

LAUGHTER SHARED OR THE GAMES POETS PLAY:
THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF IRONY
IN POSTWAR AMERICAN POETRY

by

STEPHEN J. SUMMERS

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2014

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Stephen J. Summers

Title: Laughter Shared or the Games Poets Play: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Irony in Postwar American Poetry

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by:

Mark Whalan	Chairperson
John Gage	Core Member
Paul Peppis	Core Member
Mark Johnson	Institutional Representative

and

Kimberly Andrews Espy	Vice President for Research and Innovation; Dean of the Graduate School
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Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded June 2014

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Stephen J. Summers

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

June 2014

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During and after the First World War, English-language poets employed various ironic techniques to address war's dark absurdities. These methods, I argue, have various degrees of efficacy, depending upon the ethics of the poetry's approach to its reading audience. I judge these ethical discourses according to a poem's willingness to include its readers in the process of poetic construction, through a shared ironic connection. My central ethical test is Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative and Jurgen Habermas's conception of discourse ethics. I argue that without a sense of care and duty toward the reading other (figured in open-ended ironies over dogmatic rhetorics), there can be no social responsibility or reformation, thus testing modernist assumptions about the political usefulness of poetry.

I begin with the trench poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, whose sarcastic and satirical ironies are constructed upon a problematic consequentialist ethos. Despite our sympathy for the poets' tragic positions as soldiers, their poems' rhetoric is ultimately coercive rather than politically progressive. It negates the social good it intends by nearly mimicking the unilateral rhetoric that gave rise to the war.

The next chapter concerns Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, fundamental modernist poems defining the postwar Anglo-American era. In contrast to the trench poets, I argue these two poems at their best manage to create an irony of free play, inviting the audience's participation in meaning-making through the irony of self-parody. Traditional ethical critiques of these poets' troubling politics, I argue, do not negate the discourse ethics present in these texts.

The final three chapters follow the wartime and postwar ironies of the American poets William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens. Williams, a medical doctor, makes use of the ironic grotesque in his poems to offer the voice of poetry to the disenfranchised, including individuals with disabilities. Moore, a modernist and early feminist, pairs her poems to decenter poetic authority, depicting possible ethical poetic conversations. Finally, Stevens's democratic, pragmatic ethics appears within poetry that continually invites its readers to fill in gaps of meaning about the war and beyond.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Stephen J. Summers

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Oregon State University, Corvallis

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, English, 2014, University of Oregon
Master of Arts, English, 2010, University of Oregon
Honors Bachelor of Arts, English, 2008, Oregon State University
Honors Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, 2008, Oregon State University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Anglo-American Modernist Poetry
Ethics and Literature

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Instructor of Record, Department of English, University of Oregon, Fall 2009-
Spring 2014
Research Assistant and Grader, Department of English, University of Oregon,
Fall 2008-Spring 2009

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, English Department, University of Oregon, 2008-
present
Kirby Essay Award (nominated twice), English Department, University of
Oregon, 2010
Weaver University and College Prize, Oregon State University, Academy of
American Poets, 2008
Summa cum Laude, English and Philosophy, Oregon State University, 2008
Waldo-Cummings Outstanding Senior in Liberal Arts, Oregon State University,
2008

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks are due to the members of my committee—scholars for whom I have the utmost respect—for their input, feedback, and assistance in producing this dissertation. In particular, to Mark Johnson for assistance untangling my ethical stances, and to John Gage for his early suggestions and for introducing me to the world of academic publishing. I must give a special thanks as well to Paul Peppis, for continual, generous advice and aid throughout my entire tenure at the University of Oregon, ever since the first phone call he made asking me to study in Eugene; I could not have survived the process without your support and insights. Also a very special thanks to Mark Whalan—whose arrival in America coincided with my interest in modernist American poets—for the substantial sacrifice of time and effort he gave in helping me produce the best dissertation I could. Naturally, any errors in this text are my own.

Further, Professors Martha Bayless, Liz Bohls, Lara Bovilsky, Suzanne Clark, Dianne Dugaw, Jim Earl, Karen Ford, Tres Pyle, Mark Quigley, Ben Saunders, Deb Shapple, Helen Southworth, Betsy Wheeler, George Wickes, Harry Wonham all contributed something (if indirectly) to this final project, for which I am thankful. Thanks also to Carolyn Bergquist and Jim Crosswhite in teaching instruction. Further back, my Oregon State Professors Kerry Ahearn, Neil Davison, Royce Jones, Barry Lawler, Michael Scanlan, and Tara Williams still develop my thinking and writing through their past instruction. The same goes for my Teachers Mike Barnett, John Colvett, Paul Dage, Will Greenleaf, Pat Mikulec, Joe Minson, and so many others.

Thanks to my friends at UO—Anthony, Karl, Matt, Jenny, Dan and the rest of you—as well as a big shout-out to my friends in the UO Graduate Student Fellowship,

Zhen, Amy, Ben, Paul; to Dick, Emily, and the rest of University Christian Fellowship, and to friends like Jimmy, Santana, Brian, Sarah, David, and the rest of you—as well as those at First Baptist and Willamette Christian Center for spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and cultural support and care. To InterVarsity and my friends within it, Michael, Kit, Fredrick, and many others, thanks for the worldviews. To friends who were there to listen and help, thanks to Dennis, Britten, Jadon, Aleasha, Michael, Ryan, and many others. To my students, at least to the ones who laughed at my jokes, I salute you. To my family, near and far, thanks: in particular to Mom and Dad for, quite literally, everything; it helped to know I never had to do any of this for you to earn your love! To Joseph, for keeping me grounded on whatever planet you happen to be occupying at the given moment. To Andrew, for inspiring me to keep thinking about the absurd, abstract, awe-inspiring world in all your wonderful awkwardness. To Dave and Cheryl, my “cool” parents. To Grandma and Grandpa and Grandma and Grandpa for the love, the means, and the fun. To Chrissi’s family—mine now—and the rest of mine. Thanks to the Corkums, Joneses, Ayres, Johnsons, Maphets, and assorted Summers. To the Ettlichs for being my academic—and real—family, thanks always. To B.K. for translation help. To my other friends: do not go to graduate school! Importantly, none of this would have been possible without the agricultural revolution.

To Christina, who loved me anyway, no matter what. Thanks for accepting my gross life choices and letting me read you poetry.

And, finally, from I Corinthians 15:57, “But thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

To my “Uncle” Ernie,
whose love of wisdom helped shaped my path and inspires me still.

“How much better is it to get wisdom than gold!
Yea, to get understanding is rather to be chosen than silver.”
Proverbs 16:16

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: DISCOURSE ETHICS IN THE AGE OF IRONY

In many ways the anglophone poetry of the early twentieth century paralleled the literary and philosophical aims of the long eighteenth century. Both eras were populated by writers attempting to engage with social politics, many of whom were forced to develop this political commentary through indirect means. Thus, ironically, both in the positive rationality of the Age of Enlightenment and later in the scientific, mechanical age of the early twentieth century, writers felt they could respond to problematic political realities only in satiric, wry, or parodic ways.

After the Romantic period and its democratic revolutions and following the rise of industrialization, the world was plunged into modern warfare on an unprecedented scale in 1914. With the end of this brutal, absurd war, many modern witnesses to and writers of the carnage found the previous century's faith in social progress and individual agency now rung hollow in their ears. Rationality could not keep the world from destroying itself. Thus many of the anglophone writers in the wake of World War I sought a new ethic and a new method of conveying their dissatisfaction with the political and social status quo. The result was a revival of eighteenth-century ironic tropes, methods of telling the truth, but telling it "slant," (in Dickinson's words). In the interwar period Anglo-American poets would grapple with irony's ability to address the unaddressable, to reason against failed rationality—by means of *unreason*. The result is a poetry rich in wordplay and gaming, despite addressing the dark truths of war, pain, death, and loss.

Yet I will argue that the retreat into subterfuge and gaming—the world of satire, parody, grotesques, understatement, and wit—was not an escape from politics or the sacrifice of social responsibility. The war raised ethical questions on a grand scale, and the ironic poems of the postwar period do not evade this reality but engage with it, if at a slant. I will argue that modernist ethics can venture beyond the confines of the poem or page and into the streets of society. What varies among the poets is the particular kinds of ethical reasoning they employ, and the positive effects those choices will allow.

I hope to demonstrate several things in this work: first that there is an ethical thread central to modernist poetry—in particular, to American poetry—during and after

The Great War, despite modernism's willing protestations to the contrary. Second, I believe this ethics is often transmitted ironically—whether through satire, sarcasm, parody, grotesques, inversion, understatement, or straight comedy. Thirdly, the efficacy of the ethical discourse (centered upon the relationship of speaker and reader), I argue, depends upon both the speaker's tone and upon the extent of the speaker's willingness to joke with the reader—that is, to include the reader in the process of poetic construction by means of a shared ironic connection. Some of the poems here examined will embrace this three-fold path and remain a relevant commentary on ethics even to the present day, whereas others date themselves in the unwillingness of their narrators to give their audience any part in building their projects, limiting the uses of their ethical stances.

My ironic ethics will be built upon the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas and the relationship to the other outlined by Emmanuel Levinas, and I attempt to follow a pragmatic negotiation within and beyond their philosophical frameworks. Central to my argument is more than a description of the interactions between ethics and irony among the moderns. Not all ethical systems the poets use are created equally; some methodologies work better than others. I will thus proceed as pragmatically as possible to test whether individual poems are capable of ethically changing the mind and heart of another, within a traumatized society. I argue in the chapters to follow that a necessary link between individuals that has been severed—the separation of souls that makes war possible—is built in part upon a divorce between self and other. I contend that literature can bridge this gap by acknowledging the other within the framework of the game, the exchange, contained within irony and wordplay. Some of these games are coercive, not exchanges at all but unilateral commands that treat the reader as merely an instrument, a means of accomplishing a goal *greater* than that other. I argue that this is both an unethical way of addressing social divisions, and also an ineffective remedy to them.

The roots of Habermasian discourse ethics may be traced to the works of Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth century, whose ethical positions permeate modern philosophy well into the twentieth century. Kant begins his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* with a baseline for his ethics, writing that the only thing universally, permanently good is “good will,” writing that all virtues other than this pure attitude can be tainted to some degree (9). The important thing is that good will is an

action, and one that we must offer rational others *regardless* of their attitude toward us. Kant explains this central rule of ethics: “*Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*” (*Groundwork* 37). Kant implies that others within the community of agents must be thought equals to oneself, simply due to their status as rational beings. And other persons’ rationality produces a complete duty over our actions: regardless of others’ responses, we owe others the respect of their rationality. Kant’s Categorical Imperative is a useful guide to judging ethics in modern poetry, I will argue, because it demands we treat each other as equals within a culture constantly ranking, judging, and classifying individuals. The modern lyric thus becomes a hallowed space where conversation is initiated in intimacy, different than prose, drama, or song. The possibility of an unabstracted conversation between two independent minds—divorced from social or market pressures found in more-popular media forms—makes the lyric such a crucial place to look for ethical communication. The use of coercion—whether literal or literary—can never be ethical, even with the best intentions, as doing so denies the quality of rational, independent equality in another, something we will explore further in Habermas’s ethics.

Interestingly, the poets I praise are not self-consciously philosophical poets; they are poets of play, inversion, folly, and instability. They are not seeking *a priori* knowledge of good but instead a methodology useful to their projects. Particularly the latter poets I will speak on, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens, will work to treat the reader as a person, as an end in him- or herself, one with something to offer the *writer*. The closer the modernist poets get to treating the unknown other as equal with the self, rather than as simply an instrument or a platform for the author’s own message, the more defensible and enduring their ethics are, I argue, and the more likely their poems are to make tangible political changes.

Hutchings notes that Kant is often overlooked as a political philosopher, despite writing in response to the revolutions in France and America (38). Kant also remains a part of the tradition of political philosophy beginning in Hobbes and culminating in Rousseau’s concept of the social contract. Kant is always contractual, demanding that we fulfill our obligations to respect others as equals—both in theory and in political and social contexts. The common or community will is, to Kant, the key to a functioning

society (Hutchings 43). Though the poets I will focus on are often considered apolitical or even hostile toward the idea of public service through poetry, the opposite is often true, as these writers always attempt to find a way to engage with their fellow citizens.

Thus my thesis relies upon a duty to respect others' individuality and rationality, as we depend on each other's ideas in judging poets' philosophies. Chapters four, five, and six will cover three poets whose mix of a pragmatic, deontological dynamic works to create the interpersonal bonds upon which society can build a multifaceted conversation. At the end of the *Groundwork*, Kant writes that there is a "dialectic of reason" that arises when we connect the *a priori*, theoretical nature of moral philosophy with the application of such theories to practical life (72). Kant already addressed a "natural dialectic" at the end of the first section of the *Groundwork*, a debate originating in agents' desires to doubt or alter the "strict laws of duty" we apprehend (21). But, critically, these internal debates do not remain internal or theoretical. They drive us "from practical grounds themselves, to go outside its [personal] sphere and to take a step into the field of *practical philosophy*" by which to confirm or adjust our ethical positions (*Groundwork* 21). The goal built into this method is a "complete critique of our own reason" (*Groundwork* 21), something essential to healing a society in turmoil. If we attempt to live out our philosophies in the context of rational community, others may notice.

Still, the work of the moral poet or person is never easy, nor can they simply learn to be ethical through practical trial and error. Kant argues: "In actual fact it is absolutely impossible for experience to establish with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action in other respects right has rested solely on moral grounds and on the thought of one's duty" (*Groundwork* 74). We must act from our knowledge that the other's rationality compels our respect and our acknowledgment of that status, rather than believing practical conditions necessitate overruling this maxim. The idea of hypothetical, *a priori* rules to govern our actions is crucial, Kant argues, because to argue for a morality based only on *a posteriori* or empirical experience is to have a permanently limited ethics, and one built on familiar, human conditions, thus lacking the imperatives of some abstracted Reason beyond our personal circumstances (*Groundwork* 92-93). For some principle to command us utterly, it must begin outside the accident of our practical conditions. This is precisely the problem with coercive literary appeals, ironic or

otherwise: they arise from personal conditions; we humans have a tendency to warp our ethics to suit the present position in which we find ourselves. Wartime rhetoric ought to be the same rhetoric as any other time.

But lest we accuse Kant of producing an ethics too abstract to be useful in day-to-day situations, we must consider how his theories apply to the situation of lyric ethics. Kant writes of the ultimate goal of society, a “kingdom of ends,” where all subjects are equalized by their reasonable, independent status, and they interact by treating others as perfect moral ends, rather than as useful to their own purposes (*Groundwork* 100-1). Kant explains:

I understand by a “*kingdom*” a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws....

For rational beings all stand under the *law* that each of them should treat himself and all others, *never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end in himself*. But by so doing there arises a systematic union of rational beings under common objective laws—that is, a kingdom. (*Groundwork* 100-1)

The politics of the kingdom of ends is not an empty social abstraction. What I praise in modernist poetry is the extent to which an author treats his subjects and reading audience as ends in themselves, rather than making use of them to make a point. Critically, Kant’s formulation suggests that selfish or coercive actions, those which subsume the rationality and ultimate worth of another to our own purposes, hurt not just the other but ourselves as well. For instance, as I will argue in the case of the trench poets, the aggressive rhetoric of some poems effectually steals another’s autonomy, thus breaking our moral obligation. But such actions also removes hurts the *poets*, removing some element of their own humanity while also robbing them of the virtue of dialogue or exchange with rational others.

The ethical dialogue that can result in a fair exchange between writer and reader is predicated upon Kant’s differentiation between means and ends. Kant classifies an entity as an “end in itself” “whose existence in itself has an absolute worth” (*Groundwork* 45). Humans (and “every rational being”) fall into this category, and thus it is unethical for us to use or abuse another to serve our own purposes. Humans necessitate inherent respect from each other because, to Kant, they contain an essential autonomy that grants them “dignity” superseding any other purpose—including utilitarian purposes (*Groundwork*

52). Oliver Sensen however argues that Kant does not mean we *owe* the other esteem because of some *literal* value they carry (103). Our job is not to appraise people and decide that their individual value and wills outweigh our purposes for them.

Discourse Ethics and the Centrality of Irony

But Kant's ethics are not enough: though he points us toward an ethics based on rational, radical equality of act and thought we must turn to Jürgen Habermas for the essential points of discourse ethics, a methodology that give us a more practical way to judge modern poetry as socially progressive or not. George Herbert Mead sets the scene for us by assessing Kant's views, writing that "Man is a rational being because he is a social being. The universality of our judgments, upon which Kant places so much stress, is a universality that arises from the fact that we take the attitude of the entire community, of all rational beings" (Mead 379). To act in a way that diminishes another community member's status as an autonomous, rational being, is to be unethical toward that individual. Habermas builds this notion into his outline of discourse ethics. Habermas writes, in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, that it is within the community of "rational beings" Mead outlines that "discourse" occurs, where discourse is Habermas's term for a specific kind of speech built upon reflection and aimed at creating a "consensus" among those in conversation (*TCA* I.42). Importantly, for discourse to occur, an argument must be both "open" and "long" enough to allow individuals to arrive at that consensus (I.42), which will become a crucial test of my poets' ethics. I will consider whether poems leave ironies open-ended, inviting response, or if they only allow for *one* kind of slant.

Later in that same volume, Habermas further explains his theories:

... I shall speak of *communicative* action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes; they pursue individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions. In this respect the negotiation of definitions of the situation is an essential element of the interpretive accomplishments required for communicative action. (*TCA* I.285-6)

This is the rock on which I wish to build my modernist poetic ethics: poetry cannot just be a diatribe or manifesto: it cannot prioritize “individual successes” and “goals” over shared “understanding.” Most interestingly, we cannot hide behind the esoteric or the selfish: instead we are to agree on “definitions,” we are to always work with the other to achieve a mutual accomplishment in communicative action. Reaching understanding requires that both subjects work *equally* (I.286). Thus I am writing in contrast to perhaps a more conventional view of modernist poetry, one that finds the authenticity of one voice—the poet or prophet of the age—only as it contrasts with the broader voice of society, the past, or the bourgeois. Individualistic poetries and movements, I believe, often abandon the mutual goals of understanding and the necessary acknowledgment of the reading other’s role as equal actor, equal maker of the poem. In so doing such poetries have a selfish ethos, sacrificing social renewal in favor of their own rightness.

How then can a better poetry occur? Through irony and play, in noncoercive forms. Habermas writes in the second volume of his *Theory of Communicative Action* that within the space of play or in the game, “ego” and “alter” interact, trading the “communicative roles” of “speaker and hearer” back and forth, and within this situation, “the intermeshing of the interchangeable perspectives of speaker and hearer describes a cognitive structure that underlies their understanding of action situations” (*TCA* II.35). The “interchangeability” of roles is the crucial piece that play exemplifies, and this is the key to an ethical poetics. Irony is a universal state of play (as will be further elaborated in the proceeding chapters), offering an identifiable, communicable puzzle to a listener—crucially a puzzle that a listener must solve on his or her own. The less direction, dogma, or coercion a speaker uses, the more ethical the message, as this openness allows the “alter” or “other” equality with the speaker, upending the speaker-listener hierarchy.

Thus an ideal ethical poetic engagement is one where writer and speaker negotiate the meaning, rather than making the listener a passive receiver of sound or image. I will be relying heavily on this kind of calculus in judging poets’ ethics: the more the poets will allow their ideas to be tested and adjusted by their implied or real audiences, the more I see them as open to restoring a broken society. The compromise initiated and highlighted by open-ended ironies (in contrast to more coercive rhetorical strategies like satire or sarcasm, as I will detail in chapter two) are the preferred methods by which a fair

reading can occur, ones that acknowledge the ability of the reader to complete the effects of a speaker's words. Though seemingly a minor act, this is a microcosm for social progress; without the willingness to remain on equal footing with those we address and to respect those persons as equals in meaning-making, we merely fling our preferred dogmas at others and are simply speaking to ourselves.

I have called this project "Laughter Shared" because herein is the ethics of modern poetry. The ironies we engage with in modernist poetry will be ethical insofar as they share their power to invent and discuss with their readers. And the laughter—whether the result of comedy or absurdity—reminds us of the body of the other, as well as the mind. Emmanuel Levinas writes in *Ethics and Infinity* that it is the body, especially the "face" of the other that "ordains me to serve him" (97). The physical reality of the human body demands our responsibility and our care, to Levinas, and I believe laughter at a mutual irony reminds us of this. Irony keeps us grounded within the bodily, the playful, the Bakhtinian, as will be demonstrated especially in the poetry of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. But the ability to exchange roles in a space of Habermasian communicative action depends upon both recognizing another's equality with oneself, and acknowledging one's responsibility for the other as a fellow human.

Further, to indicate the freedom and liberty we must grant others if we are to make them equals, each receiver of a literary text must be free to accept or reject the message sent. Habermas writes, "The performative attitude that ego and alter adopt when they act communicatively with one another is bound up with the presupposition that the other can take a 'yes' or 'no' position on the offer contained in one's own speech act. Ego cannot relinquish this scope for freedom even when he is, so to speak, obeying social roles;" (*TCA* II.59). This will become relevant especially in discussions of satire in chapters two and three, where the rhetoric appears to offer us the choice of acceptance or rejection but in fact does not, forcing us instead to take a position approved by the speaker or be relegated to the categories of foolishness, irrelevance, or wickedness. This is why I will privilege and pursue ironies that do not demand an utterly clear, prescribed response from readers, instead asking, essentially, for our help in decoding the shared paradox. Habermas clarifies in *Between Facts and Norms*, that his "discourse principle states" that "only those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons

could agree *as participants in rational discourse*" (BFN 79). Habermas here demonstrates the effect of equitable discourse: when all participants are accounted for, they are afforded rights to equality, liberty, and mutual protection. Literature's engagement with the other is always political, as we will read in these modernist poets.

Returning for a moment to Levinas's ethics, here is a clear connection between Kant's rational subject, Habermas's autonomous audience, and Levinas's "face" of the other. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Emmanuel Levinas encapsulates our relationship to others by arguing that "before being for myself, I am *for another*" (129). If other rational beings exist then we ignore and refuse their rationality if we do not communicate with them in service of *them*, rather than of ourselves. Our love must be true, our jokes must be fair. Authors must live at the expense of their audiences, I argue, not the reverse. Roland Champagne's analysis of Levinas's ethics is helpful here in discussing the politics of ironic engagement, as he writes that "Levinas's ethical call of the other, what he calls solicitude, becomes... the beginning of a dialogue with oneself in which humor is the vehicle for constantly delaying a retrievable unity of the self" (Champagne 28). Humor is not accidental to my ethical project: the acknowledgment of others' status as a unique ends-in-themselves can be indicated, I will argue, in the willingness to laugh *with* rather than *at* those others. Further, Champagne explains that "The unique quality of Levinas's ethical call is that it does not conquer. Instead, it provides the invitation for a bilateral contract between the text and its reader" (30). If others are rational individuals, we must *ask* them, rather than *tell* them. To change minds, we cannot conquer, but only converse. As Drew Dalton details, it is only through these contractual, answerable relationships with the other that we can even *ask* useful questions or have ideas at all (134). This is a way of offsetting the risk in making ourselves responsible for and answerable to others. Jeffrey Dudiak considers this element of risk within discourse ethics:

To attempt to engender such a dialogue is as such a supreme risk, and precisely a supreme risk *for me*, (since I am the one called upon to give the gift), because there is no guarantee that the other will respond in kind and return gift for gift, will invest my understandings and my freedom, will leave me anywhere to live or anything from which to live, in short, no guarantee that the other will acknowledge that I have a right to partake of the goods of the world, a right that the other has inalienably. (Dudiak 146)

Levinas argues for this right others have to our care but we should not minimize the risk of this endeavor. To make oneself responsible to another is to choose a kind of servitude that a poet—a maker of beauty, a bearer of truth—might abhor. But I will argue that the most ethical artists do this—and the effect is a more interesting, more useful poetry that rises above local concerns to imagine an ethical engagement far beyond the page.

Steven Hendley's *From Communicative Action to the Face of the Other* aptly links Levinasian and Habermasian ethics, arguing that both philosophers are correct to believe that the morality of language exists within the bond of speech, in Levinas's image of the "saying" rather than the "said" (Hendley 61). I will focus on these dialogues within the poems I consider, which, at their best, eschew the manifestos of the "said" for a continual "saying" of you and me. The risk is apparent: in an open dialogue, you may disagree with and reject me. Habermas in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* draws a distinction between purely rhetorical missives and those genuinely seeking understanding: "I call interactions *communicative* when the participants coordinate their plans of action consensually, with the agreement reached at any point being evaluated in terms of the intersubjective recognition of validity claims" (*MCCA* 58). Importantly, Habermas differentiates this communicative action from "*strategic*" action which aims only at convincing and influencing the other either through threats or promises, and is coercive rather than allowing for free discourse (58).

Discourse offers us the opportunity to make some practically-universalizable claims, allowing us to adjust and put to use Kant's deontologies. William Rehg argues that some values certainly must be universalizable, for instance the meeting of basic needs, as well as some amount of liberty and freedom (49). These are the sorts of claims most humans can agree on so they establish a baseline against which to measure literary ethics. Such basic rights are interrupted when texts are coercive, dogmatic, or otherwise refuse to allow others to make up their own minds and act freely without fear or bribery. To produce ironic texts demanding a controlled response is to ignore basic human rights. The freedom to respond autonomously is crucial to Habermas's discourse ethics (*MCCA* 71). Habermas thus reframes Kant's moral imperative, as Thomas McCarthy, Habermas's longtime translator, clarifies in his *Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*: "Rather than ascribing as valid to all others any maxim that I can will to be a universal law, I must

submit my maxim to all others for purposes of discursively testing its claim to universality” (McCarthy 326). This “submission” is crucial to honest dialogue; our own preferences must be laid aside if we are to honestly consider another’s opinion without tainting the other’s beliefs or responses. To submit to others the views that *we* find most compelling is an act of humility that alone can engender dialogue.

In discourse ethics, Habermas finds three levels of rules we must adhere to to ensure fair dialogue: first, we cannot be self-contradictory (*MCCA* 86), something I will critique in examining the violent, satirical rhetoric of the war poets. Second, writers and speakers must believe what they assert—they must practice sincerity and good faith—being accountable to their readers or listeners (*MCCA* 88), which we will explore in the parodies of Eliot and Pound. Finally, Habermas believes that, “Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse,” and they are “allowed to question any assertion whatever,” so that “[n]o person may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights,” (*MCCA* 89), an ethical test that will become particularly interesting in the cases of Dr. William Carlos Williams and his poetic “patients.” In his *Justification and Application* about discourse ethics, Habermas explains the extent of this third element: in order to have real dialogue, others must be allowed “complete reciprocity” based on their status as humans, equals to ourselves (*JA* 44-45). The result is fundamental to literary ethics, as Habermas argues:

... [R]espect for a person *as* a person admits of no gradations; we respect a person as such not on account of some outstanding characteristic or other. We respect a person as such on account of his capacity to act autonomously, that is, to orient his actions to normative validity claims; we respect him solely on account of the accomplishment or quality that makes him a person.... We do not respect someone as a person because he impresses us or because he is worthy of esteem in some way or other—or even because he is a good person or lives a good life—but because he is ... fundamentally capable of being a ‘member of a community’.... (*JA* 45-46)

This is the basis by which I will test figures in modern poetry who have traditionally been thought of wrongly, I argue, in terms of their ethical positions. I argue in chapter two that the English war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen—though certainly “good persons” who had a “good life”—are *not* writing discursively ethical poetry. Their ironies are too forceful to admit that a reading other is “person” enough to be part of the

decision-making community; in refusing this humanity to the other, they jeopardize the antiwar message they intend to communicate. In direct contrast, in chapter three I claim that Ezra Pound's and T. S. Eliot's major postwar poems (*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and *The Waste Land*) display not a purely elitist, politically-problematic ethos as they have often been read, but carry a fruitful thread of self-parody within them embodying some ironic openness despite their nonprogressive reputations. Respect for an other—especially as we will see in the puzzle poems of William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens—means letting the *other* do some of the thinking.

Habermas thus contends that discourse ethics is constructed on two premises: first, that normative claims to validity hold a cognitive importance and may be considered like enough to truth-claims, and, second, that the justification or endorsement of moral norms cannot be univocal or unilateral; it must move beyond an individual's mind, where Kant left it, and into the realm of good faith discourse (*MCCA* 68). Within this untainted discourse arise norms and values that hold real weight and have social validity. Thus what appears most ethical in modernist poetry is the acknowledgment of this activity—the joint naming of values—which remains a compelling method for critiquing art more broadly. We can avoid a great deal of arbitrariness within this process. Discourse ethics aims for a practical conversation over Kant's "pure," self-focused deliberations (Rehg 79). Furthermore, discourse ethics saves us from the tyranny of eternal abstraction: instead we can address actual events and experiences in conversation with the other (79), something we will see becomes true in the poets writing in the wake of the First World War.

Habermas admits that we cannot really have the perfect situation every time we speak; there are no actual "ideal" communities of speakers and interpreters in daily life, as Chaim Perelman desired (*JA* 54). Yet Habermas believes that in a public space where communication and ideas are universally accessible, we can do well enough (*JA* 54). William Outhwaite elaborates that discourse ethics does not require a "concrete Utopia," where all work in a "giant seminar," but instead writes that our ethical focus alters "from a fruitless search for precise entailments and commitments to a broader account of communicative action in general, and moral reasoning in particular" (Outhwaite 44). The

freedom from the abstractions of *both* utilitarianism and Kantian ethics allows individuals to act pragmatically and build real conversations upon shared premises.

I believe that the poet's job is to facilitate this community-building, almost by default. Nearly every other avenue of society exists to persuade individuals of one ideology or another. But within the space of art and literature—especially within the *lyric*, the domain of independent thought rather than the transmitter of social hegemonies—we have the freedom to call and respond, to solicit and modify our statements. I laud poets that use poetry's power in this way, rather than simply echoing the cacophony of wind and noise of society's dictators. Outhwaite asks how we can arrive at a level of “communicative competence” with others in discourse ethics (49): I believe the answer is through poetic ironies. When we read a poem (or another open-ended communication) I believe it is the presence of irony that signals us and demands a thought-out response. Irony is at once the flag of truce and the volley of new discourse. Within irony is the recognition of a mutual (mis-)understanding of an often-nonsensical, absurd world. And this acknowledgment—and its risky confession of one's own failure to understand and solve the human equation—leads to the other's possible admission of the same fact, and a resulting solidarity. As Rehg notes, in conducting discourse ethics we remain at the mercy of another person's recognition and acceptance of our realizations (86). A complete exchange requires the listener to share in the speech, to be able to participate in meaning-making and agreement. Levinas envisioned this dramatically, in terms of being held “hostage” to the other, whose claim to our respect and responsibility is infinite (Arnett 203-4). To throw away this responsibility, to privilege my own aims over the other's—as coercive ironies often do in poetry—is to ignore this duty.

Ultimately, social utilitarianism fails its society by abandoning the personal, individual human element in ethics. Habermas critiques utilitarianism, arguing, “Thus, the utilitarian is unable to explain that moment of uncoerced, well-considered, rationally motivated consent that valid norms demand of everyone involved...” (*TCA* II.93). Kant, at least, was a bit closer, as his moral theory “presents the categorical imperative as a maxim by which each individual can test whether a given or recommended norm deserves general assent, that is, counts as a law” (*TCA* II.93). He points us toward the individual's essential role in social ethics. Yet Kantian ethics remain limited as we must

still leave our own heads in reaching the community of the “larger self” (*TCA* II.97). As with Aristotelian virtue ethics, the self is always implicated in the polis, the larger citizen body (*JA* 6). Aristotle writes in Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that “Between friends there is no need of justice...” (VIII.1 228). Aristotle clarifies this relationship, saying that friendships are best built on non-utilitarian foundations of generosity and mutual happiness: “The friendships I have been speaking of are founded on equality. Each party wishes for, and receives from the other identical benefits, or else they exchange equivalent amounts of different things” (VIII.6 239). But as Levinas would point out, we do not have to be someone’s friend to respect him or her, or to realize our infinite responsibility for the other. If we limit your generosity, patience, and dependence to just an inner ring, we will end up with as isolated a society as the moderns had.

The Role of the Reader

Toward the goal of avoiding such isolationism, I will be leaning on transactional theories of literature for my evaluation of ethics in these poets. What sets my project apart from others on ethics and modernism is my focus on poetry: much has been made of narrative ethics, and much less analysis exists on the ethics of poetic communication. I will argue that the conversations developed in literature are not confined to prose. Newton calls narrative ethics “narrative as relationship and human connectivity” (7). Münch writes that in America, in particular, ethics and instrumental action exist by continually remaking themselves within an interplay of traditional ethics and modernity (28); there is no separating the action of the text and the social movements waging war (27-28). Poetry is infected with ethics.

Further, while still focusing on narrative ethics, the theories of Wolfgang Iser and Wayne Booth offer ethical frameworks that help apply Habermasian, Kantian, and Levinasian worldviews to modernist poetry. Wolfgang Iser’s *The Implied Reader* establishes the necessity of the reader’s role in the reinterpretation and reconstruction of an author’s text within the context of narrative. We interact with texts and even complete them, as a literary text “needs the reader’s imagination” to be finished (*Implied Reader* 277). And it is within this interaction and mutual-completion of the text, between author and reader, that I find the ethical concerns I am interested in expounding through the

medium of ironic poetry. In *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth suggests that ethical criticism can be usefully applied to the reader as well as the author of a text, that we may speak of “an ethics of readers—their responsibilities to stories” (9). I will build on this idea in poetry, suggesting that one may perform the same ethical evaluations in the transactions of poet and reader that one can in narratives. Booth’s depiction of this mutual responsibility is profoundly moving. He writes that as a reader, “must I not also accept the responsibility to enter into serious dialogue with the author about how his or her values join or conflict with mine? To decline the gambit... is surely condescending, insulting, and finally irresponsible” (135). I am interested, like Booth, in the way that certain writers choose to treat their audiences as equals, giving us challenges that force us to use our own logic and ethics to make meaning out of texts (187). This abandoning of authorial hegemony that my central poets perform allows for this kind of ethical solidarity between conversants.

The poetry I remain interested in is the sort that allows for the reader to test a theory and come to a conclusion within its lines, where we must add something to the work. The ethical poem is the one that allows for the reader to use his or her mind to co-create an idea with the author. Iser refers to this aptly in his *The Implied Reader*: “Herein lies the dialectical structure of reading. The need to decipher gives us the chance to formulate our own deciphering capability—i.e., we bring to the fore an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious” (294). An ethical ironic poetry is one that *asks* something of the reader—the poetic voice refuses to exclusively *tell*, but leaves space for a returned thought, in the form of answering dialogue. A parallel to this line of reasoning may be found in Michael Eskin’s *Ethics and Dialogue in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandelstam, and Celan*, in the concept of “semethics” (39). Like Eskin, I consider poetry a zone where dialogic activity may be staged and acted out (56). This is particularly relevant to my study of the poetry of and after war, as Eskin notes poetry’s unique ability to disrupt violence or totality (57), especially that of a society dealing with catastrophic literal (and aesthetic) violence. Such trauma requires a Freudian “talking cure,” with poems that “listen” to us. Understanding community as instrumental to both aesthetics and well-being helps us understand the healing power of discourse (Taylor 43).

Critical Intersections

Poetry is not a purely individual aesthetic enterprise, but a social one. Theodor Adorno's "Lyric Poetry and Society" sees in the lyric an "individual, spontaneous element," an independent creativity that necessarily seeks to create a more humane world (61-2). Modernism, as Jessica Berman argues, intends to highlight in particular the role of literature in defining or "imagining justice" in its age (7). Berman argues that within the "plurality" that literature shapes for us, we always find a political "community" (20-21). Modernist literature and modern society are never mutually exclusive. Poetry thus can function as a pragmatic world of active belief within which we must all live, but it is a pragmatism that offers us strength "over censorship and brute force" as Misak suggests (152). Modernism was invested in remaking the ethics and politics of a broken world (Oser *Ethics of Modernism* 1, 7), and I intend to explore how irony, in particular, makes this possible.

The title of Jeannine Johnson's analysis of modern poets and their defenses of their art, *Why Write Poetry?*, asks a valid question. And its converse may be even more important: why should we *read* poetry, especially poetry a hundred years old? What difference does it make today? Johnson argues for Adrienne Rich's assessment that poetry practices a fundamental function within language (Johnson 275). It forces us to examine ourselves and our motives whenever we enter the poetic world of textual fireworks. We read and assess poetry—in particular the heavily-freighted texts of modernism—because it is *useful*. Chris Green writes in *The Social Life of Poetry* that modernist poetry has a unifying quality making it "an ample gauge of pluralist discourse" (7), even now. Modernist poetry asserts its *form* more than its forebears, demanding that we change from having read it. We cannot pass through an avant-garde artwork without knowing that something has hit us. Modernist poetry makes the abstract personal, through pain or laughter. It is never politically or aesthetically neutral. In particular the poetry from wartime forward represents a moment when a new humanism and, consequentially, a new ethics, was desperately sought by poets (Sicari 11-12). To look back at that time is not a waste of effort: we are still moderns, attempting to find a firm foothold upon which to stand and speak. Modernism was fertile ground for the developments of grassroots ethical solutions to social problems never before seen. We do not inhabit the same space

of post-World War I America or Britain that the modernists did, yet like these poets, we do face challenges within rhetoric, politics, and aesthetics in our present time that have never before been encountered. Thus the *motions* modernist poets make to address the unknown future are movements we may copy and learn from, still. I will argue that the ethical nature of ironic modernist poetry remains a useful methodology for our time, despite our different collection of ethical challenges.

My thesis engages with multiple currents of contemporary critical approaches in negotiating the connections between the artistic and social worlds, working to explicate the union of ethics and irony within modernist poetry. Walt Hunter's "Lyric and Its Discontents" offers a useful overview of recent scholarly treatments of the ethics of the lyric. He writes that recent years have seen a focus on the "community" that poetry engenders, reconsidering the "we" who inhabits that company (80). The last two decades of criticism have also established the lyric's position as meeting site for a "collective self" (81), as scholars recognize the unique linkage of writer and reader that poetry can create (Hunter 86). Interestingly for my argument is the lack of consensus around the purposes of irony, satire, parody, and similar tropes within that theater of "community."

Paul Allen Miller attempts to fill in this gap in his essay on "Ethics and Irony" and does an admirable job of explaining the way that irony helps shape an ethical space apart from dogma, by moving us outside of a binary realm of right and wrong (51). Irony's ethics exists in turning the "fabric of the Symbolic back against itself, creating new layers of often contradictory meanings" to create skepticism of the symbolic realm (67). This folding or "doubling" is proof enough of the ethics, to Miller (69). This connection is an excellent launching-point into my interests in irony and ethics.

Yet Miller's account misses something crucial: there must be a politico-social relationship to the irony for an ethical engagement to occur. I agree that the *choice* offered by irony is its central ethical move, but Miller believes that doubling alone is *enough* of an ethical move (at least when reading Ovid), while in the case of the modernists I have searched for a more complex ethics. I have found that the war the primary catalyst for intricate ethical ironies in the later 1910s and early twenties, and thus have focused on the shock waves that move outward from that event, as writers both near and far from the war narrate cultural tragedy through irony. Here in a world that seems

antithetical to play is where the acknowledgment and wordplay of irony is most needed, and most difficult. Lee Oser's "Human Nature and Modernist Ethics" is helpful in reminding us that "The point [of ethics] is not to repeat the past, but to remember our real needs" (296). In other words, it *matters* who we are reading: Ovid's ironies are certainly interesting in the abstract, but in the ethical ironies of the modernists I find an ironic negotiation that is no simple duplication of neoclassical tropes, addressing instead the very "real needs" of the poets' time.

And those needs are always changing. For instance, Siobhan Phillips recognizes an "epistolary ethics" arising from delayed "reciprocity," a union that can overcome the isolating life of the artist in relationships that evade definitions (353). The culmination is found in the relationship between modernist poets Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop (356). Poetry provides an adaptable political and personal space, according to the needs of its era's writers and readers. Further, Charles Altieri has written recently on the subject of modern poetry's adaptability and fluidity of ethos:

...poetry is no longer an act of rhetorical persuasion. It seeks so much more of its audience than to be persuaded. The poetry does not want to evoke belief but to elicit self-reflection on what is involved in participating in this scene of metamorphosis.... Participation is continuous activity; it involves opening oneself to all the equivalences that can occur when there emerges a cry as the response to an occasion. (349)

His sense of poetry as "continuous activity" is correct, and helps argue for why the ethics and ironies of poets like Wallace Stevens (whom Altieri addresses here) remain relevant in our time. I agree with Altieri's assessment, though he still localizes open-ended persuasion largely within the mind of the single artist. I wish to emphasize in my work the crucial importance of meeting minds within the invitation of wordplay.

Though many have taken on the complex relationship of ethics, irony, poetry, and modernism, there remain unanswered questions. One problem is the way that different forms of irony work differently in promoting social ethics. I address this issues in the debate between satire and parody in chapters two and three, as I hope to illustrate a rhetorical problem that has not been adequately resolved. I will show that Pound and Eliot's parodies can be reclaimed as socially progressive, at least at their better moments, in their sacrifice of ego for a borrowed conversation. Yet, conversely, I believe we must

point a more critical eye at the satirical rhetoric of the trench poets than has been traditionally done. For example, W. K. Penny, writing only three years ago, continues to hold the traditional line on the trench poetry of World War I in “A Tragic Harp, Ritual, Irony and Myth in the War Poetry of Wilfred Owen.” Penny argues that a reader’s “intuitive” approach to Owen’s ironic disjuncture of war ideals and war realities is the correct one (161), suggesting that Owen’s sarcasm is ethical. I will argue against this reaction to the trench poets’ ironies which seem rhetorically unfair—inciting division from and even violent anger toward their reading others.

On the other hand, Pound and Eliot’s major postwar works have often been colored by the dubious political stances they assumed later in their careers. I want to reassess and rehabilitate their immediate postwar texts to reconsider the more-complex ethics of parody within. Tom Dolack wrote about “Imitation, Emulation, Influence, and Pound’s Poetic Renewal” in the past year, addressing some of Pound’s creative borrowing, but there remains an apologetic tone to his descriptions of the poet, whose poetic ethics we struggle to separate from his politics (Dolack 5). I will also add a counterpoint to Robert Lehman’s “Eliot’s Last Laugh,” as I argue that *The Waste Land*’s satire is significantly *less* important than its *parodies*, which ultimately, I believe, offer the reader a choice of futures. Satire may usefully invoke the *past* critical tradition in the wasteland (Lehman 75), but parody, I will argue, offers its readers a brighter potential *future*. More generally, the irony of Eliot’s fragmented wasteland remains of interest to scholars (Howarth 442). The modernists have never lost their relevance.

My fourth chapter, on William Carlos Williams, explores the relationship between disability studies and the performance of the literary grotesque, in the work of the doctor-poet. I will interrogate whether Williams’s *groteschics*, as I see them, can be reconciled with the Disability Rights Movement’s slogan, “Nothing about us without us” (Durgin 163). I will see if Williams’s ironies can be ethical both for the doctor and the patient. Chapter five considers the early feminist politics of Marianne Moore, questioning whether her preference for an understated wit places her at odds with the (largely-masculine) avant-garde of 1910s and 20s New York. I study her position as a woman poet and editor of two politico-aesthetic movements, feminism and modernism. Moore has become a very popular modernist, but we are quick to remake her in our own feminist

visions. Instead, I argue alongside Rado that the early Moore was as much an iconoclast within feminism as she was within modernism—rejecting typical “feminist” aesthetics while continually remaining politically invested (Rado 11). Chapter six argues that Wallace Stevens’s encounters with pragmatism both built his poetry *and* made it ethical, despite its anarchic aesthetics, and it explores the social ethics of this experiential attitude. I see Stevens’s pragmatism as optimistic toward reaching his goal of a connected, communing society (Rae 11). Pragmatism’s traditional emphasis on the individual I believe is repurposed in Stevens to create a joint, mutual philosophy.

All of these intersections of irony, ethics, and society can be unified within the basic framework of discourse ethics and its focus on the interaction of mind with mind, as well as its pragmatic reliance upon “experience” to find ethical consensus (*MCCA* 204). The beauty of discourse ethics is its universality: it is, at base, a functionalist ethic, an idea that can be adjusted to all situations. Kant, Habermas, and Levinas all project a philosophy that demands of each of us a great deal, built upon the principles of a just exchange of ideas and duties and predicated on the faith that others will honor that exchange. There are limits to didacticism: you cannot teach someone how to live well in every possible situation he or she might face, nor demand that the other treat you fairly. But if one can manage to trust another, if one person can speak to another—and listen as well—then society may be changeable after all.

will argue that poetic ethics *always* necessitate a conversation between writer and reader; without a site of equal exchange there can be no social progress. The sharp lines between writer and reader, warrior and civilian, must be softened to heal the war's wounds.

But where do Owen and Sassoon fit into the broader scene of modernism? There is no debating the significance of the ironic mode of thought upon modernists beyond the war poets, though measuring the extent to which modernist writers engaged in the project of social criticism and renewal is trickier. Modernist poetry framed itself in the teens and twenties as a discourse detached from what it described as its excessively-sentimental nineteenth-century forebears. But for all their bluster, many modernist poets retained the idea that poetry must *do* something for society: despite sentimentality's obsolescence among the high modernists, poetry's ethical tradition was not killed off by the pure aesthetics of Oscar Wilde nor the early imagism of Ezra Pound. Neither was it silenced by the modernist move toward abstraction in visual art, and the return to ancient, mythic, or exotic aesthetics in literature—nor even by the utter destruction wrought by the First World War. The war gave rise to some of the most adamant calls for ethical reevaluation in a world well aware of its capability for destruction.

Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* argues that late modernism arises from "the tributary channels by which memories and experiences of the war were transmitted from participants to readers and from generation to generation" (27). The war spawned a sense of "collective catastrophe" functioning as the "generative matrix" for modernism between the world wars. Miller argues that the war's effects are not limited to those who fought in it, but spread to the entirety of a culture that could not make sense of it (26). Likewise, James Dawes, in his *The Language of War*, describes the American cultural landscape in the wake of World War I as a singular place of rebirth after death. The violence of war created a kind of renaissance for many literary figures, as Dawes notes:

The war's loss and waste could not obscure the fact that its destruction was also a consummate achievement, an act sublime and gratuitous.... The end of World War I, accordingly, marked the beginning of a sustained cultural meditation on the nature of creation, a meditation made urgent by war's confusion and anxiety, and by the intimacy of cruelty, the realization that exhilaration, seduction, and even care were as natural to acts of violence as they were to compassion. (74)

World War I painted an indelible mark on the poets of the 1910s and twenties, bringing ethical questions distinctly to the forefront of many texts—whether the poets had slogged through the trenches or not—though, as Dawes implies, their responses varied greatly. The war poets, typified by Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen (and later writers such as e. e. cummings) concerned themselves with displaying Dawes’s “intimacy of cruelty.” In contrast, civilian poets such as William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens read the war as a recollection of “exhilaration” and of sympathetic “compassion” (Dawes 74).

Yet despite their differences in poetic tone, style, and forms, all poets writing during and after the war were forced to take on a lucid ethical stance. Both the soldiers and civilians who survived the war were left with the problem of addressing the barbaric evils that war had brought to the forefront of the “civilized” mind. When writing about the novelist Ernest Hemingway’s experiences and expressions of the war, Dawes explains that in the aftermath of the First World War, Anglo-American modernists felt compelled to perform a “powerful analysis of both the deformation and the illumination of morality” that the war had foregrounded—not just the soldiers (113). Likewise, Jennifer Keene recognizes that the American doughboys—the first conscripted civilian army in America since the Civil War—represented the uniting of civilian and military figures and concerns in World War I (11). No longer could a volunteer army seem separate from the concerns of the civilian political and social spheres. Progressive ideals thus could sprout both from within the military experience or without it, despite the trauma associated with the conversion of civilian to soldier (Keene 12). The line between military and civilian concerns blurred considerably with the onset of World War I.

In particular, one of the most prominent questions shared by both military and civilian observers of the war concerned what had become of ethics in an era of mass violence. As Janis Stout writes in her *Coming Out of War: Poetry, Grieving, and the Culture of the World Wars*, when we look at the poetry of the World Wars we see that it addresses a broad spectrum of experience based on the war but not limited to combat alone; nor do these poems all maintain the same ethical stances or artistic styles (xiv-xv). War poetry is extremely diverse, ranging from the “antimilitary,” “antiwar,” or “pacifist” stances, with ethics varying considerable from one category to another (xv). What is most important identifying these myriad stances (which differ in their varying degrees of

vitriol and in their targets) is that they demonstrate that there is no monolithic, pure ethic concerning the war. Despite what the soldier-poets will often insist, there is no perfect knowledge of good and evil in the confusion and absurdity of the war, and our reasons for privileging one kind of ethical measure over another often has more to do with our personal beliefs than with the historical conditions of the poetry in question.

Thus I will focus on the poetic culture of the later First World War and the years directly after in exploring the variety of ethical stances in poetry to which Stout alludes. I will also attempt to broaden this category when I consider poets who respond to the war obliquely, with moral stances and political positions that do not fit cleanly in one of Stout's three categories. However, I do want to echo Stout's suggestion that in Anglo-American poetry, "Retrospective views of the war frequently employed an ironic tone, ranging from the terse and brittle to the sarcastic" (83). To this account I add that the choice of ironic tones in postwar poetry is more than an aesthetic decision—it is the marker of ethics for each poet. This chapter follows two quintessential war poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Both use a sarcastic, satirical style aggressively instituting an ethics of unilateral discourse—at the cost of their effectiveness, I suggest.

Discourse Ethics: The Trouble with Satire and Sarcasm

As argued in the introductory chapter, the moral theories that frame modern poetry most usefully are found within the realm of discourse ethics. I am interested in the strain of rationalism that originates in Kantian ethics and culminates in Habermas's conception of communicative action. I will argue throughout this chapter and in the broader work that the hope of poetry to communicate between writer and reader depends on the *reasonability* of that exchange—paradoxically an exchange often ensured by the play of *absurdity* or irony. As Habermas explains, a rational statement is binary: first it is a claim to truth and second a claim to validity—the prospect of a statement's success (*Theory of Communicative Action* I.9). To Habermas, communicative statements (including poetry) are dependent on a good faith effort on the part of the speaker to reach some consensus with the reading other (*TCA* I.19). Furthermore, Habermas contends that communication is dependent on three validity claims, within this framework: firstly, the statement must have some truth value (it must not be completely empty or meaningless);

secondly, it must exist within “normative content,” within a context that an audience can recognize; thirdly, the speaker’s *intentions* ought to be manifest within the message (*TCA* I.99). This last piece is most applicable to us, and will help to illustrate how satire and sarcasm are less useful than more open-ended ironies in communicating ethical stances to an audience. Sarcasm and satire hide their intentions behind a veil of foolishness or simple absurdity while in fact attempting a coercion that negates its ethical potential.

This is not to say that right and wrong must be telegraphed from poet to reader. However, the poets who keep good faith with their audiences—including communicating their intentions within poetry without forcing those upon others or clumsily masking them with satire—can make the most useful statements within their ironies. Critical to the communicative ethics of literature is its ability to speak to others beyond those already *agreeing* with the speaker. Habermas argues, “A communicatively achieved agreement, or one that is mutually presupposed in communicative action, is propositionally differentiated. Owing to this linguistic structure, it cannot be merely induced through outside influence; it has to be accepted or presupposed as valid by the participants” (*TCA* I.287). Rhetoric—ironic or direct—must acknowledge the other’s rational independence, and seek agreement or motivation not by coercion but through mutual respect. The trench poets I examine struggle with this communicative action, more concerned with producing a controlled message than in offering their audiences the choice to make their own ethical decisions about the war. The poets’ good intentions are stymied by the problematic ethics of their rhetoric, we will discover.

Fundamentally, we cannot control the other. Poets should not fear that a reader will make the *wrong* choices within the sphere of ironic poetry, but should focus instead on offering the other the chance to decide those choices unencumbered—for the only decisions that will have lasting effects are ones readers make for *themselves*. Habermas says, “The performative attitude that ego and alter adopt when they act communicatively with one another is bound up with the presupposition that the other can take a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ position on the offer contained in one’s own speech act. Ego cannot relinquish this scope for freedom even when he is, so to speak, obeying social roles” (*TCA* II.59). Ironies that are ethical allow us always a *choice* among options. Ethical ironies cannot confine the other’s reason and liberty: we do not gain from the impoverishment of

another. A strain of Kantian rational egalitarianism inhabits this theory: Habermas writes that discourse ethics ought always to be reversible and universalizable to be just; speaker and listener should be able to switch roles within this space where “a new category of taking the attitude of the other becomes possible, both from the sociocognitive and from the moral points of view” (*TCA* II.35). Ethical poetry cannot just be a one-way street. Thus I will privilege poetry that relies upon its readers to help shape its meanings, rather than poetry that clearly defines its purposes without needing a reader’s contributions.

Yet rational communication and the free proposal and acceptance of discourse is broken up by the tropes of sarcasm and satire: thus I will begin by detailing the problems of these literary modes before exploring their use among two of the preeminent English trench poets. That the war poets often employed satirical irony is convenient since a study of the ethics of literary irony begins most naturally with a consideration of satire. Satire is one of the more recognizable points at which ethics and irony meet: it forms a focal point at which the discourses of literature, philosophy, and history converge. It is a mode of conveying an ethic, a joke, a prescription, and an aesthetic all in one. As Alvin Kernan’s *The Plot of Satire* puts it, “the two poles of satire” are “art” and “morality;” and satire lives within this line—in the best satires, the former is indistinguishable from the latter (17). Henry Carlisle paints satire in multiple shades, as “clever, irreverent, and insinuating; it is, above all, critical; it does not accept life the way life is commonly accepted, but finds normal things abnormal, proper people odd, ridiculous, and sometimes even evil and outrageous” (xiv-xv).

Appropriately, Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* calls satire a “militant” brand of irony, a term that will help us frame the satirical war poetry that dominated the postwar era (223). George Test in *Satire: Spirit and Art* agrees that a sense of aggression indwells satire, as violence is one of the four elements he identifies in the mode, along with play, laughter, and judgment (15-30). Similarly, Arthur Pollard argues that a satirist, besides employing a forceful method of convincing an audience of a claim, also always operates in opposition to a victim (73). Satire involves a triangulation between author, reader and an outside figure who symbolizes something undesirable to the satirist. This aggression, or “fury” as Carlisle labels it, “distinguishes satire from ordinary humor. Satire is not respectable; humor is” (xiv). At the bottom of satiric irony is supposedly

playfulness, but a sense of play born of barely-concealed anger. In Bloom and Bloom's *Satire's Persuasive Voice*, the authors mention the sense of sadism that exists in many satirists; there is often a feeling in such texts that the work's speaker is more concerned with the release of his or her own temper than with the rectification of social ills (51-2). Such a response to social pressures as traumatic as World War I is not unexpected, nor perhaps even condemnable; satirical poetry may have been the only outlet for many who felt the painful absurdities of modernity. Dustin Griffin makes the compelling claim that the historical conditions which give rise to satire involve the total corruption of the world, or at least a world that *feels* corrupted, to the writer (134). Such a feeling is particularly understandable in wartime, but it is hardly an innovation; Juvenal, for instance, felt that his own age demanded a harsh satiric rejoinder (Pollard 7).

Satiric "militancy" is not in itself a damning criticism of satire as an ethical tool. The satirist's worst abuses of his or her "enemies" are not necessarily unethical. Perhaps the satirist is correct in feeling that the world has lost its collective mind, or that society has abandoned its conscience. Satire's intentions to "hurt" some real or hypothetical victim that Pollard identifies (66), are not, I would propose, grounds enough to dismiss the mode as unethical. Typically, analyses of satire create two divisions within the field: Juvenalian and Horatian satire. Juvenalian satire is marked by direct condemnation; it is the harsher type, intent on social rebuke and reform (Griffin 21). In the modern period, the best examples of Juvenalian satire are the poems of the latter half of World War I and shortly after it: poems full of vitriol, hatred, and a sense of tragic betrayal. Juvenalian satires are the most militant reveling in a verbal warfare that seems warranted in a wrecked society. Yet Horatian satire seems to eschew this: Horatian satires take on a more playful tone than their Juvenalian cousins. George Test defines Horatian satire as the satire of friendship, of joking—it is more private, as opposed to the public denunciation of Juvenalian works (91-2). Thus it is easy to consider Horatian satire a different beast, with its less violent or aggressive tone seeming to eschew the harshest tactics of moralizing, and not to be lumped in with the bitterest works of the war poets.

But both Horatian and Juvenalian satire have something troubling in common: both methods share an incessant disposition toward unilateral didacticism or dogmatism (Bloom and Bloom 33), which makes satire a problematic literary form. Satire allows no

communicative action, instead its didacticism sways us toward mocking some other to rectify a perceived wrong. There is little *free* language play or exchange in any satire, whether Horatian or otherwise, as satire maintains only one goal—reform, whether reform by cajoling or shouting, whether reasoning with close friends or public enemies. Open-ended ironic play is different, as Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* demonstrates: play—with words or games—is primarily an escape from reality; it has *no* discrete endpoint as its goal (Huizinga 13). As Huizinga explains, winning the game is not the *meaning* of the game, nor the purpose of play (49). Unless the satirist is content to play with language without total concern for the outcome, he or she has not given up power over the audience. One can be moral in immoral ways, or ethical in unethical ways: the war poet who slams his blundering generals for their incompetence may actually be doing society some good—but he is by no means playing with language nor respecting his audience, refusing to admit or accept the unscripted response of another mind.

No matter how playful the satire, satirists aim to be taken seriously despite their ironies; satirists do not write in a vacuum, nor for their own amusement; they intend texts to have a specific effect on their world. Satirists address issues arising from actual ethical dilemmas and often implicate readers in their attacks (Knight 42), whether directly (based upon a reader’s literal guilt) or indirectly (based upon a reader’s ignorance or tacit acceptance of a broken society). It is within this indirect relationship that satire exists, raising questions of what such works can really *do* to reshape society; paradoxically, it can be hard to see any real social change arising from satire (Bloom and Bloom 18).

Thus although satire argues for its own morality and can influence a receptive audience, satire and its aims for tangible social transformations are rendered meaningless if satirists are not taken seriously by other reasonable readers, outside their own camp. If, hypothetically, readers *were* able to keep satire relegated to the level of wordplay, irony, or carnival, then such texts would not be *able* to make the psychic and social impact they seek. Carlisle, in praise of satire, writes that despite its litany of flaws, aggressions, and blind spots, satire remains “irresistible” (xv). Carlisle makes this judgment with relish, studying American satires, and he is certainly correct. But I read the term “irresistible” more darkly: I believe modern ironic satire is unethical *because* of its very irresistibility. The fact remains: satire is persuasive and seductive, despite its “morality.” With its

whispered force of “common sense” comes something else: the didacticism the Blooms mention above, the dogmatic nature of satire. Put simply, satire can only speak—it is incapable of listening. Frye is helpful here in determining the difference between satire and broader irony: “whenever a reader is not sure what the author’s attitude is or what his own is supposed to be, we have irony with relatively little satire” (223). The true satirist allows no doubt in the reader’s mind about where the author stands on the issue at hand—nor on how the reader *ought* to feel about it. No matter how slyly a satire’s points are made, they are never really up for debate; the speaker of satire knows precisely how the world has been upturned and feels no need to solicit any other interpretations.

It is essential to note satire’s relationship to the sarcastic mode of speech. The massive category of irony—put simply, the sense of double vision between an expected reality and the simultaneous experience of some other reality—includes satire and its targeted reversals. But oft overlooked is that satire fits within another specific category of language: sarcasm. Sarcasm is a subset of irony, as John Haiman’s *Talk is Cheap* explains, though it is usually thought a more basic type since it is so visible. Sarcasm is simply saying the opposite of what one means—something prevalent in the war poetry arising after the midpoint of World War I. Haiman explains sarcasm as “overt” irony “intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression” (20). This is critical to understanding the trench poets: first, that word “intentionally” is fundamental, as Haiman suggests that sarcasm requires a speaker creating ironies that illustrate a specific message for an audience. Second, the “overtly” ironic nature of sarcasm is crucial, despite feeling oxymoronic. The label of “overt” irony signifies a second-level position in speech. In contrast, a first-level speech act is a *direct* statement—such as an earnest insult or curse, or another obviously-aggressive maneuver. Haiman writes that sarcasm, as overt irony, dips below this level of speech into a secondary position of indirect communication (20). Thus, though the meaning overlaps, telling another a straight “I hate you” is different than saying “I love you” in an affected, sarcastic tone (a second-level statement).

Yet in practice, sarcasm—despite its indirect or second-level nature—cannot escape direct application. This is because sarcasm, conventionally, is meant to be heard *as* sarcasm. We do not say “I love going to the dentist” because we wish our audience to believe we *actually* love going to the dentist, but because either our affected tone or the

generally-accepted incongruity of the sentiments (this is key) in this message tells the listeners we actually do *not* love going to the dentist. This is why Haiman's description of sarcasm as existing "overtly" is so crucial; if a sarcastic statement is not understood as such, then it fails (this is where Habermas's theories of intention within communicative action apply). And satire works in the same way: if what is written is *not* taken as satire, then the satirist has failed in communicating. In contrast, irony more broadly is a fluid communication method, with less direct effects. D. C. Muecke uses this terminology in his *The Compass of Irony*, labeling sarcasm as "overt" irony, since sarcasm (and satire) are not really all that ironic at all; sarcastic remarks are meant not to complicate communication but to be clearly understood (54). Muecke argues that in the cases of sarcasm or overt satire the ironist does not pretend to be unaware of the real import of the communication sent—and neither is the audience (20).

Haiman builds on this, saying that the sarcasm is an actor made up of a "divided self" of "performer" and "persona" (61). But Haiman says the sarcasm is not a "method actor" but a "disdainful" one who does not hide the performer within the persona but instead "advertises" his unbelief within the role. By keeping persona and performer simultaneously present for the audience's perusal, the actor purposely acts "poorly" to show the difference between what the actor *truly* believes and what he or she *purports* to believe (which, in sarcasm or satire, are always opposed). The result is a controlling communication; the only possible response to sarcasm is direct (and uninteresting) discourse that does not allow for ethical, multifaceted conversations.

Communication's critical purposes are exemplified in Emmanuel Levinas: Levinas offers an explanation of the relationship between the self and all others: "[F]raternity precedes the commonness of a genus. My relationship with the other as neighbor gives meaning to my relations with all the others" (*Otherwise than Being* 159). He continues, "Consciousness is born as the presence of a third party.... It is the entry of the third party, a permanent entry, into the intimacy of the face to face" (160). Social relationships, the ideas of justice, respect, and even self-knowledge, arise only from contact with others. As Diane Perpich explains, "Prior to any commitment on my part, before I can invest this assignation with meaning or make of it a theme for consciousness, I am affected by the other. Indeed, Levinas goes so far as to say that before being for

myself, I am *for another*” (129). We not only exist solely in conjunction with others, but we cannot even understand our own minds *without* relationships.

When this kind of ethical acknowledgment is applied to language, we see even further the problematic nature of satirical communication. Michael Eskin follows Levinas in writing that the relationship between the self and other must always begin at the level of “discourse” (32). Satires and sarcasm fail as ethical modes of communication simply because they *disallow* mutual discourse with the other. Interestingly, sarcastic speech exists in a doubled position: it veils itself as a complex approach to reality—seeming to shape a clever, subversive, alternate world of language parallel to the standard one—despite remaining unilateral. George Test notes that sarcasm remains a fundamental tool of the satirical artist (156), and it is easy to see why: listeners enjoy the double-level nature of satirical or sarcastic speech. It is precisely this sense of cleverness that makes satire so “seductive” (Carlisle xv). We find ourselves listening to and agreeing with a satire because of its powerful “bond of sympathetic recognition” (Bloom and Bloom 35). We readers may pride ourselves on our ability to read the “true” message beneath the purported one. We may even feel flattered that the satirist let us in on the joke.

But if the receiver of simple sarcasm or satire stops for a moment to consider the basis of such communication, he or she will find that those “in on the joke” are not so special after all. Listeners *are* insiders privy to the joke of underhanded communication in the case of satire—but that group of insiders extends to most rational beings. Put another way, we are certainly unique—but so is everyone else. We are not particularly gifted in being able to unravel sarcasm or satire. To misunderstand sarcasm renders someone almost illiterate: for instance, though some readers of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” may not recognize his satirical irony, this is likely due to unfamiliarity with the text rather than a debate over its meaning. The more familiar a reader becomes with Swift’s satire, the more ludicrous it becomes to believe the satirist intends it to be understood literally. The satirist intends to “hurt” its target, to inflict damage (Pollard 66, 68). To lack an element of perceivable, unidirectional aggression is to fail at satire.

This unidirectional element is precisely what dooms satire as unethical communication. Satire masquerades as a complex approach to reality, but as long as a reader or listener experiences satire *as* satire, reality is oversimplified. There is a very

clear delineation between the pretended opinion and the true opinion of the speaker, or a satire has failed anyway (Haiman 20). In presenting only one point of view as valid, satire seeks to dispel discourse, discussion, or debate with its recipient. Thus while we may consider the finer points of Swift's satire, we readers cannot ever read "A Modest Proposal" with any interpretation of the "Irish Question" contrary to Swift's narrator. Swift makes it clear throughout the satire that his "real" speaker (the second-level speaker, not the glib narrator who relishes his grisly plan) is not willing to entertain the possibility that the Irish problem is anything but an English problem. He offers us details that make us agree with Swift's actual position on the topic, but he has done so in a way that divides two sides, and allows little actual *discussion* about the real political positions (Booth *The Rhetoric of Irony* 119). In other words, if you agree with Swift, you are both intelligent (for understanding the sarcasm) and kind (for we cannot help but agree with Swift's position). If you do not agree, you are a bigoted cannibal.

I do not wish to be confusing here: I am not arguing that the intentions of Swift's satire were not worthy ones; his motives were moral, though I would contest that his *methods*—and those of the wartime satirists we will examine—are less so. Satirical and sarcastic texts are, at bottom, coercive: they demand that a reader agree with them or be classified alongside the evil, the foolish, or the insane. Satire informs a reader of its intentions, while couching communication within the additional message that there is *no need* for discourse about the satirist's opinions. As soon as the message is sent, the questions it would raise have been settled, the satirist assures the audience.

I follow Paul Armstrong's argument that texts reach their potential when they create opportunities for "play," when they allow for back-and-forth interaction between speakers and listeners. He explains, "The interaction of free and instrumental play in textual games provides a model for the ethical use of power" (Armstrong 34). When I read satire I become aware that my opinions are not needed by the author of the work: the only possible conclusions have been laid out for me. But ethical texts respect their readers enough to solicit responses from them—however this is signified (the details of such interactions will be explored in later chapters). Eskin, echoing Levinas, reminds us that an ethical approach to the other can be signified in literature within the figure of the "midrash," a Hebrew term symbolizing "the solicitation of meaning" (53). Within the

figure of *midrash*, texts become more than just signifier and signified: interpretation *becomes* solicitation and texts function as a space for dialogic activity between self and other (Eskin 57). Sarcasm works contrary to this solicitation or dialogue: it exists as a veiled threat, reminding us that a viewpoint is *obviously* wrong and that to doubt the speaker is to join the side of the ignorant or incorrect. Such overpowering tactics cut off communication; they do not open new channels for it (Armstrong 36).

Satire's major ethical failing is a lack of faith in one's audience to interpret ironies for itself. As Kernan puts it, the satirist "sees the world as a battlefield between a definite, clearly understood good, which he represents, and an equally clear-cut evil. No ambiguities, no doubts about himself, no sense of mystery troubles him, and he retains always his monolithic certainty" (*Cankered Muse* 21-22). The satirist, for all the flashy, antisocial vitriol, is the greatest moralist of all, and the most conservative of teachers. The best satire is based on a "definite" understanding of the morals involved (Kernan 88-89), with no room for debate. Satirists enjoy this position of deterministic moralization and profess a didacticism that dishes out the answers to society's ills with great gusto (Bloom and Bloom 68). But from the viewpoint of discourse ethics, satirists are as wrong as oppressive governments or institutions: they all share the same fears that free individuals might make up their minds *wrongly*. No matter the angle, the message remains: agree with the verbal authority or be ignored, ridiculed, or punished.

There is, I believe, a better alternative, one offered by Wayne Booth in his text on narrative ethics, *The Company We Keep*. He advocates an ethical literary criticism based upon treating others as equals. The hierarchy the satirist creates between the "approved" point of view and all other possibilities is upset if the writer gives up the coercive power of satire and employs a more multifaceted irony. This is what makes literature useful for ethics, Booth argues, as it allows writers *and* readers to use moral discernment and make judgments without simply repeating back dogmas they have been taught (187). Booth puts it eloquently, speaking from the ethical reader's perspective:

If I am to give myself generously, must I not also accept the responsibility to enter into serious dialogue with the author about how his or her values join or conflict with mine? To decline the gambit, to remain passive in the face of the author's strongest passions and deepest convictions is surely condescending, insulting, and finally irresponsible. (135)

This is not simply about argument or disruption, but about using literature to its fullest extent. We must put aside the “passive” nature of reading and accept that an author’s imagining of a complex, ironic world requires an equally complicated engagement and response from us. If we are to accept the “gambit” literature offers, it will mean rejecting (or at least responding to) the kind of literature that discourages such gambits. And we may find a delicious irony in the dogmatic position of the self-deluding satirist.

The Irony of War and Siegfried Sassoon’s Myriad Fools

It should come as no surprise that satirical stances would arise under the pressures of the most ironic event of its time, the First World War. Paul Fussell muses that “every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected” (7). Yet perhaps no war *felt* more ironic in its time than the first modern world war. As Eric Leed explains in his *No Man’s Land*, the war provided not an expected ascent toward cultural enlightenment, but a “spiritual and social descent” into meaninglessness (81). Instead of the promised quick, decisive war, soldiers and volunteers were faced with the horrors of the trenches and the terrors of chemical warfare (Eksteins 100, 162). The battlefields of Europe were built upon powerful defensive batteries (Leed 96), making it nearly impossible for either side to gain ground. Traditional aggressive maneuvers could be shut down easily by enemy artillery. Thus the soldier of World War I spent more time waiting in and wading through the trenches than he did fighting anyone. This absurd, passive position of modern warriors, feeling like nothing more than cannon fodder or shell-shocked Tommies or Doughboys, would not soon be forgotten by those who experienced it.

Thus it is little surprise that some of these witnesses to war would express their position in sarcastic screeds, in opposition to the official stories of the war. In Britain, the newspapers and periodicals at war’s beginning were rife with patriotic slogans, jingoistic buzzwords, and sexist, racialized and other forms of abusive propaganda, all aiming to justify the war effort, as Vincent Sherry writes of the “Liberal Measures” in World War I (29). Likewise, propaganda flooded the American media long before America’s entry into war. Stanley Cooperman writes about the American experience of the war that “The intensity with which propaganda had been first accepted... was a vitally important factor in the subsequent revulsion against all verbalized value” (28). This “intensity” should not

be understated: in the first years of the war, especially, propaganda filled the ears of soldiers with stories of enemies, victims, and heroes and it promised a reasonable war fought under reasonable, traditional conditions. But times changed: Leed writes about the growing disparity between homefront and war fronts: the continuing propaganda from the homefront contrasted with the soldiers' inability to live up to such jingoism (106). The result was a growing gulf between what the soldiers and observers of the war experienced and what those away from the action believed. Fussell argues that some of the soldiers' strongest memories of the war were linked inseparably to irony—such as the sight of cavalry riding forth only to be decimated by enemy guns (32). Qualities that had seemed invincible before the war—including the power, honor, and morality of the armies of Europe—sounded laughable by war's end. The logical, rational arguments for Britain's entering the war as the only “civilized” response to German aggression (Sherry 35-6) looked more and more foolish as the bitterly-ironic realities of trench warfare dragged on. The promise of progress that had spawned the myth of the “Great War” grated at the soldiers' collective consciousness. The propaganda that had gotten them into the trenches and kept them there was understandably painful to those in harm's way.

The stinging irony of debunked propaganda was the impetus for war poetry's change after 1916 after the drawn-out destruction of the Battle of the Somme from July to November of that year. Total casualties on all sides exceeded one million, including over 300,000 killed and missing among the British and French Allies and the German forces. Ironically, those hundreds of thousands dead managed to push the Allies only six or seven miles further east (Hynes 99). The prolonged, apparently-pointless conflict at the Somme was not a unique event: it was paralleled by multiple other battles of attrition, such as the Battle of Passchendaele during the summer and autumn of 1917 (Leed 99). Perhaps not surprisingly, from 1917 on, civilian war poetry began to be displaced by the new poetry of jaded, scared, and bored soldiers, intent on preaching the “stupid and ugly side of war” (Hynes 31-2). They sought a new rhetoric in their poetry, characterized by five themes, according to Stout, all built upon irony, including: 1.) “bluntness of visual details,” 2.) “a reluctance to use marching rhythms,” 3.) “ambiguity and disorder,” 4.) “sadness and misery,” and 5.) “ruined landscapes” (Stout 40-1). Also-apparent in the war poets' work is a heavy use of grotesque imagery and sound (as we saw in Owen's

“S.I.W.” and will see in the poetry to come) in attempting to capture the inhumanity of the trench experience (Dawes 154). Fussell adds that among the soldier-poets there grew “the feeling that the pre-war world should be not simply forgotten, but rejected, because it had been wrong; and the feeling that between that world and the world-at-war there was a discontinuity, a gap in history that could not be bridged” (24).

I will trace this anti-propaganda through some examples of the later war poetry, establishing a “control” for my broader investigation of poetry of war and after, finding what anti-propaganda propaganda looks like. The poetry of Siegfried Sassoon is apropos: the English soldier’s experience of the war—from his initial impressions of an adventurous jaunt to his disillusion and subsequent loss of hope for finding any good within war or society—can be traced through his works. Sassoon’s poetry is terse and poignant, usually dashed off and printed quickly, and largely published in the pacifistic *Cambridge Magazine* (Moeyes 64). Much of Sassoon’s war poetry was written as a hedge against mental breakdown, in his own assessment (Hemmings 116). Thus the latter poems may be considered—as Owen’s will be—a record of treatment, specifically prescribed by his pioneering psychiatrist, William Rivers (Hemmings 110), and it is critical to read Sassoon in this light. He is not making a public service announcement in drafting his poems but is instead working through traumas external and internal, factual and fictional, and his poetry should never be taken lightly—*nor* as self-justifying.

“The Hero”

Such is the case with Sassoon’s August 1916 poem, “The Hero,” which firmly establishes the soldier-poet’s satirical ethos. It deserves a look precisely because it is *not* one of Sassoon’s most violent or heated poems, yet its ironies remain problematic:

“Jack fell as he’d have wished,” the Mother said,
And folded up the letter that she’d read.
“The Colonel writes so nicely.” Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. “We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers.” Then her face was bowed.

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Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He’d told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.

For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes 10
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how "Jack", cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried 15
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair. (Sassoon 49)

"The Hero" was written in the summer of the Somme offensive, which Sassoon spent alternately between the frontline trenches and various hospitals (Sassoon 49-50). As satire, it mimics the playfulness of Horace more than the vitriol of Juvenal, in its sarcastic recounting of its "Hero." Thus, Lane categorizes this as one of Sassoon's poems of "dramatic realism" rather than one of his more abstract satires (95). Further suggesting the poem's relative mildness is the fact that Sassoon felt comfortable enough to read it aloud (along with his poem "They") at a London party in November 1917 before a predominantly-female audience (Egremont 174-75). Yet there remain troubling elements in this early poem that limit its attempts at ethical communication.

"The Hero" stands out as a poem of *titles* rather than identities. First is the poem's title, the generic styling of "The Hero," and this is followed by an unnamed "Mother" in line one, a likewise-nameless "Colonel" in line three, and the doubly-(un)titled "Brother Officer" of line seven. We do not get a single personal name, in fact, until the Hero's name is revealed as "Jack" in line thirteen. The quote marks around "Jack" in Sassoon's text draw attention to the fact that this is the only personal name in the poem, while simultaneously putting that personal title into *doubt*. "Jack" works as an euonym, suggesting that the "Hero" is nothing special—a "Jack" of all trades and master of none. Sassoon's speaker takes it one step further: not only is "Jack" ordinary but he's worse—a coward, "cold-footed, useless swine" (l. 13).

The emphasis on titles and the dubious quotation marks around "Jack" are clues to Sassoon's game. Commenting on the poem after the war, Sassoon remarked that the poem did "not refer to anyone I have known. But it is pathetically true. And of course the 'average Englishman' will hate it" (Sassoon 49). Thus the characters distinguished only by their roles (capitalized as though players in a drama) rather than as individuals make

more sense: they are representatives of a world that Sassoon experiences and imagines, *placeholders* rather than people. Even the Hero, who might have been someone Sassoon knew, is not Jack but “Jack,” not a literal creature but a literary character. Sassoon’s admission of this vignette’s fictionality is interesting, but we might have followed the trail of titular clues to arrive at the same realization, anyway.

So what does Sassoon have up his sleeve? Why burst the bubble of belief by telling us, both directly (after the fact) and subtly (within the poem), that this story is representative rather than *real*? The fact that he would write a poem in this vein at all—that is, one demythologizing the war and the idea of the heroic soldier—indicates that Sassoon’s speaker wishes to reveal some truth about his *own* experience of reality. The ironic, absurd (anti-)hero “Jack” feels like a lesson of some sort: perhaps, for instance, those trapped by the war lose their individuality and become little more than faceless play-actors, lacking independent thought or agency. Or perhaps the speaker intends this poem ironically to be a dark comedy, relishing the thread of misinformation and false beliefs weaving together the characters’ differing perspectives.

But Sassoon clarifies this murky telos when he writes that though the poem may not have come from a literal experience, it is still “pathetically true,” that is, a truth one can *feel* even if one has not seen it. Essentially, he’s admitting that the poem is purely concerned with rhetoric, including the ignorant civilian patriotism the Mother spouts and the “gallant lies” the “Brother Officer” spews, but also, most importantly, the rueful sarcasm of the narrator’s voice. Had Sassoon ended the poem after the hapless “Jack” had gotten himself “Blown to small bits” in line 17, he would have offered us a complex kind of rhetoric, concerned with opening up avenues of debate and discourse with a reader. Without these last bits of poetic editorializing, the reader would be left to decide what to make of both the fictionalized (but, effectively, real) tale of the brutality and absurdity of the war *and* able to evaluate the narrator’s recounting of this.

Yet Sassoon’s speaker refuses to allow us such ambiguities. He uses the sarcastic heroism of the poem to teach the reader a lesson in morality. Here is the problematic didacticism that satire exhibits: intent that the reader come away from the poem with only one response, Sassoon’s poem tacks a blatant moral onto the end of the story, following up the blunt and powerfully ambiguous figure of the doomed soldier’s end with the

bathetic lines: “And no one seemed to care / Except that lonely woman with white hair” (ll. 17-18). This kind of speech elicits as predictable a response as a parent telling a child she need not be particularly concerned about the ice cream truck at the end of the driveway; that is, most children will respond with protestations to the contrary. And this is precisely the sort of discourse the satirist deals in: when Sassoon’s speaker says “no one seemed to care,” we become his child chorus, professing our feelings to the contrary. We care what happens to Jack and to his mother, and we do not like the war either. Satire—even the mild satire evidenced here that is largely abstracted—still attempts to *control* our response. Satire constrains its hearers ability to interpret and engage with its speaker. Worse yet, it works to remove both our ability and our responsibility (even temporarily) to think critically about society. Satire rejects a mature discourse for a juvenile one. The complexities of “Jack” the play-actor’s absurd death are smoothed over by a shepherding, dogmatic speaker who believes his listeners have no business thinking for themselves about matters of life and death. But the joke is spoiled when the punchline is explained.

Furthermore, the poem’s problems are compounded with Sassoon’s additional sarcastic comments that “[O]f course the ‘average Englishman’ will hate it” (Sassoon 49). In this moment the author and the poem’s speaker are aligned in their attempt to evoke “hate” from his cultural audience. That “of course” suggests that the statement is likely tongue-in-cheek, but Sassoon need not have said it at all—we can find its echoes written upon the poetic text already. The overt disgust for his “average” reader merely echoes what the poem’s dubious ending insinuates: that audience members should not be allowed to make up their own minds about Sassoon’s *private* experience of the war. Of course, this is *not* even Sassoon’s experience of the war—not in the literal sense, anyway, as this poetic event and its characters did not *really* exist—which answers the argument that Sassoon is merely recounting events as they happened. He is making a rhetorical claim with this symbolic poem, and he admits this. The trouble is, the method he chooses to make a point about the war carries a strong disregard for actual discourse. The satirist knows he is undoubtedly right (despite fabricating this “rightness”) and he has little patience for other viewpoints. Perhaps he *is* right—heroism is an old myth—but to demand that his audience agree with this controlling final language is to disrespect and discount all minds but his own.

In this case, the “average Englishman” reading Sassoon was actually an Englishwoman, as Sassoon himself would find when nervously reading his poems to a crowd of women in London (Egremont 175). This compounds the poem’s problematic satire, as women—unable to participate directly in the war service that Sassoon considered legitimate—were left to their own “irresponsible and dangerous assumptions about the glory of war,” as James Campbell puts it, and to empty consolations for the deaths of their men (“For You May Touch Them Not” 836). Patrick Campbell notes that this is the first time a mother’s viewpoint is taken up directly by Sassoon, with the use of “We mothers” (32). Campbell further writes that Sassoon believed the mothers to be guiltier than the fathers for the war, as Sassoon thought women’s sentimental attitudes toward battle and their ignorance of war would drag the fighting out further (32, 117). Surely pity intermingles with satire in Sassoon’s description of a “lonely woman with white hair” in the final line of “The Hero”—as Sternlicht remarks (41)—but I argue that this is once again a way Sassoon distances himself from his civilian readership. Whether he hates or pities his audience, Sassoon never makes others equal to his prophetic narrators. Pity creates as dramatic a hierarchy as more overt poetic antagonism can.

Here I should interject that I do not blame the poet Sassoon for his use of controlling satire (though his misogyny is less excusable), I merely wish to point out its problems for entertaining real discussion, something I argue is essential to changing an opponent’s position. If a writer does not respect a reader’s ability to make up his or her mind about a topic in question, a reader can often sense this skepticism and the lack of respect it implies. If a speaker insults us, questioning our ability to interpret his opening claims for ourselves, his rhetoric may fail to create the effect the speaker seeks, no matter the intent. The reader of satire can usually sense the omnipresent angle of attack and the intent to hurt (Booth *The Rhetoric of Irony* 28). The astute reader may thus feel insulted or at least manipulated by satire’s heavy-handed attempts to elicit a response, making satire a difficult way to promote ethical discourse between rational minds. The clever satirist may find ways around these limitations but he or she must do so by finding ways to justify the hierarchical positioning of satire (Pollard 73).

All this to say: moral intentions are not coeval with ethical rhetoric, and this is particularly obvious in the satire and sarcasm of the war poets. There is little doubt that

Sassoon and his ilk had reasons for writing the poetry they did. I do not doubt Sassoon's convictions, nor question his attempts to communicate a gross tragedy that seemed incommunicable, nor will I in Owen's case. But ethical discourse, fundamentally, requires its instigator to leave open the possibility of changing one's own mind, as well as someone else's. To be ethical in communication we must force ourselves to admit that we do not know as much as we would prefer. If the speaker already knows without a doubt the answer to a question then it is not a real piece of discourse at all, nor really up for debate. Readers and listeners are not all fools: there is a band of audience members between those who completely agree and those who refuse even to listen, an audience reached only by the olive branch of ethical discourse. Those readers know when writers and speakers are not open to a discussion of points, and they can thus realize they must either agree or disagree with the speech as it is given—eliminating the possibility for the inquiry and insight attainable with a real Socratic dialogue.

The pragmatic method helps to justify my criticisms of wartime satirical poetry. William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* contends that the "final test of belief" of any sort is not the origins of a belief, but the "way in which it works" (29). My problem with Sassoon's poems is *not* that his belief in war's evil, heroism's end, and civilian ignorance is incorrect or immoral. I merely insist that satire does not "work" in the Jamesian way that Sassoon intends it to. When couched in an ethic that (passively or not) disrespects its fellow communicant, satire does not produce its intended effects. Thus satire cannot be the best rhetorical method for remaking modern ethics, despite its witty allure and its often-earnest attempts to communicate and correct society's failures. Satire's heart is in the right place but its mind is misguided.

“Blighters”

The sense of righteous indignation in Sassoon's poetry grows as the war drags on, turning violent in the February 1917 poem “Blighters.” The first stanza sets the scene:

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
“We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!” (Sassoon 68, ll. 1-4)

takes a turn at joking in this stanza, building upon the invocation of “dear old Tanks” in line four, with the image of a tragicomical dancing and “lurching” Tank crushing all “Music-halls” and their inhabitants beneath its treads—all to the absurd background of up-tempo “ragtime tunes” (ll. 5-7). But the speaker tells us, lest we consider him heartless, that he would do this only to stop the “jokes in Music-halls” which, he believes, “...mock the riddled corpses around Bapaume” (ll. 7-8). The narrator has a heart after all: he is not trying simply to squelch civilian laughter, he simply cannot stand to hear the death and destruction of war “mocked.”

What is the collateral damage of Sassoon’s moral victory? Patrick Campbell praises the poem for its grittiness and its offer of “no ‘holier than thou’ attitudinizing” (134), but this seems quite wrong, as the poem’s speaker *clearly* takes a superior position to those performers he critiques. Sternlicht rightly admits that Sassoon’s ““Blighters”” is “grossly unfair to the poor women of the chorus, who were entertainers, not harlots,” though he maintains that Sassoon’s “general indignation and frustration are justifiable” (38). Of course ““Blighters”” is about more than simply Sassoon’s disgust for civilian obliviousness to his war experience; Jean Moorcroft Wilson explains that although this response to an unwitting homefront celebration of war is understandable, much of Sassoon’s anger here has another source as well. Sassoon’s venom, she writes, is not righteous anger on behalf of his fellows but stems from his perception of civilian indifference to his *own* eventual death (317). His anger is selfish: he worries about his lack of recognition or fame fighting *in* the war while performers back home are publicly lauded for singing and dancing *about* the war. Egremont further indicates that Sassoon’s wrath stems from more than his own morality: entries in Sassoon’s diary indicate anger not just at women for their faith in the war effort, but also at them for enjoying the domestic comforts of marriage and family life that he himself felt separated from by his homosexuality (120). Egremont muses that Sassoon’s anger at civilians stems from a sense of justice, but also that it has psychoanalytic roots in Sassoon’s failure to live up to his mother’s ideals, an angst that still bleeds into his satirical poetry. Regardless, Sassoon’s motives for social critique are complex and necessitate that we do not gloss them as the “truth” of the war or any such reduction. The divisions of warrior and civilian are much more difficult to define and justify than we may assume.

This complexity can be extended by returning to the dark pun on “riddled corpses” in line eight of ““Blighters,”” a pun that emphasizes Sassoon’s sense of the meaningless of both the Battle of the Somme (wherein Bapaume was a prime objective) and of an ironic approach to the war. But this “riddle” of death is one that Sassoon’s speaker would rather avoid considering. Especially in this poem, Sassoon’s views of the war and death become apparent: death—to Sassoon and many of the other war poets who saw it, *en masse*, firsthand—was no joking matter. Death was perceived as the ultimate, unquestioned figure of evil, the ultimate enemy, the final falsity; Sassoon considered monolithic Death as a concept removed from the realm of debate or discourse. It was not something Sassoon could joke about—nor something anyone else ought to, either, he believed. Ronald Schleifer writes that World War I in particular made death easier to see, hear, and feel (13). This is certainly true for those directly affected by the war; death at that time took on a materiality that eventually become a bulwark of modernism in the twentieth century, as Schleifer argues, critical to the rhetoric of modernity (30). On this point, Sassoon the soldier and Sassoon the poet come into conflict. As a warrior facing an enemy, death is to be avoided at all costs, but this does not imply that the poet is tied by the same laws as the soldier. Is death any different on the French battlefields than it is in London or New York? Does death’s power change? Sassoon is not interested in such questions. As a soldier, death is no joking matter to Sassoon, of course. But I question his intentions to speak for everyone on this point. Could death be such a dogmatic truth—essentially the new god of the modern period—that it kills off all joking?

Ostensibly, Sassoon’s harsh ““Blighters,”” attempts to drive a tank not over all jokes but over coarse jesting and ignorant mimicry about war, death, and soldiers. But in the last two lines of the poem we see that he fails in this delimitation by condemning all joking equally. Sassoon longs for a world where “there’d be no more jokes in Music-halls / To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume” (ll. 7-8). Had Sassoon’s speaker been interested not in ending all jokes (in the face of deeply unfunny death) but simply ending farces of the war, then these final lines might have read “there’d be no more jokes...” *that* “mock the riddled corpses...” With a preposition switch, the poem might have condemned unidirectional propaganda in theater. But Sassoon’s poem goes further than that, damning *all* jokes in the music halls, as the wording of “... no more jokes in Music-halls / To mock

the riddled corpses...” implies that music-hall jokes—*civilian* jokes—only work to desecrate the bodies of the war dead. Just as Sassoon makes all women “harlots,” and casts all pageantry as a “mockery” of reality—as Trudi Tate notes (76)—so does the speaker unjustly make all jokes out to be attacks. Whether consciously or not, the narrator wishes to end all joking because he sees any laughter as the ignorance or ridicule of Sassoon’s omnipotent, untouchable deity Death.

Sassoon’s narrator doesn’t want to understand that joking is an escape from the might and meaning invested in Death. To comment on this, I defer to Simon Critchley, who opens his book *On Humour* by reminding us that “Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world” (1). It is a profound remark, and one that Sassoon must have known during wartime—and that is precisely *why* his poem wants to cut off jokes about the war entirely. Sassoon does not at all wish to see discourse open up around death and the war. The poet is convinced that death is the only meaning in his universe and is not interested in a discussion over this—*especially* with a civilian. Laughter, jokes, the comic, and wordplay are threats, because are all elements that resist reduction to simpler terms and forces (Huizinga 6). Pure irony adds a layer of complexity to the commonalities of human existence—including the dance of life and death. As Eric Weitz puts it, “Humour reminds us that, for humans, there is more than one way to make sense. Furthermore, it involves a feeling *about* that sense, which sometimes makes a truth told by humorous means seem *truer* than one conveyed through serious discourse” (65). To cut off the debate and inventive play inherent in the ironic, Sassoon’s ethic refuses to open itself up to the possibility that other viewpoints could complicate truth. Christie Davies’s *Jokes and Targets* notes that jokes themselves are too ambiguous and flexible to be clear moral statements (11). And this is what Sassoon resists: the loss of control over the message of the “true” war experience, which causes him to doubt the viability of open ironies to do good. These fears manifest in his poetry with a feeling that unless irony fits a satiric, moral mode, attacking blatant wrongdoers and heresies, it must be silenced.

Essentially, Sassoon’s “Blighters” throws the baby out with the bathwater. Joking is a way of coping with and addressing difficult issues obliquely—which is often the only way they can *be* addressed. Davies notes that military jokes are prevalent enough to constitute a major category of humor all on their own (27, 31), and Sassoon himself

does joke about the ineptitude of military leaders in such poems as “The General” and of society’s rulers in “The Fathers.” But the humor in these and other poems remains satiric, unidirectional, and solicits no response from his rivals or even his listeners. Sassoon rejects the use of joking or humor for productive conversations, and thus abandons its ethical component. Tragically, in doing so he is refusing one of the few avenues of effective social response to the war’s tragedy available to him as a soldier. Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* writes that the joke and laughter is a means of upsetting the sacred in society (87). The result of such destabilizing, undermining laughter is a “victory of laughter over fear,” a means of toppling authoritarian power of all sorts—even if the laugher has no power of his or her own (Bakhtin 90-1). Critically, as Bakhtin explains, “medieval laughter is not a subjective, individual and biological consciousness of the uninterrupted flow of time. It is the social consciousness of all the people” (92). In contrast to this shared laughter, Sassoon’s sarcastic joking represents a satirical *modern* laughter of an age of “enlightenment”—not the “medieval,” pre-modern, unselfconscious laughter of an oppressed group. Bakhtin writes that the latter kind of joking can lead to a mutual victory over oppression, authority, and even death—at least in a pragmatic sense—whereas Sassoon’s laughter fails to do this. Sassoon throws away the dialogic, shared joke as a possibility for revolution. He is not interested in destabilizing the authority of one-way communication—instead he wishes to keep such authority for himself and those who think like him. Sassoon has lost his moral high ground. Adrian Caesar writes about Sassoon’s poems that threaten or decry his civilian audience, deeming them “Sassoon’s anxiety to rub the noses of civilians into the mud and blood and slaughter of the western front” (85). Caesar argues, “In the case of real warmongers this may be justified, but reading Sassoon’s poems of this kind can lead to the very mistaken impression that every civilian was a heartless coward” (85). We realize that Sassoon’s joke is not just a harsh truth—it is not the truth at all. By throwing away the possibility of a dialogic exchange with his audience, in one fell swoop the soldier-poet has lost his personal battle.

Sassoon abhors the loss of power that open-ended joking invites, so he sticks to what he knows: hatred masked as joking, and the refusal of all other “jokes... / To mock the riddled corpses” (ll. 7-8). He can only do this by throwing out *all* complex irony, as the line’s construction reveals. Especially relevant is the distinction between the

solicitation joking embodies (a form of complex ironic communication that does not work or exist unless its listener can supply some of its context and meaning) and the unilateral volleys of satirical jesting. Ted Cohen writes about the “asymmetrical joke,” a piece of humor operating when a joke’s teller and its audience do not share background relevant to understanding the irony (32). The result is a division between the in- and out-groups the joke creates, and the joke essentially becomes “deviant” or “fraudulent” (Cohen 35), not seeking discourse but discord. This is the wall that soldier-poets often hid behind, defining two groups with a clear hierarchy, the “I” who has been through hell and the “you” addressed who has not (Hynes 159). This is the way Sassoon writes his humor and in doing so he writes the constructive joke out of the picture. By throwing away open-ended ironies and their complicated approach to reality, Sassoon unfortunately gives up an avenue of escape or possible triumph over the monolithic face of Death.

Wilfred Owen’s Dark Laughter

Sassoon’s protege, Wilfred Owen, represents a more tragic version of Sassoon. His life was marked by a sad irony, as he was killed in action just a week prior to the Armistice. The misfortune of his early death, coupled with Owen’s tenderer, emotive poetry, often makes Owen’s readers even less likely to criticize his ethical methods than those of his mentor, Sassoon, whom he met in convalescence in Craiglockhart War Hospital in 1917. If Sassoon has been taken as something of an antiwar satirist, Owen was apotheosized as the true bard of the war, elevated to a level of poetic sainthood that admits little criticism of his methods. Even today, Prime Minister David Cameron calls “Dulce et Decorum Est” his favorite poem (Thomas 1). In Owen, as with no other war poet, we see the “Romantic poet-hero” (Caesar 116), who lived fiercely, his poetry burning brightly, only to die young. Naturally this colors the way we read him.

Jon Silkin uses these two figures, Sassoon and Owen, to define two chronological stages of the war poet’s consciousness. In Sassoon, Silkin identifies the position of the “angry prophet,” who thrives upon anger and satire alone and creates sardonic distance between himself and those who sent him to war (31). Owen, in contrast, represents a different stage—pity or “compassion” over anger—as Owen’s poetry is more sensuous and tender, replacing anger with pity; it *feels* more than Sassoon’s voice (Silkin 32). In

this vein, Stout claims that Sassoon's anger is fundamentally different than Owen's sense of bitter pathos (42), continuing the oft-assumed argument that one sort of satire operates more ethically than another. If Sassoon's satire is Juvenalian, Owen's is Horatian: it may have a less-pointed attack but it still attacks, nonetheless, and has no problem ignoring alternate visions. Owen arrived at Craiglockhart in the summer of 1917, after Sassoon, and the language and rhetoric of the older poet worked its way into Owen's poetry (Hynes 180-2). With the style and tonal force inherited from Sassoon came a similar argument from the shell-shocked Owen against outsiders' comments on the war. The younger poet, mourning the loss of a romantic world of beauty and truth, cannot help but write ironically about the ugliness of his wartime surroundings (Stout 28, 37).

Yet Owen's poetry is as satirically divisive as Sassoon's. Fussell writes that Owen saw his world as sharply divided between those who spoke of and "ordained" the war from a safe distance and the soldiers who had to endure its sufferings (89). Owen could not reconcile the world of those who had seen the war's horrors and those who had not, and his poetry draws a distinct line between those he will listen to—his fellow soldiers—and those he will not—*everyone else*. James Campbell's term for this is "'combat gnosticism,' the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience" ("Combat Gnosticism" 203). As with Sassoon, Owen's poetry is both the result of and treatment for his war trauma and shellshock, functioning as a "work-cure" that Owen's psychologist Arthur Brock (and his fellow patient, Sassoon) encouraged Owen to try (Hipp 32). Also, like Sassoon, Owen exhibits the feeling in his poetry that soldiers could find more in common with their fellow warriors—even enemy combatants—than they could with those back home (Purkis 51). As with Sassoon, Owen's poetry often displays rhetorical divisiveness and the resistance to use irony as a healing, dialogic process, instead using satire in familiar, problematic ways.

"Apologia Pro Poemate Meo"

This analysis is not meant as a charge against the person Owen's experience of the war: it seems especially cheap to speak ruthlessly of the young dead. Thus I address my criticism of Owen's polemics to his poetry and specifically to the poetic persona of

the “soldier” he uses so frequently, rather than to the man himself. To be sure, much of Owen’s poetry is not strictly satirical; however, in the poems that are ironic and address laughter darkly, Owen works within a satirical mold. With this caveat, we begin with Owen’s “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo,” written in November 1917 but published in 1920. The first four stanzas set the battlefield scene vividly:

I, too, saw God through mud,—
 The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
 War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
 And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child.

Merry it was to laugh there— 5
 Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
 For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
 Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

I, too, have dropped off Fear— 10
 Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,
 And sailed my spirit surging light and clear
 Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn;

And witnessed exultation— 15
 Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,
 Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,
 Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul. (Owen 101, ll. 1-16)

After Sassoon’s spleen, this satire seems relatively sedated, but similar marks of the older poet’s unidirectional speech remain: the accusations against a two-dimensional foe, the stark division of “I” and “you” that will become forceful in the end, and the subject of joking, laughter, or “merriment” in an ironic time. As such Owen’s “Apologia” exemplifies the war satirist’s toolkit. The title alerts us to the position the poem seeks: Owen calls it an “Apologia” or defense of his (war) poetry, harkening back to an older mode of poetic criticism, à la Sidney or Shelley’s defenses of poetry. This title makes the iconoclastic Owen a descendent of these earlier poetic innovators—all of whom died quite young. Yet even shrouded in the Latin of yesteryear—which the better-educated Sassoon actually edited for Owen (Kerr 533)—we can still read the title as initiating an aggravated, defensive posture for the work. This defensive tone and position is the mark of the satirist, a writer who bristles at having to explain his position, assuming his or her criticism is above reproach. Thus calling the poem an “Apology” while arguing that it

need not justify itself signifies a sarcastic envoy to Owen's audience, shaping a gulf between speaker and imagined readers that will only grow as the poem develops.

Initially, however, the poem appears to offer the kind of ironic exchange with its audience that I find useful: though alternating stanzas begin with the individual "I" voice, they are coupled—in stanzas one and three—with "too" (ll. 1, 9). "I, too" signifies a joining between oneself and another, and this opening seems to invite us alongside, saying that, symbolically or not, we might join the speaker's conversation. Perhaps our experience can match his, "too." Similarly, stanza two speaks of laughter—often a signal of ethical exchange—even in the midst of mud and blood, as Owen's speaker writes that for his fellow "wretches" "War... / ...gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child" (ll. 3-4). He goes on to say "Merry it was to laugh there— / Where death becomes absurd and life absurder" (ll. 5-6). This is perhaps existential laughter, as Tadeusz Slawek believes, laughter at the absurd and incomprehensible (319).

But I believe otherwise: the speaker's laugh sounds unnatural—the calculated, rhetorical jibe of the sarcast. Suspicion grows when the joke is ruined: Owen describes, "For power was on us as we slashed bones bare / Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder" (ll. 7-8). The intriguing initial suggestion of a community, built upon shared laughter at absurdity, is destroyed when we realize that the speaker is not interested in the equalizing and destabilizing nature of comedy within tragedy. Instead Owen sounds as sarcastic as Sassoon, linking laughter to a loss of feeling and conscience, rather than using irony to create or invite. The poem's smiles and jokes are unilaterally sarcastic, forcing us to agree that the absurdities of No Man's Land contain no complex ironies, really. The didacticism of this laughter controls a reader's response, suggesting that we can tell the speaker nothing, but are here only to experience *his* harsh laughter. Hopeful, Bakhtinian jesting is abandoned alongside the loss of "Fear," as the soldier has "sailed my spirit surging light and clear / Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn;" (ll. 9, 11-12). Similarly, stanza four speaks sarcastically of the field of battle as an absurd place where "Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl, / Shine and lift up with passion of oblation, / Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul" (ll. 14-16).

Without that final addendum, "though they were foul," we might have read this stanza as complexly ironic. Pollard posits that sarcasm is irony without mystery, lacking

“generosity” toward its audience (68), and the result of such cynicism is hollow, bitter laughter (69), rather than the inventive, inclusive play of irony that opens perspectives. Owen’s vision in stanza four of humans united in spirit by death is actually a very complex, interesting one that—and one that might speak to the beginnings of a real conversation about the war transcending the propaganda of one side and the anger of the other. Instead, the poem dissolves that possibility with the sardonic rejoinder, “though they were foul,” a cheap shot at the harmonic corpses that tells us once again that the sarcasm has less interest in a convoluted discussion than in transmitting his own truths.

After the harsh opening quartet, stanzas five through seven make a turn from the last stanza’s “foul” ending, as Owen continues:

I have made fellowships—
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long, 20

By Joy, whose ribbon slips,—
But wound with war’s hard wire whose stakes are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

I have perceived much beauty 25
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate. (101, ll. 17-28)

Owen’s speaker seems apologetic here, more introspective and less self-assured, as he opens with the admission that “I have made fellowships—” with others on the field of battle (l. 17). Not only that, but these connections were worthwhile ones, greater even than those of “happy lovers in old song” (l. 18). True love, Owen argues, is not the “binding of fair lips” between man and woman but the ties of “war’s hard wire whose stakes are strong; / Bound with the bandage” bleeding and the “webbing of the rifle-thong” (ll. 19, 22-24). And if true love can be found between rough soldiers, so can true beauty be found within “hoarse oaths” and music heard “in the silentness of duty”—even tranquil “peace” might exist “where shell-storms spouted reddest spate” (ll. 26-28). These are interesting ironies that expand our understanding of the scene of terror Owen and others inhabit. The allusions to past ideals of sublime beauties are not used for sarcastic

to tread through the world of absurd laughter and opaque ironies—a world where beauty is unrecognizable but remains, transformed into something transcendent. The speaker says, matter-of-factly, “Nevertheless, except you share / With them in hell”—that is, alongside the soldiers in the trenches—“[y]ou shall not hear their mirth” (ll. 29-33). Of course, it *would* be difficult to join in such “mirth” without being physically present.

But the suddenly-defensive narrator turns possessive at poem’s end: the audience has no *right* to share a “jest of *mine*,” (my emphasis) Owen’s speaker says; the soldiers may be “worth / Your tears,” yet “You,” the listener, “are not worth their merriment” (ll. 35-6). What exactly prompts this sudden reinforcement of an in-group/out-group divide, where the audience’s participation in the joke is refused (Cohen 35)? Caesar suggests that this shift from private experience to public moralizing is the result of Owen’s felt need to tell the truth of the war and its terrors (151). Traditionally, this is how Owen’s poetry has been read, as a justifiable “indictment” of a foolish society (Lane 57). Yet Caesar and others note that the good things Owen finds amidst the terrors of war complicate his moral stance. Sarah Cole writes further about the complications Owen raises in his “Apologia,” writing that Owen asserts that the poem almost arrogantly argues for the supremacy of intimacy on the field of battle over all other kinds of relational bonds, thus it is open only to a select few—males and combatants, specifically (Cole 163). Likewise, Santanu Das posits that in Owen the mixture of applause and homoeroticism surrounding his fellow soldiers is a liminal site where “a rigorous Protestant ethic mingle[s] with feelings of guilty eroticism and a hatred of warfare” with the result being “tortured sadomasochistic images” (“Kiss Me, Hardy” 65). Owen’s “tortured” war truths are as complicated as Sassoon’s, and his poetry similarly reports much more than the facts of the war. The “merry” aspect of war Owen identified in line five is not entirely sarcastic: there is joy on the battlefield of death, a joy that Owen cannot even explain to himself. As Marc Cyr argues, Owen’s soldiers are more than just passive victims (96). We should resist the narrator’s attempts to elide these moral complexities.

Thus the ironic disjuncture of pleasure and pain, love and death that the poem hints at is interesting, but Owen feels pressure—whether under Sassoon’s direct advice or otherwise—to put a satirical, unilateral antiwar ending upon an otherwise complex and captivating poem. Owen gestures toward experiences in war, emotional or aesthetic, that

can exist only within that space of terror and confusion. But in the end resists being more than a war protestor. Amidst what Susanne Puissant terms the “anti-landscapes” of “ironic reversals” in Owen’s poetry (44)—here signified by the shared space of love within Owen’s “sorrowful dark of hell” (l. 30)—Owen invites his audience to rethink the very strangeness of war, only to throw away the audience’s right to discuss it. Even that final jab, Owen’s insistence that “These men are worth your tears,” is weakened by the possibility that this “hell” of war is only hell in these last two stanzas—before this it was a strange place, no doubt, but one with alternatives Owen now forgets. The attempt to silence inventive ironies—particularly felt in the stinging finish, “You are not worth their merriment”—is a familiar move from Sassoon’s poems. But Owen’s glimmer of complexity in ironic jest found in the middle of the “Apologia” makes this final line all the more disappointing. In the “Apologia” the soldier sacrifices completely for undeserving others who “are given no chance to escape their unworthiness” (“For You May Touch Them Not” 834). Opening up debate and discussion in this way only to close it immediately only confuses an audience and shuts off its questions—questions that might have helped us understand Owen’s real pain.

“Dulce Et Decorum Est”

Next I consider Owen’s most familiar poem, “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” a poem that seems to have little in the way of laughter, at least on the surface. Begun in the fall of 1917 and revised in winter 1918, this poem has become Owen’s definitive commentary on the soldier’s experience. Interestingly, the poem has its origins in a letter written from Owen to his brother Harold in September 1914 (Edmundson 327), a year before Owen enlisted—reminding us that even poems prized for their authenticity are still constructed works, with intentional rhetorical effects. This is especially important in considering a work that heavily relies on reaching its audience through an appeal to pathos. Rick Furtak believes the poem reveals “real emotions and makes us less susceptible to sentimental ones” (213), and though the difference between these categories is unclear, I agree that the emotional appeal is a strong one, and might even be ethical.

During the drafting of “Dulce,” Owen had dedicated it at times “To a Certain Poetess,” the patriotic wartime poet Jessie Pope (Norgate 520-1). Had this sarcastic

dedication remained in the final draft it might have emphasized Furtak's distinctions between "real" and "sentimental" emotions, as Pope was seen as a jingoistic poet if not a true war apologist. At one point Owen even dedicated the poem sarcastically to Pope "my friend" (Saunders 73). "Dulce Et Decorum Est" is something of an attack on mirth and play, a satirical response to the wartime visions of civilian poetry. For reference, the poem Owen had in mind in singling out Jessie Pope was likely Pope's optimistic 1915 poem "Play the Game," of which the final stanza is most relevant:

Football's a sport, and a rare sport too,
Don't make it a source of shame.
To-day there are worthier things to do.
Englishmen, play the game! 20
A truce to the League, a truce to the Cup,
Get to work with a *gun*,
When our country's at war we must all back up—
It's the only thing to be done! (Pope 11, ll. 17-24).

Certainly Owen felt these sentiments irksome, but his own complicated idea of proper "play" makes his sarcastic dedications to Pope even more interesting, as we will find.

I will focus my analysis of Owen's poem on a few specific images and argue that though the satire in the poem is minimal it is a personal exercise in grief more than an effective social commentary or an example of communicative action. As a poem of emotion and experience it is powerful, but as a work of discourse ethics, it is inaccessible. I would caution that a poem may be great, brilliant, and crucial, without offering a rhetorical opening. A poem may be *good* without being *ethical*, so to speak. I am not attempting to dismantle Owen's legacy but simply trying to apprehend the means by which his poem communicates with broader society.

"Dulce" is a fascinating poem: in the midst of some of the darkest, most powerful lines of English poetry is a story of ironic play, or of play denied—stemming from Owen's response to Pope's ignorant and irresponsible war poetry. Unfortunately, Owen's investment in his poetic character disallows the kind of debate we would find most interesting, and the ironies tend to work largely defensively, rather than to innovate. I will argue that this poem is based not on the immorality of the enemy, as has been traditionally asserted, but upon the notion of shattered play, and the grief for modernity's lost ability to joke. It is not the play in Owen that I object to, but the *false* play he

practical impossibility) is an ethical switch, too. Owen's rhetoric turns more persuasive, but it proceeds circuitously, moving us away from the more-obvious wordplay and irony of the simile to the more-disguised exaggerations of the metaphor. There is a failed validity claim sneaking its way into the discourse (Habermas *TCA* I.99).

Owen's poetry abounds in wordplay, but we can be tempted to read it literally, as a reproduction of "reality"—unless we take great care. Owen himself feeds this temptation, mimicking the frankness of "real" spoken speech with the direct opening of "Bent double," which withholds its subject until the end of the second line and thus adds a disquietude that smacks of realism. Owen's economy of words helps build this realistic effect throughout that first stanza, as with the three-word sentence in line five, "Men marched asleep," packing a great deal of force into few syllables. But we cannot look at that shift from open simile to more-subtle metaphor without considering the rhetoric of "truth" Owen wishes to produce. Thus, despite its supposed protestations to the contrary, Owen's "Dulce" does not work as a literal representation of reality. Reality is never so clear-cut as the trench poets wished it to be. I cannot agree that the discourse of unreality-as-reality (with its journalistic sense of accuracy) is a fair attempt at communicating with a reader. Those who already agree with Owen will appreciate the poem's force, but his opponents would have just as easily ignored it.

Thus despite its rhetoric of reality, Owen's poem is fundamentally a work about play, it is itself a more artificial thing than we may first suppose, a kind of dark game. The continuous stream of wordplay suggests this artificiality through the opening stanza of Owen's "Dulce," even within a gritty scene of terror and hopelessness. Johan Huizinga writes on the relationship of play and poetry: "All poetry is born of play: the sacred play of worship, the festive play of courtship, the martial play of the contest, the disputatious play of braggadocio, mockery and invective, the nimble play of wit and readiness" (129). Owen's poetry not only describes war, it is effectively "martial play," attempting to argue for his vision of the world. Interestingly, Huizinga writes that play is a way of escaping a tension, an anxiety, or an uncertainty of some kind (11), a claim that makes sense when applied to the war poets. Sassoon and Owen no doubt used poetry as a literal escape from the world of real physical and emotional suffering. Writing the drama of "beggars," or "blind" men is a way of identifying and making sense of a senseless reality. Thus, despite

the assertion of realism easily read *into* “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” the careful reader will find the poem’s opening stanza built upon a foundation of metaphorical play.

Yet this drama is abruptly and brutally interrupted in the next stanzas:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; 10
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, 15
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (Owen 117, ll. 9-16)

The sudden yell of “Gas! Gas! Quick boys!” breaks up the acting; no longer can the “boys” think in the abstract, for the gas and the mud intrude on their dreams. Instead they are jerked back to the reality of life and death, forced to react to the intrusion upon the world of imagination by “Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time” to avoid death (l. 10). The imagination’s masques are replaced by unwieldy gas-masks, turning daydreamers back into terrified men. The death of the unlucky soldier destroys the last vestige of the imaginary world, though wordplay begins to creep back into the frame as the speaker describes the hapless soldier in simile, “flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...,” “[a]s under a green sea, I saw him drowning” (l. 12). Here the playacting is not acting at all—the dead man is not aware of his tragic mummery—and the *reality* of absurd death (as opposed conceivable, narrative death) corrupts Owen’s literary stage. The reality of sudden, unfair death intrudes upon the space of play and it hovers over the remainder of the poem, even as the wordplay of metaphor returns. The short third stanza uses the image of drowning in blood, a painfully absurd moment (drowning without water) that situates itself, fascinatingly, between the unreal play-space of the dream in its strangeness and the practical experience of the death. In these contradictions, we lose distinct delineation between imagination and reality, as the borders of (word-)play break down.

The final stanza emphasizes this broken, mixed-up literary stage and ends in an accusatory statement that is understandable (of not quite ethical), metaphor or not:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

as memoirs describe a world of public school-educated officers who went directly from the cricket pitches to the battlefields (196, 199), and many brought the ideas of sportsmanship and gamesmanship with them to war. Fussell notes that the British, in particular, dedicated themselves to performing theatrically the role of soldier due to their cultural capital in “possessing” Shakespeare “as a major national asset” (197). Soldiers would describe conflicts not as epic tragedies but as “farce or melodrama” (Fussell 201). The sense of the battlefield as a kind of twisted sport is not as absurd as it first appears, echoed as it is by the sheer volume of wordplay in the poem.

But the raw anger Owen’s speaker builds to in the end—a sardonic tone that Stout finds elsewhere in the poem, too (49)—is triggered by the *gas*, in particular. Huizinga is again useful: it is because all play—no matter what its form—has rules, and in the realm of play the worst kind of person is the “spoilsport,” the one who shatters the pretense of imagining, breaking unspoken rules (Huizinga 11). Gas was not fair, it was not supposed to be part of the exercise. The use of chemical warfare was cowardly—a way of cheating at the “game” of war—to soldier-poets such as Owen and Sassoon (Eksteins 161). The drama of the battlefield was acted out thus: each side had to play by the rules, down to the specific, unspoken compromises that Leed details (114). Eksteins writes of the British soldiers’ sense of anger at the “unsporting” tactics of the Germans (160). The initial shock and anger at the use of gas in the trenches arises not only because of the weapons’ destructive ability, but because gas represents a breakdown in the “common courtesy” of trench warfare (Leed 160). Gas shattered the last illusions of civility, order, and honor on the battlefield—ruining the game, as it were, and whatever semblance of orderliness and safety existed. Chemical agents were a ludicrous, lethal “spoilsport” (Huizinga 12); chlorine or mustard gas followed none of the traditional rules of warfare, killing either side indiscriminately (as the British found early in the war). British Lieutenant General Ferguson called gas a “cowardly form of warfare which does not commend itself to me or other English soldiers...” (qtd. in Cook 37). The very idea of “cowardly” warfare only makes sense within the context of agreed-upon, artificial rules of behavior.

Yet General Ferguson claimed that despite his misgivings about gas tactics, “We cannot win this war unless we kill or incapacitate more of our enemies than they do of us, and if this can only be done by our copying the enemy in his choice of weapons, we must

not refuse to do so” (Cook 37). Though the war begins as a kind of theatrical play *about* nations and nobles at war over principles, it eventually descends into a mad realm of meaningless, animal destruction. This official stance is reflected perfectly in Owen’s poem, beginning with the similes and metaphors of actors, before being interrupted by the deadly gas attacks. The trouble is Owen, like Ferguson, decides that once the illusion of the game is broken by the spoilsport, there is no reason to follow the rules. He throws the match away in the last lines of “Dulce Et Decorum Est” and refuses to rebuild the complex world of real/unreal he had begun. Owen, like Ferguson, is not wrong to decry the unsporting nature of enemy tactics; but Owen’s return to satirical tactics should sadden those of us who were compelled more by his wordplay than his rhetoric.

Owen’s propaganda has merged with that of his culture’s: if the other side will not play fair, neither will he—at least as far as letting his readers play along with him. But what the angry Owen forgets is that “an eye for an eye” doubles the violence—mental or emotional violence included. Poets must choose to treat their readers as equals, regardless of the opposition’s stance; we have to play fair, even if the other side will not. This kind of fairness would little change the immediate battlefield, but it ought to change something in *Owen’s* experience. When he sends back his own propaganda to shred his enemies (whether ignorant civilians, German soldiers, or foolish generals), Owen does not allow his art to rise above such attacks and embody a more honest, open-ended discourse. His anger at the dirty methods of the enemy—methods with real implications for his own life or death, of course—gets the better of his poetry. If Owen’s real enemy can cheat, then perhaps the audience will, too; his lack of trust is transferred from his physical enemy to his literary audience. He doesn’t believe we can reason out his argument that war shatters play, and thus the ending of “Dulce” rigidly explains this. The art of the game is lost, and the elicitation of an unforced response in kind is destroyed, as well, as long as the fictions of the “old Lie” control Owen’s response. We may agree with Owen, pity him, or dislike him, but the discourse he might have had with us has been halted.

I may sound unfair to critique the anger of Owen and Sassoon toward the unjust nature of war. It is true that they perform an important social function in pointing out an alternate side of experience to the official story of the war. As Joanna Bourke points out, aside from the “narrow canon represented by poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried

Sassoon, and Edmund Blunden,” “patriotic and heroic depictions of combat never lost their attraction” (5-6). Thus in going against the general tide in an attempt to point out war’s atrocity, Owen and his ilk provide a valuable service within the context of their poems. But I expect more from these writers because of their very nature as iconoclasts: they should know more than any of their fellows that warfare is brutal, destructive, and a bad game to play—and that includes warfare in *any* form, whether physical, mental, or *aesthetic*. A less-propagandistic poetic retort might have spread their experiences of the war to a greater audience than simply like-minded, antiwar individuals.

“Smile, Smile, Smile”

To make this clear, we will consider one last poem, one of Owen’s more satirical: “Smile, Smile, Smile.” The poem, composed by Owen in September 1918 (Stallworthy 273), was a sardonic retort to the 1915 marching song “Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag, and Smile, Smile, Smile” by George Henry Powell (as George Asaf) and Felix Powell. The Powells’ song was a study in optimistic propaganda:

Private Perks is a funny little codger
With a smile a funny smile.
Five feet none, he’s an artful little dodger
With a smile a funny smile.
Flush or broke he’ll have his little joke,
He can’t be suppress’d.
All the other fellows have to grin
When he gets this off his chest, Hi!

[Chorus]

Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag,
And smile, smile, smile,
While you’ve a lucifer to light your fag,
Smile, boys, that’s the style.
What’s the use of worrying?
It never was worth while, so
Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag,
And smile, smile, smile.

Private Perks went a-marching into Flanders
With his smile his funny smile.
He was lov’d by the privates and commanders
For his smile his funny smile.

When a throng of Bosches came along
 With a mighty swing,
 Perks yell'd out, "This little bunch is mine!
 Keep your heads down, boys and sing, Hi!"

Private Perks he came back from Bosche-shooting
 With his smile his funny smile.
 Round his home he then set about recruiting
 With his smile his funny smile.
 He told all his pals, the short, the tall,
 What a time he'd had;
 And as each enlisted like a man
 Private Perks said Now my lad, Hi! (Asaf and Powell 2-5)

The song proved popular enough to spawn a play and a film. The buoyantly-named "Private Perks" functions as a trickster figure in a folktale: physically he is unimpressive, but his omnipresent optimism and japes defy all comers. Most importantly, Perks comes back from "Bosche-shooting" still wearing "his smile his funny smile" (ll. 25-26). His emotional or psychological state is unaffected by war, and the first thing he does is "set about recruiting / With his smile his funny smile," to ensure that "his pals" each "enlisted like a man" (ll. 27-28, 29, 31). In other words, this song is as jingoistic as possible. Most interesting about this lyric is its strange focus on "good humor" (laughing after killing) and "friendly jesting" (suggesting a man who does not enlist is not a man at all) to the war effort. Laughter here is linked to adventure, heroism, scrappiness, and militant camaraderie (with an undertone of imbecility or depravity).

In contrast, Owen's "Smile, Smile, Smile" smiles sarcastically without any optimism, and it recalls Sassoon in its attempt to silence all joking or smiling—believing jokes to be irrevocably ruined by the grotesque grins of "Pack Up Your Troubles" and its kind. Owen answers the Powells:

Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded scanned
 Yesterday's *Mail*; the casualties (typed small)
 And (large) Vast Booty from our Latest Haul.
 Also, they read of Cheap Homes, not yet planned,
 'For', said the paper, 'when this war is done' 5
 The men's first instinct will be making homes.
 Meanwhile their foremost need is aerodromes,
 It being certain war has but begun.
 Peace would do wrong to our undying dead,—
 The sons we offered might regret they died 10

If we got nothing lasting in their stead.
 We must be solidly indemnified.
 Though all be worthy Victory which all bought,
 We rulers sitting in this ancient spot
 Would wrong our very selves if we forgot 15
 The greatest glory will be theirs who fought,
 Who kept this nation in integrity.
 Nation?—The half-limbed readers did not chafe
 But smiled at one another curiously
 Like secret men who know their secret safe. 20
 (This is the thing they know and never speak,
 That England one by one had fled to France,
 Not many elsewhere now, save under France.)
 Pictures of these broad smiles appear each week,
 And people in whose voice real feeling rings 25
 Say: How they smile! They're happy now, poor things. (Owen 167)

As a response to “Pack Up Your Troubles” Owen splashes cold water on the optimism of three years before. As much as any of his poems, this one shows Owen drawing a sharp distinction between the soldier and his out-of-touch culture. Those back home, personified in the newspapers capitalizing the “Vast Booty” and “Victory” while burying the “casualties (typed small)” deep within the pages of the *Mail*, cannot understand (ll. 2, 3, 13). Interestingly, Owen’s poem takes the form of a newspaper column, as one unbroken stanza, though its satirical bent plants it firmly in the editorials. The use of the *Daily Mail* is also apropos, as it had a complex history regarding the war. Initially, it and other major English newspapers had argued favoring Britain’s neutrality on the brink of World War I, only to shift their opinions at war’s beginning, all the while shielding their rhetoric under the aegis of “factuality” and “reasonability” (Sherry 41, 44). Thus it might be easy to understand Owen’s judgment of the “*Mail*” from home being nothing more than a record of idiotic patriotism, much like “Pack Up Your Troubles.”

But, curiously, the *Daily Mail* (as well as *The Times*) changed its stance shortly after the war’s beginning, and by 1915 the paper was attacking Secretary of State for War Earl Kitchener’s handling of the fighting as well as Prime Minister Asquith’s support of the slaughter, with the paper celebrating the former’s death and the latter’s resignation in 1915 and 1916, respectively (Hunt 367-8). Thus, some major media outlets in Britain had already taken a skeptical stance toward the war years before Owen penned “Smile, Smile, Smile.” Further, though Owen was not likely aware of it, the writers of “Pack Up Your

Troubles” were not exactly the typical civilian propagandists. George Henry Powell (“Asaf”) was himself a conscientious objector, avoiding conscription in 1916 (despite the line about enlisting “like a man”); his brother, Felix Lloyd Powell, was actually a British Staff Sergeant in the First World War, and would later commit suicide in 1942 (in uniform) (Nevin 13). Though Owen would know nothing of Felix Powell’s end (as Owen would be killed within two months of writing “Smile, Smile, Smile,”) and probably never knew of Felix’s war experiences or George’s antiwar stance, Owen’s assumption that the songs and editorials from home were nothing more than gaudy, thoughtless propaganda seems a dated stance by the autumn of 1918.

But this is the danger of satire: it commits so fully to a single point of view, a single message, that it absorbs all such complications and complexities (like those the Powells’ song engender) within the binary categories of “reasonable” or “ridiculous.” The satirist can group everything he or she sees within one of these two classes, with no overlap or alternatives. Likewise, as Test reminds us, satire has a tendency to “commandeer” other people or positions to make its own rhetorical appeals (30). Owen is so committed to making a moral point about the ignorance of the civilian world to the soldiers in Europe that he hijacks newspapers, songs, and individuals that all have their own complex histories and swallows them up within his own rhetoric. Owen’s poem bluntly leaves reality’s complications aside in favor of a simpler story that the poet believes takes precedence. The soldier’s experience is *realer* than reality, to the poet, and thus supersedes reality’s intricacies. Interestingly, if there is any complaint about the poem among traditional critical views, it is simply that “Smile, Smile, Smile” does not give us *enough*—that it lacks the gritty realism of Owen’s other works and thus loses some ethical potential (Lomas 382). Perhaps this feeling of surrealism is based on the fact that the poem was not written from a specific memory of Owen’s but was meant to be a corrective to some speeches made by the French Premier Clemenceau and the British Minister of Labour—figures representing to Owen the epitome of the patronizing, ignorant civilian (Hibberd 338). We may certainly agree that this poem is not primarily focused on realism, but I disagree on the point of its ethos.

This is because I believe the us-versus-them binary of Owen’s poem to be no accident. After reading the oblivious civilian headlines from home, Owen’s soldiers,

“The half-limbed readers,” “did not chafe / But smiled at one another curiously / Like secret men who know their secret safe” (ll. 18-20). Cole writes positively of the community established among the men at war that this scene presents. The “secret” language spoken here is a testament to the physical “interdependency” of the soldiers, Cole says, though she admits that it also has a distancing effect toward readers (165). However, she argues that, ultimately, Owen’s goal is to find language with which to communicate the relationships forged on the battlefield, avoiding solipsism (166). Likewise, Puissant explores this poem as proof of the kind of companionship that exists despite the war’s continual breakdown of relationships through death and injury (48). She highly values the outsider perspectives that the poets represent within the confines of slaughter (49, 156).

But these theses are problematic, however, as Owen’s poem makes no attempt at bridging the one-way communication from home. Owen has given up on his audience, believing, that only one who has *been* there can understand his world. The poem’s ending firms up this conclusion as Owen writes, “Pictures of these broad smiles appear each week, / And people in whose voice real feeling rings / Say: How they smile! They’re happy now, poor things” (ll. 24-6). The lines can only be read as a sarcastic treatment of oblivious civilians who wrongly interpret the “broad smiles” of dead or wounded soldiers (both of whom were “escaping” from war in some sense) as proof of war’s virtuousness, speaking of the dead and wounded with “real feeling”—concepts that Owen (and any sympathetic reader) would find revolting. But sarcasm again works in war poetry to silence more complex rhetorical positions: the sardonic label of “real feeling” ignores the possibility that his civilian readership could potentially *have* “real” feelings that Owen would acknowledge. He removes civilian voices from the realm of discourse, saying their condescension and ignorance of war’s reality proves their inability to understand it, and thus justifies keeping his soldiers’ “secret safe,” forever. The “secret” is the “real war” that he knows, as opposed to the civilian (mis)understandings of the war, results in Owen’s feeling even more cut off from the homefront than from the enemy (Eksteins 229-30). The trouble is that by assuming this, Owen effects it: war poetry’s sarcastic treatment of civilians was something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is one thing to feel abandoned, but to disown the other in kind dooms both conversants.

Intriguingly, while at Craiglockhart, Owen's psychologist, Dr. Arthur Brock, encouraged Owen to write poetry about his war experiences as part of his recovery. This was Owen's "ergotherapy," an early version of occupational therapy, where patients were directed to reintegrate with social and civilian environments as well as to take up projects such as writing (Caesar 147). Brock's goal was for shell-shocked soldiers such as Owen to become involved with and have a stake in the world beyond the war, reverting (in some sense) to families, neighborhoods, and cities (148)—all as a method of returning his patients to full health. But Owen resists this prescription in his poetry, attempting not to reintegrate with the world back at home but to keep it at bay. His poetry becomes a poetry of resistance: he resists the cooperative mindset of humor while employing it instead to perform a societal separation. The smile shared among the broken soldiers is not a smile of rue in Owen but one of anger, resisting closure and help from the outside world—something the real Owen desperately needed. The tragedy is that the war kept him from ever finding this point, and he died still smiling at the blind civilians' expense, promising himself he preferred his private pain to a public request for emotional aid. The result is a poetry that has closed itself off to ethical exchange and the healing it might provide, burying itself in its own mirthless laughter and ashen smiles. As Leed writes, for the war poets, the fighting presents foremost an escape from *contradiction* (70). Even this late in the war, we see this is true in the case of Owen, who wants to keep his own secrets and forget his broader audience. They have nothing to offer him, he is certain. There is a self-destructive selfishness to this position, a kind of "moral masochism" visible here (Caesar 4). Owen—on some level, even if not fully conscious of it—gets something out of this division between us and them, refusing to reconsider it.

The eventual result of unidirectional laughter is the same in Owen's poetry as in Sassoon's. What we see on display in Owen's sardonic "smiles" is not Bakhtin's laughter of carnival for Owen's poetry is not the victory over fear that Bakhtin speaks of (91). There is no rebirth in Owen's work (Bakhtin 92), for he revels (rhetorically, not literally) in the death and pain surrounding him. Owen in these later poems especially reveals a "love-hate relationship" with the war (Caesar 160). This is not to say that Owen enjoys the war, but he enjoys being *at war*—with *words*. He's not interested in equality of speech or resolution of disparities so much as he is in his own satirical rhetoric. He has

given up on the invitation offered by inventive irony and humor and instead limits himself to sarcastic jibes in much of his poetry, choosing the war of words over real discourse. Thus he abandons the complex, disruptive potential of ironic language (Davies 249), and, with it, a measure of the political effects that might have resulted.

A quote from T. E. Lawrence is apt: “The worst thing about the war generation of introspects is that they can’t keep off their blooming selves” (qtd. in Eksteins 292). This wry irony helps explain the dominant use of satire among the war poets, as this form lends itself to an obsession with the self, one’s own point of view, and admits few other minds. As long as Owen refuses to admit that ironic language can be a place of word- and idea play rather than simply a vehicle for narrow philosophies, as long as he refuses to play along with his audience by employing ironies that invite complex answers rather than knee-jerk responses, he and Sassoon remain self-exiled to an ethical limbo as far as their rhetoric is concerned. In the trench poets we see glimpses of the play that words can produce even within the confines of terror and destruction, but the results remain limited in their effects. Moral intentions are easily thwarted by heavy-handed rhetoric. And although Sassoon reads his anti-civilian poems to audiences of civilians and Owen writes poems in dialogue with contemporary poems and verses, neither is really able to listen to the feedback their works engender.

The figure of Yeats hovers over all modern poetry and I end this chapter with his own thoughts on Owen. To the anger of many, Yeats famously declared that he purposely left Owen’s, Sassoon’s and other war poets’ works out of his 1936 edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. In a December, 1936 letter to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats wrote,

When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets’ corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board Man of the revolution & that some body has put his worst & most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum—however if I had known it I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick (look at the selection in Faber’s Anthology—he calls poets ‘bards,’ a girl a ‘maid,’ & talks about “Titanic wars”). There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him. (Wellesley 113)

In his uncouth way, Yeats reminds us of something the war poets can make us forget: they are human, and their works are the works of humans rather than visions of revealed truth. I do not agree with Yeats that Owen and Sassoon are substandard poets, but I do

agree that their methods and results must be tested and questioned, rather than accepted at face value based upon the lives they lived. If we are careful we can see, like Yeats, that works are not invincible and poetic merits ought to be reevaluated as time marches on. In terms of the war poets, we must go beyond simply the content of the poetry to look at the rhetorical appeals they make to their audiences. Unlike Yeats, I do not wish to mock or diminish the poets, but merely to consider what it is they actually have to tell us about the proper use of words in political contexts. In the end, play is fundamental to both Sassoon's and Owen's approaches to the war—but they both use it too often for divisive rather than discursive ends.

Lake Isle” were part of a collection of “Poems Old and New.” Pound’s title nods toward Yeats’s poem, and it aptly frames the rest of the parody:

O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves,
Give me in due time, I beseech you, a little tobacco-shop,
With the little bright boxes
 piled up neatly upon the shelves
And the loose fragment cavendish 5
 and the shag,
And the bright Virginia
 loose under the bright glass cases,
And a pair of scales
 not too greasy, 10
And the *volailles* dropping in for a word or two in passing,
For a flip word, and to tidy their hair a bit.

O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves,
Lend me a little tobacco-shop,
 or install me in any profession 15
Save this damn’d profession of writing,
 where one needs one’s brains all the time. (“The Lake Isle” 277)

Pound’s parody of course takes liberties in addressing Yeats’s poem, itself a recreation of past themes. For instance, Pound’s invocation of any and all muses in the first line pokes fun both at Yeats and himself—suggesting a universal writer’s block—with the speaker knavishly angry at his “damn’d profession,” “where one needs one’s brains all the time” (ll. 16-17). The playful Pound’s true muse is “Mercury, patron of thieves” as he decides that *parody*—a mild kind of literary theft—trumps poetic originality (l.1). Thus Pound recycles Yeats’s title and adapts the wishful thinking of the elder poet’s poem, while also invoking the “greasy” scales that recall the “greasy till” of Yeats’s modernity (from “September 1913”). Interestingly this offhand reference to one of Yeats’s most important political poems is buried within a text that pawns itself off as a trinket, a joke. Pound’s poem spreads its self-conscious sense of triviality back to the parodied original.

In fact this is the charge traditionally leveled against literary parody, the claim that the trope is merely “parasitic,” as F. R. Leavis deemed it, and that duplicating another artist’s style is wrong, winning a parodist unwarranted praise while disparaging an original work (qtd. in Hutcheon 3-4). Over time even the word parody has gained a negative connotation, seen as an act of “malignantly ridiculing” rather than a playful

adaptation of another work (Rose 9-10). Thus we could imagine a reader feeling insulted by Pound's parodic allusions in "Lake Isle" if the reader felt Yeats's poem was the "real thing" and Pound's was more mockery than poem. A reader might react in particular to the casual allusion to "September 1913," a poem carrying considerably more weight for an Irish reader than for the Anglo-American Pound. In contrast, when Pound (who made something of a living at parody) mocks the English poet A. E. Housman with his "Song in the Manner of Housman" and its sardonic accompanying notes—or when Pound sings out lustily, "Winter is icummen in, / Lhude sing Goddamm," ("Ancient Music" l. 1)—few readers are incensed (except perhaps lovers of Housman or troubadours performing the "Cuckoo Song"). But when Pound begins leeching political power out of poems—as his mocking of Yeats might do—his parodies begin to make him enemies. Pound becomes a primary figure of contempt for Leavis and his ilk (*The Common Pursuit* 36-37), adding injury to insult: if literary plagiarism is not bad enough, Pound (and Eliot, we will find) has the gall to dilute or obscure the "message" of the original artwork, raising the ire of readers who seek a direct politics in poetry. Pound's parody trumps Leavis's critique, but only in his postwar poetry, where Pound begins to take on *himself*. In the prewar meantime, Pound takes potshots at Yeats's earnestness.

What parody actually does is reveal and occasionally shatter a major literary convention: the idea of originality. With the rise of the Romantics, originality or creative genius was valorized as the primary source of true art. After Wordsworth, poets were no longer to imitate the ancient masters: instead, they would speak forth from their hearts the truths within. Thus it is unsurprising that the art of parody petered out after the eighteenth century (as Neoclassicism gave way to Romanticism) and didn't return in full force until the moderns and post-moderns. Pound's "The Lake Isle" illustrates parody's complexity and its modernist uses: Simon Dentith argues that Pound's parody is not actually attacking Yeats or the elder poet's style, emphasizing that without the title we might not even connect the poem to Yeats (Dentith 35-6). Instead, Pound's poem attacks an entire "aesthetic," the Romantic idea of the poem as solely the site of lyrical beauty, of pastoral or melancholy daydreams (Dentith 36). Thus "The Lake Isle" reveals Pound's vision of poetry as shaped not from the "deep heart's core" but from the measured, exacting work of the intellect; parody becomes a modernist missive (36). To Dentith's account I add that

Pound is not as interested in the isolated intellect's work as he is in the link between minds, an exchange that parody is particularly suited to foregrounding. This interaction between old text and new may seem disrespectful or offensive, depending on our investment in to literary originality, but neither originality nor ethics is lost in parody. I will contend. Parody is more than mockery: it can perform political work (or stifle it), and it can be as creative and innovative as its source material.

Parody and Play

And what is parody, precisely? As with satire, it depends on whom you ask. "Parados" or "paraodia" is the Latin and Greek root, denoting an "imitating song" (Rose 7). It may also be translated as a "beside-song," one sung alongside an original—thus an imitation that is *not* purely derivative (Kiremidjian 2). Typical parodies do not obscure their originals but create a new relationship between the texts—engendering a dialogue about their existence. Kiremidjian also notes that parody traditionally is a space to sing not of great, heroic deeds, but of the local "quotidian" (2). Parody works at the level of the everyday, replacing the elevated and ineffable with the common and apprehensible. This is illustrated in Bakhtin's descriptions of medieval parody in carnival, where kings and popes are parodied by common merrymakers (*Rabelais and His World* 81-82). John Gross writes that parody is located literarily between "pastiche" and "burlesque," where pastiche borrows the style of another artist (a neutral repositioning) while burlesque "fools around with the material of high literature and adapts it to low ends" (xi). The parodic elements in a work occupy a self-consciously lower, clowning position.

When a text reveals itself as parody it gives up any guise of "truthfulness" or "reality": parody admits what it is, a literary figure. It makes itself a jester poking holes in both reality's and art's often-inflated rhetoric. Joseph Dane points out that parody is both a critical concept and an artistic trope: parody works as a "meta-literary genre and thus... a form of literary criticism" (5). Hutcheon calls parody "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (6). Further, "Parody... is repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 6). This "critical distance" makes parody more than just childish imitation or sarcasm. Parody can contain multitudes. It is not so much a recreation of a

previous event, status, or idea as it is the creation of a new *space* between the past world and text of the original and the present world the parodist shapes. Parody is not laziness or plagiarism but a new experience of art within art. It carries a greater honesty within its ostensible theft and can express forms of experience beyond an origin text (Kiremidjian 15-16). As Gross explains, “Much of the pleasure of parody comes from contemplating the rival worlds that authors inhabit, each incurably idiosyncratic, each revolving on its own axis” (xii-xiii). Further, beyond the pleasure parody creates from its unity/disunity trope is also a realm of potential dialogue that can go beyond pure jest. As with Pound’s parody, the jokes do not spoil the original poems for us, but they do raise questions about their efficacy and usefulness in our time. Parody always engenders a debate between past and present requiring its audience’s judgment and participation. In this, a connection to Habermas’s discourse ethics appears, and I will further explore the possibility of an equal exchange between sender and receiver within parody throughout this chapter.

However, this is not to say that all parody implies an ethical relationship with its audience; Gross notes that in the twentieth century parodies become a weapon of choice for satirists wishing to critique modernity (xvii). When parody functions as solely a vehicle for satire, it exhibits the same faults as the coercive language of sarcasm. Thus, while a poet may shape a space of discourse ethics with parody more easily than with straight satire (since parody works primarily on the linguistic level, promoting a sense of doubt about its own context and performance) this is not always a given. There is a reason satire and parody are often confused: mocking another’s words (satire) can be even more successful when mocking another’s style as well (parody). Denisoff writes that while marginalized groups have made use of parody as a progressive political tool to critique mainstream society, nevertheless, “[t]he use of parody... is not one-directional. Supporters of dominant or established social institutions also use parody to challenge what they see as a burgeoning cultural threat in order to undermine its claims to legitimacy” (Denisoff 2). Parody, like satire and sarcasm, can be abused as a method of literary control and unethical coercion when used at the expense of its audience’s reasoning faculties, undermining the discourse of communicative ethics.

How then is parody more open-ended than its satirical counterparts? Parodies almost always invoke humor, but they do not always carry the imperatives of satire or

sarcasm. What makes parody a more ethical form of literary humor is that it more-overtly requires an audience's participation in creating its meaning. Not only are readers entrusted to find the link between new poem and old poem, but they are also given the opportunity to *fail* to recognize the allusions at all. In contrast, in the satirical poems of Sassoon and Owen we recall narrators who do not leave the decoding of their ironies to others. If we fail to realize that the church fathers are singled out for raillery in Sassoon's satiric "They," for instance, then Sassoon's satire has failed. But the same is not true for parody: parodies require knowledge that is *external* to the parodying work (*Rhetoric of Irony* 123). Even if we cannot recognize a parody as such, the text still operates. Wayne Booth uses the example of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, "My Mistress's Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun" (which parodies Petrarchan poetic clichés), as Booth comments that Shakespeare's love poem is a parody of a love poem; yet Booth adds that even if the reader knows nothing of these tropes, it still *works* as a poem (123-24). Satire unrecognized is nonsensical: parody unrecognized is still *something*.

Linda Hutcheon calls this "double-voiced" element in parody "democratic" (94-95). The parodist's work is a sort of "gambling" (Hutcheon 96). Parody can be an honest kind of wordplay that satire cannot; satire uses the guise of play to mask very clear instructions or results, and the reader of satire has no real say in determining what exists behind that mask. Parody involves a very real game, to which Hutcheon alludes, because unlike the illusion of choice offered in sarcasm or satire (where a reader is not really allowed to participate in the meaning of a text), parody does actually offer two options, based on our awareness or unconsciousness of the parody's origins. In this gaming or gambling, I argue, is the ethical potential of parody: it asks its audience to decide what a text will mean for each individual, and parody works on those terms, in much the way that Habermasian discourse ethics outlines communicative morality—built on mutual validity agreements. The multiple layers of meaning in parody do not produce a unilateral statement of fact from an author. Instead, varying levels of significance are allowed a reader, and the resultant meaning of the parody is left largely up to the reader. Parodies vary; all are not equally open. But parody offers interpretive options that satire does not.

But parody is not always read this way: as I mentioned with the Pound-Yeats parodic complex, there are readers of Pound's "Lake Isle" who would consider it an

abuse of or lack of empathy for Yeats's style or intentions. There remains a stigma to parody, perhaps because the appearance of every significant cultural product spawns a host of parodies in our time. A popular method of cashing in on success remains to parody popular music or videos. The ubiquitousness of the parody has cheapened it in the eyes of many audiences. What's more, parody can be seen as useless for communicating a social message: Bakhtin, though praising parody in the medieval world, writes darkly of its descendents, saying: "In modern times the functions of parody are narrow and unproductive. Parody has grown sickly, its place in modern literature is insignificant," (*Dialogic Imagination* 71). Modern parody, to Bakhtin, cannot do the political work it once did, wallowing in flippancy and impotence. It looks easy and feels cheap.

But, lest we forget, a parody is more than an imitation. Were it merely mimicry, a parody would do nothing for us: it would merely direct us back to the original text. F. R. Leavis's fears that parody "demeaned the integrity of [its] subject" (qtd. in Mack 15, *Amis* xiv-xv) speak to this assumption. After all, parody was long seen as a fundamental "mis-usage" of an original piece (Rose 23). Perhaps parody's "treason" or "betrayal" of art-as-art is a fair accusation—but is parody's pulling back the veil any worse than the lies that "original" or "straight" art promotes? I counter that an ethos of honesty indwells parody: parody reveals itself as a staged performance and it shows its origin texts to be the same. Parody is a game of revelation, not obscuration. It is a parasite that paints itself and its host as artificial artifacts. Parody admits art's "indebtedness to the past," one reason why Pound and Eliot use it, and it is a way to "celebrate" past works and others' ideas (Mack 25). Parody preserves the artistic past even when it appears to attack it (Dentith 37). By transmitting the past into present ironies, parody can comment on itself as art in a way otherwise impossible (Kiremidjian 18).

Thus when Pound and Eliot use parody, they are doing what Yeats's early poetry does not: they are admitting that there is little new under the sun—at least in human creativity. Further, they are seizing the opportunity to comment on both past and present through the parodic link. If modernism means to define itself against the past, it can only do so by presenting that past for inspection; when the modern pair of parodists invoke the mythological past, Romantic truth, or Enlightenment objectivity, they maintain the power to say something new in recalling the old. Parody is built upon the need to "refunction"

parts of the past (Hutcheon 4) to serve the present. Thus when an attitude, belief, or style begins to lose its value it can still be infused with new life from the parodist's pen. Satire has no need for its source material beyond its materiality—for satire always discards its target's opinions—but parody cannot operate without it.

Thus I will argue that the great ethical potential of parody is built upon three basic premises, and the accordance with which a particular text accepts these three givens determines its ethical utility. First, an ethical parody admits that art is not equivalent to reality, although it may contain or inspire real effects. Parody dwells within a realm of artificiality, which engenders the apprehension of difference in the contrast between source material and parodic reuse. I would argue that the deliberate work of revelation for the audience is a way of admitting them, of believing others are capable of dealing with texts beyond the straightforward level of literature-at-face-value or even the (reverse, but straightforward nonetheless) level of sarcasm. By deliberately placing the reader in a position of literary doubt, the writer essentially puts all the cards on the table and offers the other a rhetoric of openness, rather than abusing literature's persuasive ability. This Levinasian move exhibits the mutual kindness found in parody. It is this admission that art is unreal but can have real effects that makes parody an ethical form of address; in poking fun at literature's gravitas and pointing out its fictionality, parody can still *do* things—politically, socially, aesthetically. It just chooses not to do them at the reader's expense by revealing to the audience the dialogue between texts and inviting the reader to join that conversation. Parody lacks the irresistible nature of satire, replacing it with the open invitation of discourse ethics.

The second *donné* of ethical parody is its admission that texts are not monolithic: they require other writers and other words. Parody *demand*s others—it foregrounds at least one other text, preventing its text from being the sole focus. Instead the comparison between the self-text and the other-text(s) is of primary interest. Parody does not aspire to elitism, purity, or genius. To insist that one's words are one's own is to insist on a self-sufficient world, one that can easily lend itself to disseminating the kind of polarizing, unilateral speech that needs no audience and hardly wants one. More interesting are parodies that do not use the source text as a mere launching point for their own missives, but engage with the other text as a discursive equal in creating new art. Christy Burns

explains that “parody is not ‘mere’ style, nor is it something that can be strictly measured with reference to some fixed norm. It is rather that which defines itself in dialogue with its various contexts and, most importantly, with its own sense of becoming,” (13). Parody is not the satirical false game: it is more than an ornament or a means to an end. In its textual interactions parody models an admirably democratic politics.

Thirdly, parody admits that it needs not only other authors but other readers, not as tools who merely purchase or are swayed by parody’s words but as active readers who play a part in the text’s act of “becoming.” This activity is foregrounded in parody in its direct conversation with past works. The reader is offered choices in parody more clearly than in other literary tropes: that reader may read a parody in context with a past work (provided the connection is noted), or the connection may be missed or ignored entirely. Thus a piece of the puzzle of interpretation is outside the author’s control, an element necessary to Habermas’s interpretation of discourse ethics. Readers may or may not “get” a parody, and their readings *change* the resulting text. The parodist offers a choice of two or more texts to a reader in a way that the satirist does not. The satirist is too invested in his or her own message to allow the reader to decode it. The parodist is more jester than dogmatist: the game of decoding that occurs in parody as a reader traces the relationship of source and progeny is more important to the parodist than direct instruction. The risk here is that parody can thus be reduced to a mere game, or not be recognized at all—and thus lose its disruptive political power. But when it works, parody’s reliance on its audience is both its ethical and its rhetorical strength. It is a dangerous game to let one’s readers think for themselves unimpeded, but if poets want interesting readers they must offer them interesting texts.

It is this offer or exchange that makes parody interesting; parody is a special trope, leaving real, differing interpretations to a reader’s discretion. It models the kind of speech that needs and acknowledges an other as an interlocutor, and it allows the speech of the author to be contingent, open to an interruption or change of direction (*Levinas Reader* 139). Parody’s open form can undermine stable works. Parody has a leveling ability, in revealing and demythologizing the privileged status of a text (Mack 21). Parody plays with its text and others, eschewing a position of literary authority. Booth’s conception of “coduction” is especially apt in parody’s case, describing the co-

development of meaning between author and reader (*The Company We Keep* 71-72). Booth's idea of readers "constantly reevaluating" a text over time is precisely parody's work (74); as a text unfolds readers continually change their judgment about both its position and their response to it.

One caveat: all parodies are not created equal. Not all parody is fully open or interesting, nor does it all engage with the world outside the aesthetic object. The mode has great potential but individual works of parody vary from the purely satirical (and closed) to the fully playful (and pointless). Thus as we examine parodic works by Pound and Eliot, we will consider the extent to which the poets relinquish control of meanings, and whether their parodic depictions are more than aesthetic attacks. Our measurement of the ethics of individual parodic moments will be based upon a consideration of how open a poem is to *self*-parody or self-criticism, following the discourse ethics of Habermas, as a means of extending dialogue about what literature can do for social or meta-dialogue. Parody can engage with issues of the day—both Pound and Eliot will use the mode to address art and war in the late teens and early twenties—but parody immediately ensures that at least two voices speak, both arodiied and parody texts, as well as involving the reader (in choosing the reading). Readers may be forced to consider an issue of the day, but as part of the solution, rather than as helpless bystanders.

Linda Hutcheon writes that the modernists, in particular, distrusted the past and its enlightenment vision that trusted rationality to heal the world's ills. She sees parody as the natural result of the doubt and self-awareness arising from the rejection of a positivist past (1-2). Yet Pound and Eliot in particular do not just satirize the past and suggest it has no bearing on the present; they believe it can be redeemed into something useful, if used (or parodied) correctly. Thus Pound roots around in Chinese ideographs and Provencal ballads and Eliot borrows from Dante and adapts the Grail legends, seeking answers. Sara Crangle speaks of a sense of "longing" penetrating modernist texts, an omnipresent desire to know the other (5), something parody naturally does with past and present. In Pound and Eliot's better parody, this longing manifests as the desire to converse with others to rebuild society through conversation. Though they sometimes falter, these poets realize the need to rewrite the past to find a context for the terminally-modern present, a modern space where little feels fixed or stable. Parody becomes their stay against nihilism.

Thus, as with the war poets, I wish to reverse the conventional ethical positioning of these two poets: if the war poets were moral but unethical in their satirical poetry, I believe Eliot and Pound are ethical when they use parody to open up communication and discourse—despite the accurate accusations of fascistic language they would be saddled with later in their careers. And just as I would not condemn the war poets for their unethical language but simply identify their rhetoric, I do not intend to defend Pound or Eliot from their political failings. Yet if we ignore the space for discourse their poetry creates, we do their work an injustice and destroy its positive uses. I am interested in the discourse ethics of a text's treatment of reader-as-other, above other ethical measures.

This is not meant to excuse the unethical poetry of this pair. Pound's fascistic and anti-Semitic radio broadcasts in Mussolini's Italy are exemplary pieces of unilateral, unethical speech, with no redeeming qualities. The same goes for Eliot, with poems such as "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" and "Gerontion" featuring anti-Semitic caricatures, poems that Charles Ferrall writes are aesthetically troubling in part *because* they strikes him as "morally reprehensible" in their depictions of Jewishness (78). Anthony Julius's *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* uses such poems to highlight Eliot's malevolent morality, calling "Gerontion" "a condensed instance of all these anti-Semitic themes" and "a horror picture, drawn with loathing. One recoils from [it]," (Julius 49). While these depictions are appalling, this sort of moral criticism is not the most useful judge of poetry. Poetry is not teacher but epistle; it raises questions more than answering them. The test of its usefulness ought to be the way it approaches the other, not just what it says about an other. Thus, if "Gerontion" uses only satirical, unilateral ironies (which it often does), then by the standards of discourse ethics it fails, having no interest in gaining anything from its targets or audience. But we must take care in conflating taste with ethics. I attempt to leave conventional moral criticism aside when addressing figures who can be culturally insensitive and politically problematic, focusing instead on how their works use parody as open discourses and gain use-value.

Truthfully, both of these figures do eventually lose some of their ethical ironies. But in the 1910s and twenties, their works had not yet become canonical; they were still iconoclasts upsetting the status quo and creating debates within texts about what modernism was and what it might do for a war-torn society. I will focus on the parodies

found within *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and *The Waste Land*, treading carefully to see how these works produce communicative action. Hutcheon writes that the “ambivalence set up between conservative repetition and revolutionary difference” in parody is a space of possibility (77). I agree: parody is a neutral space between the “repetition” of social norms or moral imperatives and the “revolutionary difference” created when we give some control of meaning to an audience. Openness is my measurement of parody’s ethics, and it will determine how we treat the momentous pair of poems of this chapter. Parody is a gamble that may be won or lost—but its strength and usefulness in shaping reality depends on the integrity of that wager and the faith behind that gamble.

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: The Parody as/of War

Self-parody helps unify Ezra Pound’s 1920 poetic cycle *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. Pound’s parody often contains the corrective rhetoric of satire, limiting its polyphony, but there are times he transcends this drive to convince and he lets the reader put pieces of the poem together. Pound’s use of parody will weave between direct allusions to another text and a more general and fluid parody of his era. He explains that his poem will be a collaborative effort from the start, as its opening section is filled with allusions. Leslie Fiedler writes that in Pound’s parodies, “Here, if anywhere, is the true voice of Ezra Pound, the man of a hundred borrowed voices” (137). As an American, he is a parodist by default—for we are always borrowing from other literary traditions (132). *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* is a point where this literary mixed-heritage is at its height (Fiedler 139). The poem is simultaneously an autobiography or obituary for Pound’s title character and a parody of Pound’s own life as the American expatriate was leaving England. Axel Nesme calls it, aptly, a “*borrowed identity*” (58). Similarly, Thomas Grieve points out that *Mauberley* is not really a new invention, but a recapitulation of years of Pound’s poetic theories put to work (*Ezra Pound’s Early Poetry...* 178). This is appropriate: as a parodist, Pound deals in a reuse of the old as much as producing his own new poetry. And as Grieve notes, much of the work will be “self-parodying” (179).

The self-parody central to the poem begins with the initials “E. P.” of the first section: “*H. S. Mauberley (LIFE AND CONTACTS)*.” The playful duplication of the initials “E. P.” alerts us to the game of self-parody about to unfold:

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley
by E. P.

...
H. S. Mauberley
(LIFE AND CONTACTS)

E. P.

Ode Pour L'Élection de Son Sépulchre
For three years, out of key with his time,
He strove to resuscitate the dead art
Of poetry; to maintain "the sublime"
In the old sense. Wrong from the start— 5

No hardly, but, seeing he had been born
In a half savage country, out of date;
Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn;
Capaneus; trout for factitious bait;

Ἰδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ', ὅσ ἐνι Τροίῃ 10
Caught in the unstopped ear;
Giving the rocks small lee-way
The chopped seas held him, therefore, that year.

His true Penelope was Flaubert,
He fished by obstinate isles; 15
Observed the elegance of Circe's hair
Rather than the mottoes on sun-dials.

Unaffected by "the march of events,"
He passed from men's memory in *l'an trentiesme*
De son eage; the case presents 20
No adjunct to the Muses' diadem.

Pound wastes little time before dunking us into the sea of parody. Hugh Kenner situates this poem in Pound's "Interregnum" period (*The Pound Era* 261), suggesting that the parodic borrowing represents the search for a new aesthetic after Imagism and Vorticism had fizzled. This opening presents a literal doubling of the character of Mauberley, and a separate doubling of Pound's initials, "E. P."—the former actually a parody of the latter. Parodic duplication is further reflected in the doubled rhymes of the quatrains (Matthias 45). In a sense there are four Pounds here, or four Mauberleys. The relationship between these characters is complex: how close is Pound to Mauberley, and *which* Mauberley?

Catherin Léglu writes in her text on parody in the troubadour lyric (a genre that fascinated Pound), “The author or performer of parody tends to occupy a subordinate place, not simply as a copyist of the model, but also as its envious spectator or pupil,” (82). Pound takes this attitude one additional step: his doubling of his characters and self-descriptions makes him the “spectator or pupil” of his *own* work. Pound’s parody is his way of relinquishing poetic authority; ironically, in planting his name (actually, his dual personae) all over the text’s opening he weakens and rejects his power as lyric speaker. Hutcheon identifies this as Pound’s use of the anti-heroic in his parodic poem (110), just as this poem bills itself as a kind of anti-poem, the record of a “life.” The result is an awareness of the space between persona and poet. By making this gap apparent in parody and repetition, Pound leaves the poetic ivory tower and mingles with his readers. It is a self-deprecating maneuver that offers his audience the possibility of discourse with the poem, while also destabilizing literature’s elevated position.

The remainder of *Mauberley*’s opening can thus be read as an attempt to put these parodic deflations and reinventions into practice. Had Pound presented himself authoritatively rather than ducking behind a self-mocking mask, readers might encounter his Greek, Latin, and French allusions as barriers to communication, dividing the general reader from the erudite scholar. But Pound’s ambivalence invites us to read these polyvocal lines as examples of Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia,” which Bakhtin defines as “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*,” (*Dialogic Imagination* 324). Despite the presumed closure of exchange that the use of multiple languages suggests (especially for Pound’s Anglo-American readership), the frame created by Pound’s self-parody makes this heteroglossia its own joke. Instead of pushing readers away, it draws them in; the E. P. / *E. P.* figure behind this poem has no interest in elevating his perspective at the cost of others. Language for him remains a game, and the same words can open up conversation as easily as they may close it off. Matthew Hofer agrees that, “Pound’s intense, dynamic, living language seeks to alter reading practices by addressing readers in a fresh way” (482). There is a game at the foundation of Pound’s style and tone, and it will surface in this poem’s best moments.

Parodic heteroglossia outlines E. P./Mauberley's joint project and Pound's ironic goal, as he works "to resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry; to maintain 'the sublime' / In the old sense" (I., ll. 3-5). Pound is creating a conversation among different voices and layers of text: behind the poem looms the man Ezra Pound, and a level beneath that is his poetic voice, "E. P." Under that is *another* voice, a persona represented by the enigmatic "E. P.," a subset (or possible parody) of E. P. the poet. Berryman fuses *E. P.* with the person of Ezra Pound (27), but this seems an unnecessary conflation. Alternately, Vincent Sherry cites an "ironic continuity" between E.P. and Mauberley, with the two figures (and their stages of aesthetic criticism) "passing into one another" ("From the Twenties to the Nineties" 42). Ironically, we will see throughout the poem that the parodist Pound *never* repeats the same idea—the meanings and identities change with each retelling. This tale concerns one other character: Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, whose life bears resemblance to the man Pound. Coupled with the allusions to other writers and texts, the poem presents a circle of gyrating personae. Within this ambiguity, we do not know where one persona ends and another begins. Kevin Wong aptly identifies all the layers of speakers in this work, whether "author," "reader," "implied author," "implied reader," "narrator," "interlocutor," or literary "characters," (196). But while it is unnecessary (perhaps impossible) to trace each of these figures throughout the poem, its commitment to heteroglossia is clear. To oversimplify the interweaving voices of the modern conversation would be "Wrong from the start" (l. 5) for the modernist poet whose ironic vision rejects the assumption of poetic authority.

The remaining stanzas of episode one echo this sentiment: the ambiguous poetic speaker sets himself in opposition to the serious aesthete Mauberley. Mauberley here is "born / In a half savage country, out of date; / Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn;" (I., ll. 6-8). Here are echoes of E. A. Robinson's out-of-date artist, "Miniver Cheevy, born too late." Even the name "Mauberley" begins and ends suspiciously like "Miniver Cheevy," adding another layer of parody, this time of a fictional figure from a decade earlier. To Pound, Mauberley is a failed modern man, like Robinson's Cheevy. Instead of gaining modernism's ironic view of the past, Mauberley continues to live in the past, a "trout" after "factitious bait" (I., l. 9). To believe artificiality to be fact is to remain stuck in the pre-modern, prewar world, to Pound. Pound's jaded hindsight makes

him skeptical of Mauberley's belief that yesteryear's aesthetics are an immortal standard for art. Pound says Mauberley's "true Penelope was Flaubert" (l. 14), an author of stylistic artifice. The charge is convoluted (Flaubert was an innovator of realism, and hardly a classical figure), but Pound implies by comparison that Mauberley seeks an aesthetic ideal from which to derive standards of interpretation. But Pound mocks Mauberley's search for an artistic Holy Grail, saying, "He fished by obstinate isles; / Observed the elegance of Circe's hair / Rather than the mottoes on sun-dials" (ll. 15-17). One can sail with Odysseus only in Homer's age, says Pound; Mauberley is mocked for being unable to read the "sun-dials" and discover that his *own* time has no more epic, no aesthetic stability. If Ulysses took too long to return to Penelope, 1920 is certainly a few years too late, Pound laughs. Pound's "*Τροίη*" or Troy has long-since fallen, and the only means of meeting the past, to Pound, is ironically, parodically.

Thus Mauberley represents not Pound but another Miniver Cheevy: "Unaffected by 'the march of events,' / He passed from men's memory in *l'an trentiesme / De son eage*;" (I., ll. 18-20). To be out of touch with one's age is to be written off as a fool. The war poets wrote a similar critique a few years earlier, ridiculing those believing in a historical, mythical ideal of war. But Pound adds to his first salvo a more interesting ending, as his narrator sums up with: "the case presents / No adjunct to the Muses' diadem" (ll. 20-21). The image is a strange one to cap the opening, but it serves to point out one of Pound's poetic mottoes: you cannot exist alongside, within, or in addition to the past (as an "adjunct to the Muses' diadem"). But though you cannot live in the past, you can make more use of its viewpoints through parody than through uncritical reenactment or repetition. Bakhtin explains that the parodic mixing of past and present, doubled by the layers of speakers "E. P." has placed in this sequence,

...serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated,... it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other. (*Dialogic Imagination* 324)

Mauberley would have preferred to be critiqued on the basis of historical aesthetic standards that, like Flaubert's strictures, are discrete and measurable. Pound argues that

not only can we not interject ourselves into the past, but we would not want to. It is much more interesting, as Bakhtin notes, to have a conversation between past and present than to pretend that Homer and Flaubert can give readers guidelines for the twentieth century. Pound levels all literary authority by suggesting that *every* idea will eventually expire. Yet at once he gives us an alternative: study the distances between past and present, and one will always be able to invent new, practical ironies. But if we live in the past, like Mauberley or Cheevy, we will die with it, Pound says. Even “E. P.” will fade with time—but as long as the past can be parodied, it retains functional immortality.

Section II of “H. S. Mauberley” furthers Pound’s claim that the present is parodic. While Pound’s first section offered parodic sounds—voices within voices, words upon words—this second piece presents the same concept in terms of the *visual*:

The age demanded an image
 Of its accelerated grimace,
 Something for the modern stage,
 Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries 5
 Of the inward gaze;
 Better mendacities
 Than the classics in paraphrase!

The “age demanded” chiefly a mould in plaster, 10
 Made with no loss of time,
 A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
 Or the “sculpture” of rhyme. (II., ll. 1-12)

Parody in Pound’s era is not much of a choice: the “‘age demanded’ an image / Of its accelerated grimace.” The art of modernity cannot mimic the “Attic grace” of Homer anymore; it must be the parodic product of a culture that cannot see itself in the mirror.

Here Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is useful. He shows us a path through the distorted reflections Pound addresses. Benjamin writes that with the modern era came the ability to easily reproduce images—to make perfect copies via printing press or lithograph—culminating in photography, a means of capturing images with the eye alone, rather than by the artist’s hand (219). Benjamin comments, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens

to be” (220). He goes on to say, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (220). That is, any copy of an original could be proven a copy when compared to the real thing. But “process reproduction,” for example, in photography, creates a reproduction identical and indistinguishable from the original. Thus, Benjamin writes, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art,” (221). The existence of copies dissolve the aura of uniqueness; whatever qualia exist in art *as* original art is tarnished and lost in modernity.

Pound (among other modernists) senses this loss in the years prior to the Great War, but in its wake the feeling of lost beauty and individuality, in art and society, is total. Pound and his circle are primarily interested in the pursuit of authenticity in aesthetic innovations from Imagism forward. Pound sees the recreation of past art as artificial, contrived. In his “Credo” from the seminal 1918 “A Retrospect” and “A Few Don’ts,” Pound argues for new authenticity. He writes on the topic of poetic “Rhythm” that the poet’s “rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable” (“Credo” 42). This phrase contains two keys to Pound’s aesthetic project: firstly that rhythm (and other poetic tropes) is “interpretative,” and, secondly, that poetry must be “uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable”—a seemingly impossible authenticity. To do this, Pound demonstrates, is to weave old and new: the modern poet must navigate between ancient rhythms and modern ambiguities. The result of this melding is not an assembly-line poem or a reproduction of the old, but something uncounterfeitable in an age of infinite reproductions. Parody is the only originality.

In the postwar moment, Pound believes the answer to the modernist dilemma of how now to make art is the parodic method, combining a specific, temporal original with a conscious addition of difference. Within the multifaceted ironies of parody is the “accelerated grimace”; the parodist grins back at the gaudiness in the mirror, thus changing the reproduction with yet another layer of meaning atop the original

Thus the second stanza of section II makes sense: the art of the present will be visual, one as informed by reproductive visuals such as film and photography as by classical artistic “auras.” Pound’s narrator proclaims an end to “... the obscure reveries / Of the inward gaze;” (ll. 5-6). He is not looking for the heart truths of Yeats or the Romantic sublime here; instead Pound foresees an age for the parodist, an age built on

surfaces and facades, calling it preferable to write lies or “mendacities / Than the classics in paraphrase!” (ll. 7-8). The tone is appropriately playful, for in tainting ancient art with the present, Pound is not merely presenting a “paraphrase” but is inventing something. At the same time, he keeps no traditional literary authority in this claim; by calling his own poetry “mendacities,” Pound’s speaker cedes the authority of poetic power. This move is his ethical gambit as he offers his readers a window into his methodologies (he shows us the source of his hybrid “accelerated grimace”) while writing them off as things of little importance, lies when compared with the “classics.” And by showing that any established literary piece—any art with an “aura”—can be recycled into something new through parody, Pound treats his audience ethically, suggesting that they might write their own “mendacities” by reading *his* “classics.”

In self-parody Pound confirms his relinquishment of control in the last stanza of Part II. “The ‘age demanded’ chiefly a mould in plaster” Pound remarks, echoing part II’s opening lines (l. 9). But rather than a pure reproduction of his phrase, Pound acknowledges his self-plagiarism with these quotation marks. The choice of punctuation was not necessary: repetition is an accepted lyric trope. Yet Pound troubles expectations by constantly highlighting poetry’s artificiality, unoriginality, and its parodic substance. Unlike Mauberley, Pound knows that art in his time is not monolithic “alabaster” but a “mould in plaster,” a mold made for *copies* (l. 9, 11). Just as Pound parodies himself, he also complicates the “‘sculpture’ of rhyme” and poetry by showing his audience there is nothing solid in it; it is literally a plastic art. Pound calls his poetry a “prose kinema,” a replaying film (not the *Pietà*), with a sense of playfulness and honesty that does not portray hostility toward medium nor audience. Pound does not live in an age of lecture or prophecy but of response and memory; his work, he knows, is open for debate.

Interestingly, Pound, later publicly associated with his fascist propaganda, here in 1920 does not strictly divide high and low art. The selfishness of his split with imagism, and his rejection of Amy Lowell’s democratization of modernism—for Pound left Imagism rather than accept “a certain number of people as my critical and creative equals,” as he wrote in a letter to Lowell (*Selected Letters* 38)—paradoxically resulted in Pound opening up his parody to the masses, leaving the elite behind for the moment. Whatever its sources and motivations, parody welcomes the audience into the world of

the ancient bard with its social artistic purposes. Thus the last image of Part II is fitting: Pound believes the artwork of his age will not be the high, classical “‘sculpture’ of rhyme.” To Mauberley, Pound warns, leave the past behind: dead “sculpture” must make way for the modern “kinema.” Better still, combine past and present in parody. “Rhyme,” the poetic repetition of sounds, signifies the function of parody—the engagement of past and present art (*last* line’s rhymes with *this* line’s) to make a new statement.

But things change. Part III of Pound’s poem traces human thought through the ages, speaking circuitously of politics and philosophies from the ancients forward. That third part ends with an address to Apollo, god of poetry, as Pound’s speaker cries, “What god, man, or hero / Shall I place a tin wreath upon!” (III., ll.27-8). The “tin wreath” is complex: the wreath of Apollo is typically a laurel, signifying the brevity and transitory nature of artistic or athletic fame. But Pound’s wreath is a mixture of the poet’s leaves and the warrior’s helm (tin was added to copper to cast bronze arms and armor). Coupled to the image is a tone of disgust, as Pound here dips into a pool of satire, signaled by the exclamation point in line 28. With this sharp tone Pound signals a transition from art-as-art to art-as-warfare, and he addresses the relationship between writer and soldier in the subsequent section of *Mauberley*. After debating art and reason, Pound turns to political parody with an element of unethical satire in Part IV, shifting our focus from the poet and intellectual Apollo to the warrior god Ares and the war in Europe:

These fought, in any case,
and some believing, pro domo, in any case . .

Some quick to arm,
some for adventure,
some from fear of weakness, 5
some from fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
learning later . . .

some in fear, learning love of slaughter;
Died some pro patria, non dulce non et decor . . 10

walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men’s lies, then unbelieving
came home, home to a lie,

home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;

15

usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places. (IV., ll. 1-17)

The parody should be familiar: Pound invokes Horace's phrase as well as evoking other antiwar poems (including, to *us*, Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," published about the same time as *Mauberley*). The second chapter's analysis of Owen's satirical take on Horace is useful in contrast to Pound's ironic address. Pound treats the war ironically primarily because he is an outsider to the conflict as an American in London. Prewar he had dabbled in the warfare-invoking Futurist rhetoric of F. T. Marinetti, but this jingoism had fizzled for Pound with the Great War's gruesome progress. By war's end he had adopted a more acid tone toward the conflict. Of course, the iconoclast Pound could not limit his disgust for the war to the killing or mismanagement of the war itself: the trench poets also earned his displeasure, as their rhetoric was spreading by 1920. Coyle notes here a distinction: Pound obliquely critiques the war poets, but *not* soldiers in general (434). But I disagree: Pound's criticism here is sardonic and feels ineluctable. Thus I agree with Grieve's conclusion that although we often split the poem into "confession," "cynical exposé," or "critique and lament" ("Pound's Other Homage..." 16), it is all these at once. Pound though open in his parodies, does not shy away from satire, either.

Interestingly, Part IV opens with few hints that Pound might be targeting the soldiers or war poets at all. His words might coexist side by side with Sassoon and Owen. In the first half of the section, Pound's speaker offers several reasons for the war—different motives for different soldiers, whether they fought to defend the homeland ("believing, pro domo" in the war), or were simply hotheaded ("quick to arm"), or sought "adventure," or joined because of social pressures and the fear of condemnation, or even if they had a "love for slaughter"—at least, as Pound wryly notes, "in [a soldier's] imagination" (IV. ll. 1-7). Yet Part III's "tin wreath" provides us with a key to Part IV. The tin crown might have embodied both laud and shield in classical warfare, but times change. Pound realizes that what once held wealth and strength has turned cheap and brittle in modernity, whether tin cap or Horatian ode. Thus we must read the fourth part of *Mauberley* with Pound's note of satirical skepticism.

Actually, the hard-headed Pound revealed his attitude toward Horace about a decade after *Mauberley*'s publication. The poet pulls no punches, describing, "Quintus Horatius Flaccus, bald headed, pot-bellied, underbred, sycophantic, less poetic than any other great master of literature... and about half the bad poetry in English might seem to have been written under his influence" ("Horace" 178). Interestingly, Pound reveals Horace to be another in an ancestral line of parody. Pound explains that "Horace lifts passages; incorporates lines;" and that "Horace at his best is sometimes more, sometimes less than a translation" (178-9). Pound's continues, "Horace is so full of matter which is not direct presentation of objects, or even direct statement of anything, that no method developed to meet the demands of such directness will serve to translate him" (186). Pound judges Horace a failed imagist. But that title is itself ironic, as Daniel Tiffany notes that *Mauberley* was "written by Pound as an 'autopsy' of the Imagist period" (331). Still, Pound offers the Augustan a backhanded compliment: the very untranslatability of Horace is a tribute to his allusive art. Bowditch agrees, saying, "Pound's grudging respect for Horatian technique, for the brilliant mosaic finish" contributes to *Mauberley* and later to the *Cantos* (477). Horace does help Pound make his point: parody is not mere repetition, it contains some untranslatable noumenon of its own. Yet the game remains coherent: Vincent Sherry writes of the doubling structure, characters, and themes of Pound's poem, which mark an entire world of parody within *Mauberley* (*The Great War...* 140-41). Pound is not playing at pedantry: he really is after some truth.

The ambiguity continues in the next stanzas, where Pound speaks of soldiers who "walked eye-deep in hell / believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving / came home, home to a lie, / home to many deceits, / home to old lies and new infamy;" (IV. ll. 11-15). The focus on "lies" and "home" might have come out of Sassoon or Owen, but I challenge the reader to decode the speaking persona's *attitude* toward the soldier's stances. The close proximity of "believing" and "unbelieving," and the juxtaposition of "old lies and new infamy" both create ironic distance between speaker and events. This irony might be a critique of some war poets' *version* of the war as nothing but "lies" from "home," essentially mocking them with their own metaphors. Or, just as likely, Pound's speaker may *sympathize* with the warriors, laughing darkly (though unwittingly, due to the proximity of their poems) alongside Owen's identification of the "old Lie."

Seemingly, the two-line stanza, “usury age-old and age thick / and liars in public places” (ll. 16-17), empathizes with a perspective like Wilfred Owen’s. Kenner notes this first use of the term “usury” in Pound’s works, an idea that became increasingly important to Pound (*The Pound Era* 317). The appearance of usury and the marketplace marks the end of an aesthetic period (Kenner 408). (Ironically, this is the same era Yeats lamented in “September 1913,” where people only “fumble in a greasy till.”) Yet when Pound writes of “usury age-old and age-thick” he triggers memories of the past. War is not a particularly new invention, and neither are lies. In a sense, the world did not actually change with the war, Pound observes drily: it was *always* rotten. Crooked kings and ill-conceived wars are as old as civilization. Pound, for a moment, speaks through the poem directly, dousing the satirist’s fiery rhetoric with a bit of cold water.

After Pound’s brief interjection the remainder of Part IV returns at a far narrative distance. When the speaker finishes off coldly with, “Daring as never before, wastage as never before... / fortitude as never before / frankness as never before, / disillusion as never told in the old days...” (ll. 18-23), we readers also distance ourselves from *his* speech. This ambiguous “collaboration” between Pound and the war poets returns again to parody, and maudlin parody at that. The repetition of “as never before” becomes darkly comic in its bathos, for we know from the lucid previous lines that slaughter, lies, and suffering are nothing new, nor will they soon end. The same speaker who notes that such acts are “age-old and age-thick” in line sixteen could not have meant these repetitions to be read at face value. The waves of repeated phrases in Part IV turn it from creative parody to jibing satire, making a mockery of the war poets. However, this rhetorical violence is *precisely* what the war poets did—satirizing the language of the war apologists to highlight its absurdities. Pound’s parody here is merely satiric, with essentially the same ethical value (or lack thereof) as the war poets’ satires. Images like the “laughter out of dead bellies” in the final line lose their ambiguity and become simply a vehicle for Pound’s rhetoric. Now he cannot help but tell us what he really feels.

Two years after *Mauberley*’s appearance, Maxwell Bodenheim called it

... the most condensed and deftly sardonic account of the war and its causes that has so far appeared. In thirty-three lines he states the essence of everything that has been written on this subject, compressing the

redundant propaganda, realistic horrors, and emotional revolts of all war-poems and novels and stripping them down to their effective skeleton. (90)

Unfortunately, though witty this “sardonic account” incurs the same costs as the soldier-poets’ works. The open-ended possibilities of parody are sacrificed by Pound to make a point about the bathetic nature of war and its art. Death embodies the wrong kind of joke. Like the war poets, Pound is not wrong because of his subject matter, but because his disrespect for his readers’ ability to interpret the images of war on their own (without his snide assurance of the war’s stupidity) limits the poem’s work.

Pound, who began *Mauberley* with fascinating parodic ambiguities, ends his first sequence of *Mauberley* in frustration, with Part V spitting further ire incurred by the war:

There died a myriad,

And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization,

Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
Quick eyes gone under earth’s lid,

5

For two gross of broken statues,
For a few thousand battered books. (V., ll. 1-8)

The great irony of war is not lost on Pound: the young always die for the old. Whether persons or ideals, the past hangs ominously over the present. Human reason and ideals are sardonically reduced to “an old bitch gone in the teeth.” Pound points out that civilization always parodies itself: rather than building the better future positivism promises, it simply, ironically repeats the same old patterns of vainglory and death. The trouble is that Pound cannot follow his own advice: he cannot escape the destructive cycles of the past, even in his own poetry. At its best, Pound’s ambiguous parody—the moments where carves out space between past and present with an unquantifiable ethos—presents a potential escape from the feedback loops of history. But he becomes lazy, believing too much in his universal scorn for society. He ignores the possibilities his parodic layers present and ends up satirizing warriors, society, and the past alike in one great wave of disgust and dismissal. Pound’s irony is too personal, his unwillingness to break a cycle he can see. Instead he sacrifices the possibilities of ethical irony for cheap

mockery. He can self-parody, as Sherry notes (*Pound, Lewis, and Radical Modernism* 88), but fiction encroaches too much on reality for Pound's comfort (83). The poet loses the ability to effect the social change that his anger suggests he wants: he loses his footing on the tightrope between original and parody.

The game of interwoven ideas and voices Pound has played throughout these first sections falls apart after the intrusion of sarcasm in Part IV. When Pound mockingly laments a war that buried so many "For two gross of broken statues, / For a few thousand battered books" (V., ll. 7-8), the poet is, knowingly or not, sealing his own fate in this irony. The war may have been fought for false ideals and outdated statues—the "tin wreaths" with no present value—but Pound doesn't realize he is waging his own war over similarly worthless trinkets. Scanlon recognizes the same imperative: "Tin wreaths may be all modern mass culture can hope to offer, but this poem cannot bring itself to abandon entirely the quest for them" (854). Pound, despite knowing better, still wishes to carve out an elite space for himself. In trying to define a new aesthetic separating him from everyone else, Pound finds himself swimming alone between America and England, with no "home" left. Though he began *Mauberry* by playing the game of parody deftly—putting his opinions aside and letting his readers judge—Pound lets his personal motives return in these last two sections, defeating his ethical purposes. He fights for an aesthetic morality as petty as the "broken statues" and "battered books" he derides.

The remainder of *Mauberry* mostly avoids the war, focusing on more general mockery of culture. However, a few more flashes of parody appear, such as those in the ninth section, "Mr. Nixon." This section's narrator listens as the eponymous Mr. Nixon instructs his protégé (Arnold Bennett, Pound's surrogate) about his literary experience:

And no one knows, at sight a masterpiece.
And give up verse, my boy,
There's nothing in it.
* * *

20

Likewise a friend of Bloughram's once advised me:
Don't kick against the pricks,
Accept opinion. The "Nineties" tried your game
And died, there's nothing in it. ("Mr. Nixon," ll. 18-24)

Even in its moments of rage, Pound's poem uses irony to challenge elitism. And while Pound passes judgments when addressing the war, when he speaks of his own domain, poetry, he laughs at his own expense. The self-mockery in calling writing and criticism a game with "nothing in it" softens the hard edges of Pound's poem. Though the war poets irk him, Pound's own poetics are just as flawed, forged or forced, he realizes. Frances Dickey reads the whole poem as a series of portraits—Pound's goodbye to traditional lyrics (144-5). Dickey writes of Pound's ambivalence toward aestheticism throughout the poem, which comes to a head in this section; "Mr. Nixon," says Dickey, curb "authentic communication" (177). I concur: Pound has lost faith in parody as reinvention so he drifts into sarcasm as a defense. The invitation he offered his readers in parody and pastiche is fading. Pound would write later that "A revelation is always didactic.... Only the aesthetes since 1880 have pretended the contrary, and they aren't a very steady lot," (*Selected Letters* 180). When his ironic tools fail him, Pound always fires back. As if sensing that its usefulness is used up in his hands, Pound leaves parody behind for most of the rest of *Mauberley*. Pound's poem is an ironic farewell to a culture he feels cannot comprehend him, an attempted escape from the "utter consternation" of the world (l. 32).

This lonely spiral of the artist returns in the last stanzas of "*The Age Demanded*":

And his desire for survival,
 Faint in the most strenuous moods,
 Became an Olympian *apathein*
 In the presence of selected perceptions. 40

A pale gold, in the aforesaid pattern,
 The unexpected palms
 Destroying, certainly, the artist's urge,
 Left him delighted with the imaginary
 Audition of the phantasmal sea-surge, 45

Incapable of the least utterance or composition,
 Emendation, conservation of the "better tradition",
 Refinement of medium, elimination of superfluties,
 August attraction or concentration.

Nothing in brief, but maudlin confession 50
 Irresponse to human aggression,... (ll. 37-51)

The artist who lives out of sync his time is not long for the modern world, says Pound. “Selected perceptions”—whether on the part of the artist who sees art through the lens of the past or the society who misunderstands—lead to “*apathein*,” emotional neutrality. Any “unexpected palms” or laurels have the same effect, “[d]estroying, certainly, the artist’s urge.” The artist is damned either way: take action and social expectations will trap you in stasis; ignore society and you will fade away. The no-win game leaves the artist alone, “delighted with the imaginary” and the “phantasmal,” preferring solipsistic isolation to impossible social interaction. The end result is an artist who cannot create, reduced from reciting the “better tradition” to canting some trite, “maudlin confession.” The high language of Horace’s odes and the melodramatic “maudlin confession[s]” and stories of “human aggression” from the war poets are all dead ends to Pound. The inevitable result is found in this section’s last two lines: “...his final / Exclusion from the world of letters” (ll. 59-60). The retreat into the self is complete.

In the penultimate section of “1920 (*Mauberley*),” part IV, the poet drifts out to sea, portraying Pound relinquishing poetic power. The fourth stanza shows Mauberley,

A consciousness disjunct,
 Being but this overblotted
 Series 15
 Of intermittences; (IV., ll. 14-17)

He has turned fully solipsistic, “disjunct” and separated from other minds. Yet while dooming Mauberley to a singular existence, Pound admits that isolation (for any artist) was not really necessary. Mauberley he dubs an “overblotted / Series / Of intermittences”—in other words the artist is a canvas to be constantly painted over, a palimpsest, not a bardic maker but a *medium* between worlds. The artist is not the alpha or omega but the “intermittences,” the *between-ness* of sequence and form. What Pound describes is, once again, parody—the ironic repetition and demarcation of difference within sameness. The tragedy of Pound’s poem is that the speaker of it does not realize the potential parody offers as an escape; Pound’s narrator uses the device on occasion to mock or to petition for understanding. But in the end he lays it aside—even as he sees the artist’s unique position to see things in-between. Pound has been overwriting himself and others in his poem, but, unhappily, he cannot seize upon parody’s power of renewal to dispel his own feelings of *anomie*.

Thus Pound sets himself adrift in the form of Mauberley (as well as quite literally in Pound's retirement from England), whose character says farewell in stanza six:

“I was
And I no more exist;
Here drifted
An hedonist” (ll. 22-25)

25

The rhymes in this climactic section echo its sense of closure. Despite Pound's awareness of the power of “intermittences” (l. 17), he sloughs off that power at last, allowing Mauberley to drift alone as “hedonist,” refusing to offer his era the hope of transforming the old into the new. Parody says that what “was” may still “exist” (ll. 22-23), the old can be reused from past to present, and can close the gaps in communication between known and unknown. But Pound, too frustrated by his misunderstanding audiences to care, throws away the tools that might have joined them. Alan Golding calls Pound a “poet-pedagogue” whose work carries a “pervasive didacticism” in spite of his lifelong skepticism of educational institutions (86-7, 90). Golding says that central to Pound's thinking is a belief that artistic juxtaposition or “parataxis” could work as a pedagogic method, leaving the audience to find meanings for themselves (93). But Pound vacates this teacherly stance by the final parodies in *Mauberley*; he is not content to let his audience riddle out the connections of reused parody and new imagery. Instead his dogmatic, isolating end conceals the valid points his paratactic ambivalence and faith in his audience might have made. Vincent Miller says that all of *Mauberley* is spoken through a mask, a “partial self” (968-9). He is correct, up until this ending where Pound, frustrated, has shattered that mask entirely and found himself left not with witty irony but only annoyance and disgust.

Pound's irony is a tragic case: he has the power to effect change, by reviving old aesthetics for new ones. But either he does not realize this power, or, worse, he chooses to reject it, refusing the role of social healer. Early in *Mauberley*, Pound manages to trouble artistic and political authority with parody, but by the end he refuses to make any engagements at all. Pound seeks for himself “isolation” and “exclusion” from the other, knowing his unnecessary, chosen fate: to die alone as a bitter, troubled, fascinating “hedonist.”

The Waste Land: Parody Killed and Revived

T. S. Eliot's parody is substantially different from Pound's. As I mention in the Introduction, Eliot follows Pound's partial attempts at a Habermasian discourse ethics—one built upon leaving interpretation and response to the reader. To this end, Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" lays out a strikingly familiar theory of ethical poetic relations. A poet should "develop or procure the consciousness of the past" in preparation for new poetry, Eliot says, and then,

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality....

It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.

...When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. ("Tradition" 40-41)

Like the catalytic piece of platinum, the poet's mind is meant to facilitate a reaction, mixing past and present—as parody does well—and communing poet and audience. That the poet's mind is, like the platinum, "apparently unaffected" by the reaction is the proof of its ethical efficacy. The "self-sacrifice" of authority and self-righteousness on behalf of the reading other illustrated in Habermasian and Levinasian ethics is central to Eliot's stance in his postwar epic *The Waste Land*. However, Eliot at times rejects his theories, remaining, like Pound, stuck within himself, unable to fully engage with others for fear of losing the right to be *right*. Later in life, Eliot said of his old mentor Pound, "I confess that I am seldom interested in what he is saying, but only in the way he says it," (qtd. in Leavis *New Bearings...* 136). Their methods of saying "it"—speaking unspeakable truths—frequently run parallel in their poetic responses to the war. Likewise, they often mix success and failure in ethical poetry—though Eliot will still manage to surprise us.

Regardless, *The Waste Land's* accomplishments are manifold: like Pound's *Maunderley*, the poem attempts to engage with the social upheaval surrounding the Great

War. Like Pound's, Eliot's poem engages with the war obliquely, using parody to approach the unapproachable. Eliot treats the war and other political subjects aslant: what he fears is poetic demagoguery, to his ethical credit—he wished to be the undisturbed platinum bit, facilitating change but not commandeering or abusing it. Thus in 1930 Eliot could write, straight-faced, “perhaps the most significant thing about the war was its *insignificance*” (Chace 145). What here resembles bravado or foolishness is the sort of undermining of our untested assumptions that allows Eliot to communicate without coercion. By suggesting that an event that means so much to so many is “perhaps” not significant at all, he forces us to reevaluate our premises.

Margot Norris takes this as a sign of modernism's refusal to acknowledge and even its attempt to suppress the war's excruciating cost of life and time. She argues that modernists feared the “crowd” and the masses signified by the soldiers so much that their ignorance of the war helped facilitate World War II (35-36). She writes, “The dead, whose sign is needed to make war's issues real, must always simultaneously be there yet be disavowed, in order to serve the purely symbolic function...” (Norris 35). But with such an interpretation the party of Norris abandons the fundamental premises of discourse ethics, not allowing the receiver of a sign to determine its meaning and import. Norris neglects her own rhetoric, as she, like the poets, uses those same battlefield corpses as a means to an argumentative end. If we force others to agree with us on *any* interpretation, no matter how sensible, we have traded ethical exchange and respect for dogmatism. To be wary of coercion and dogmatism in the wake of a war brought on by these exact forces is not to forget the war or its dead, certainly. If anything, examining all rhetoric is a potential stay against coercive social forces. Thus though at times *The Waste Land* will feel prescriptive, promoting only autodidacticism through an elite knowledge of history and culture (as suggested by “Tradition and the Individual Talent”), the poem remains enigmatic and apart, like the untouched platinum. In the climax of *The Waste Land*, Eliot will offer us a pragmatic choice, and, unlike *Mauberry*, Eliot leaves his readers to interpret it purely for themselves. I will ultimately argue in favor of the poem's ethics.

Lee Oser writes that Eliot is influenced by Aristotelian virtue ethics and its linking of body and soul, agent and act (5). In contrast to Descartes's split between mind and body, Aristotle argues that the way to the mental or emotional is through the physical

self: the way to becoming virtuous is through the actions, not the thoughts, of the virtuous person, which is where Eliot begins in walking through *The Waste Land* (Oser 5). But though Eliot begins here I will show that the parodies in *The Waste Land* unravel the image of Eliot as a poet of Platonic forms or of practical virtue ethics. As M. A. R. Habib points out, Eliot gravitates toward the “epistemological scepticism” of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, as Eliot discovers that neither the idealism of Plato nor the empiricism of Aristotle offers the modernist poet the ethical tools he needs (Habib 100). Eliot builds upon a mix of *a priori* knowledge and irony inherited from Kant to absolve the sins of the wasteland (Habib 105, 117). Habib writes of *The Waste Land*, “Eliot’s vision... insists that in the modern world irony governs the connection between ideal and real, concept and precept, intellect and sensation, and the very texture of experience itself” (220). Irony is the key to a world that is not as ideal as Plato’s nor as lucid as Aristotle’s.

To Eliot’s credit he constantly runs the risk of losing his audience within his multifarious ironies, his perpetual allusions, and his parodies in addressing the problem Prufrock had before the war and every writer had after it—the problem of how to speak when it “is impossible to say just what I mean!” (“Prufrock” ll. 104). It is the moments of parody—the poem’s richest ethical tropes—that sustain Eliot’s eventual success.

Unlike Oser, Jewel Spears Brooker writes of Eliot as an idealist who studied Kant at Harvard (132-3). Brooker depicts Eliot’s project to become an ethical poet as founded on a Kantian relationship of give-and-take, which may prevent the poem from being just a pedantic exercise in self-aggrandizing. It is, in fact, a more ethical poem in its offerings to the reader than is *Mauberry*. Nancy Gish writes that Eliot as a modernist is working in a world of “*dedoublement*” in two ways: first, truth is always doubled, to him (as we will see in the constant pairings of past and present in parody), and, second, the modernist poet is always desiring an *other*, always searching for contact with another mind (Gish 115-16), in a Levinasian sense. I will read *The Waste Land* thus as a dual quest as it tries to find truth in an ambiguous world and also to connect with a fellow traveler. These moves save Eliot’s poem from standing alone in an ethical wilderness.

Appropriately, *The Waste Land* opens with the words of *another*, transposed into a modern context through parody, and—interestingly—Eliot makes that parody clear to his audience:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (ll. 1-4)

The opening quatrain famously follows the General Prologue of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "Whan that Aveyrille with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, / And bathed every veyne in swich lycour," (Chaucer ll. 1-3). Others are here, too: the "Lilacs" are borrowed from Whitman's postwar elegy to the fallen Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and the title of *The Waste Land*'s first section, "The Burial of the Dead," alludes to the eponymous rite of the Anglican Church. From the start, Eliot's parody arises from a greater context of mass pastiche and allusion. But Eliot makes this borrowing more explicit than Pound did in *Maundering* by directly pointing out his task: he is "mixing memory and desire" to revive the "dull roots" of language and culture (ll. 3-4). This is the work of parody: shared historical "memory" combines with "desire"—the drive to artistic reinvention—precisely the way the "platinum" mind of the artist proceeds in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The allusions in parody are very like the "continual surrender of" the artistic self, the "continual extinction of personality" ("Tradition" 40). The parodist must engage in the "continual self-sacrifice" of originality and authority to help the past heal the present.

"The Burial of the Dead" launches Eliot's attempt to understand the war dead in Europe. The great irony of Eliot's masterwork is that from its dead wastes will arise a poem of resurrection, built upon the reclamation and repurposing of the past. The dead—both in language and in the trenches—Eliot believes can revive "lilacs" in parodic modernity. Crucially, Eliot's parody is not pure mockery: for instance, he does not riff on Chaucer to cheapen the original but to remind us that Chaucer's classic also produced a new poetics and language in its time, one *also* constructed upon irony and its revitalizing force. Eliot invokes Chaucer's caricatures of his society and his parodic invocation of the pilgrims' lives in order to frame his own work. The nod toward Whitman's "lilacs" couches this parody within a sober context: to ironize the absurd while attempting to revive a dead language and society is not to forget the myriad actual dead, to Eliot.

The second stanza further illustrates Eliot's ironic breadth while intensifying his ethical undertaking as he attempts a biblical parody:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, 20
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images... (19-22)

Parodying Chaucer's ironies is one thing, but to parody the Bible—specifically the book of Ezekiel, the Hebrew prophet foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem—is another. This parody of omniscience (the voice calling for the “Son of man” must be the voice of God or divine prophecy) leaves readers unsure whether Eliot wears the prophetic mantle heavily or lightly. In the first eight verses of the second chapter of Ezekiel, God calls the prophet “Son of man” four times. Ezekiel states of God: “And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me,” (Ezekiel II.3). He continues, “And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear... yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them” (Ezekiel II.5). Even if in jest, Eliot casts his project in prophetic terms and anoints himself as soothsayer, one whose message must reach his people, whether or not they will listen. Oser writes that though Eliot in *The Waste Land* considers himself a “literary exile” or pariah (from both the war and the general society) he still cannot avoid addressing social morality (53). Oser speaks to a “physiological link” connecting art to ethics that keeps Eliot a part of the greater society whatever his distance (53). Eliot in this early passage admits as much: though his poem situates itself outside of social mores (like Ezekiel, Eliot is exiled from his “rebellious nation”), it will also descry oracular truth, so that there would be no doubt “that there hath been a prophet among them.” The parodist-prophet is the person who tries to put the pieces of understanding back together from “[a] heap of broken images” (l. 22). Importantly, Eliot's voice remarks, “You cannot say, or guess” what will become of these images and roots. He is a prophet who *forth*-tells truth to his people, but even he cannot yet *foretell* if healing will eventually reach the land.

However, despite its immediate parodic volleys, *The Waste Land* is not entirely—or even mostly—composed of parody. Will Gray is quick to point out that the poem

... has outpaced anyone's critical terminology, and especially any articulation of how it reuses existing material. As a whole, the poem is not a parody. Nor, in the language of more recent decades, is it a pastiche. It is not an homage, satire or mock epic, and it is not (strictly speaking) saturated with allusion.... (Gray 227)

The Waste Land's encounter with past and present does not fit into a traditional category. But calling it a "mashup" or "hypertext" is less useful than thinking about it in terms of parody more generally: this is not just a recycling or a juxtaposition, it is all of the above, and we are better served looking at what Eliot's hyper-parody does, rather than what it is. Parody as classification is a useful starting point, but the most interesting parody exceeds the traditional bounds of the genre, as Eliot's will.

To illustrate: most of the first two major stanzas of "The Burial of the Dead" are not parody proper but are allusions, translations, or transpositions of texts, all part of the "heap" Eliot is collecting. But despite the odd juxtapositions, we run into a problem while reading the "straight" allusive pieces, as opposed to Eliot's parodies. That problem is the lack of an ethical aim. When Eliot shifts from St. Narcissus in the desert (referencing an early poem) to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* to Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* to Dante—all in the second stanza—he is assembling old "memories" but he is not explicitly mixing them with new "desires." Hutcheon writes that modern, flexible parody does not require the element of ridicule, and that the "modernist verse of Eliot and Pound is probably the most obvious example of this kind of attitude, one that suggests almost a respectful or deferential ethos" (57). Hutcheon states that this parodic ethic is often "unmarked" (60). Thus a challenge of Eliot's poem will be deciding whether his parodies even *have* an ironic edge differentiating themselves from the poem's bits of literary regurgitation. One way of reading *The Waste Land* is as pastiche, an agglomerate of images with uncertain relationships. Thus *The Waste Land* might be thought Imagism writ large, where words and scenes near and far, old and new, are scrambled together with meanings dependent upon juxtaposition alone. But the problem with this idea is its distraction from the ethical task that Eliot has already alerted us to with Whitman's lilacs and Ezekiel's prophecies. *The Waste Land* would have made for a fascinating final effort of prewar Imagism, but that is not really what it is; Eliot does not leave its moral interpretation entirely to chance, though he will be platinum-minded as much as he can.

Just to make things interesting, the poet dredges up some satire for ironic fuel in writing stanza three of "The Burial of the Dead," introducing us to the esteemed lady,

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless

Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards.... (ll. 43-46)

45

The satire is not extreme but a hint of laughter surrounds Eliot's histrionic description of "the wisest woman in Europe." This is the first truly comic passage in Eliot's elegiac epic, telling us, deadpan, of Sosotris's dubious fame, and framing this great woman with the comedic deflation of a "bad cold." Such a foolish figure ought to make us laugh; surely she cannot hold back the destructive tide of modernity. Sosotris personifies the modern parody of prophets like Ezekiel, Cassandra, or the poem's own Cumaean Sybil.

But satire turns into an ambiguous element of irony as the poem unfolds, for we find that (like Ezekiel and Cassandra) Sosotris sees the *truth*—despite society's mockery of her words. Eliot adds another layer to her parody by placing an accurate fortune into her crystal ball: she *can* see the future as her Tarot prefigures, more or less, the path of Eliot's poem. The "drowned Phoenician Sailor," "Belladonna," "the one-eyed merchant," and "death by water" will all play a role in Eliot's quest (ll. 47-55). Eliot makes a point here: the parodic fool is also the sagacious soothsayer. Certainly we can see truth in the depiction of modernity as confused "crowds of people, walking round in a ring" throughout "Unreal City" (ll. 56, 60). Eliot's poem seeks an ethical way out of these unending circles and he will see if parody can manage it.

The death and resurrection motifs littering *The Waste Land* are built on ironic twists and revivals of ancient traditions and beliefs. The final stanza of "The Burial of the Dead" shows this, moving swiftly between past and present. Eliot writes that "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many" (ll. 62-3)—invoking Dante's hell: "...a train / Of souls, so long that I would not have thought / Death had undone so many" (*Inferno* III.46-8). Allusions link past and present, a maneuver echoed by the man the narrator recognizes as "Stetson," a figure existing *both* in the present and in the ancient past, one who was "...with me in the ships at [ancient] Mylae!" (ll. 69-70). Eliot's narrator asks, "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?'" (ll. 71-2). This death and burial function as a parody of the Adonis cults (see Ovid X.709-39), or of Christ's sacrifice. Any humor in this passage's conflation of past and present is merely absurdist: to find an Adonis cult in modern London is strange, but not particularly funny—

especially if *we* need resurrecting. But Eliot is clear: the present is always a parody of the past—all war is a reenactment of past conflicts, all burials are memories of old Death. Repetition signals Eliot's engagement with Freud's uncanny, as Ferrall identifies it, the cultural memory that is suppressed and forgotten before re-emerging as something strange yet familiar (Ferrall 72, 85). Parody facilitates the uncanny here in the surreal meeting between English soldiers who are, inexplicably, veterans of Mylae (or, more literally, Flanders or the Somme). Eliot references the First Punic War, a naval battle between Carthage and Rome in the third century B.C. The effect is, as before noted, almost Imagistic: anachronistic facts are juxtaposed without explanation, seemingly unconnected or impossibly linked. For Eliot, this is parody's purpose, to acquire some qualia beyond the empirical, rational realm and weave together a quilt of seeming nonsense—Sosostris's fortunes—into a map of postwar morality. Penda notes that the entire poem is built upon scenes and characters repeating and flowing into one another, mixing up eras (142). I read in these images an invitation to our own engagement with the past, as well as some amount of trust in our abilities, on Eliot's part. If Sosostris's prophetic parody can still foresee the future and if the Burial of the Dead may lead to resurrection then perhaps Eliot's reconstituted literary history can do likewise.

Part II, "A Game of Chess," continues to build *The Waste Land's* parodies and brings questions of ethics and the war into better focus. The title prepares us for a multilayered parody, borrowed from a Thomas Middleton drama concerning a test of wills between people in love and war, though a chess match also appears in Middleton's Jacobean tragedy *Women Beware Women*. In the first play, the chess match has political implications concerning a union of England and Spain. In the other, the game is sexual: as an unsuspecting mother and a procuress play, each chess move is parodied upstairs as the duke couples with the woman's daughter (Middleton II.2). Eliot revels in allusions linked to play and mockery, especially when invoking other double-layered texts. Eliot, like Pound, enjoys the complications arising when parody is squared.

At any rate, the title prepares readers for the game of surfaces that composes Part II. Here is a woman depicted like a queen atop a chair "like a burnished throne" of Cleopatra (l. 77). This is Madame Sosostris's Belladonna: beautiful on the surface and poisonous within. Eliot here draws exquisite surfaces concealing something secret: the

this blank space of character, offering no easy judgments. Ellmann herself notes that *The Waste Land's* female typist is also a parody of the *poet*, thus undermining some masculine cultural authority (265). To have a parodic female figure within the poem as well as the ambiguous victim-warrior Philomela argues against charges of pure misogyny and opens up Eliot's ethics within his parody.

Without directions, nonsense words alone remain, like the nightingale's song, "Jug jug' to dirty ears" (l. 103). This birdsong is a parody of human speech, sound without meaning. These words indicate a final descent into undecidability and considerable discomfort for the reader who recognizes the stories within the story. And this "jug jug'" (a quotation of a quotation, no less, moving us even further from a stable position) is the lens through which we will see the other conversations in "A Game of Chess," not as exchanges of fact but of frustration built on *not knowing* where meaning begins or ends. Eliot does not give us cheap substitutes to alleviate the discomfort of thinking and feeling: instead he shares his own ethical doubts with us. We are left only with strings of questions: "What is that noise?" "Do / 'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / 'Nothing?'" (ll. 117-23).

Now that he has complicated the trope, Eliot highlights parody for us once more in the last section of "A Game of Chess," now addressing the war more directly. But before we can deal with the present, Eliot reminds us again of the past by recycling Ariel's line from *The Tempest*: "Those were the pearls that were his eyes" (l. 125). Two keys present themselves in this image: first, we cannot see reality straightforwardly anymore, post-reason, post-culture, postwar. Clear sight is blocked by opaque pearls; (though there is some beauty in this new blindness). Secondly, Ariel's song to Ferdinand is a lie: Ferdinand's father is not actually dead. Thus with Ariel's song Eliot reminds us not to accept facts at face value, as we cannot see reality clearly.

To emphasize this, after invoking Shakespeare the next stanza parodies him in a current song: "O O O that Shakespeherian Rag— / It's so elegant / So intelligent" (ll. 128-30). Eliot cites a real song, part of Florenz Ziegfeld's 1912 *Follies* theatrical revue (McElderry 29-31). Interestingly, Eliot, for all his sense of the Tradition, seems ready to mock his own cultural elitism by invoking this travesty. But reality is more complex, as Eliot writes in his December, 1922 "London Letter" in *The Dial*:

“The working-man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the work of acting; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art. He will now go to the cinema, where his mind is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and he will receive, without giving, in that same listless apathy.... He will also have lost some of his interest in life.” (662)

Eliot does not hate the working class or popular culture; he simply rejects the idea that nonparticipatory art is useful art. To Eliot, films were a form that *needed* no audience, typifying one-way, unethical discourse. Allison Pease writes that “Through the ‘direct shock of poetic intensity,’ in T. S. Eliot’s words, ‘real’ culture would revitalize not only the individual but eventually the entire culture” (78). Therefore to Eliot the music halls played a critical role in keeping culture alive (Pease 82). But while this leads Pease to criticize what she labels as Eliot’s “‘separate but equal’ policy” (92), I disagree that Eliot sees art in such divisive class terms. The value of art is not dependent on the genre at all, to Eliot: almost any genre is able to evoke a complex response from an audience. Instead I see Eliot as aware of his preference toward art inviting an audience’s response, rather than as an elitist unaware of his cultural biases. His aesthetic-ethical judgments are not mere snobbery but are based on a valid fear of art disconnected from audience. As David Chinitz puts it, “In context, the comic irreverence of the ‘Shakespearian Rag’ seems at least to balance its vacuity” (243). The playfulness and invitation that the self-mocking music-hall-birthered “Rag” promotes still, Eliot suggests, embodies the same principles that irony and parody do by inviting a complex, playful, or ambiguous response.

Besides, Eliot knows it would be ridiculous to throw away popular culture wholesale, as it is useful beyond its apparent limitations. Shakespeare’s dramas (during his time and significantly afterward) were taken at face value as popular entertainment, of course stories to delight, not transform. Only with Ben Jonson and his followers in later centuries (particularly the nineteenth, in America) did Shakespeare become a cultural touchstone. Eliot appears to be nodding toward this apotheosis subtly in this scene, and within his framing of a Shakespearean parody he offers a tool of criticism that can be applied to the poet’s own work. Eliot demonstrates that great art may once have been lowly, and though we may be skeptical of the “Shakespearian Rag” our estimation of its

worth may not be the final critique. There is a transforming interplay between the words of past, present and future: when parody links them—when Eliot uses the “pearls” of Ferdinand like Madame Sosostri’s crystal ball—there is space for textual and social renewal. Eliot’s invocation of *another*’s parody in the “Shakespeherian Rag” shores up his task of reviving the postwar wasteland. The past is dead and the present is foolish, Eliot believes, but if you put the two together perhaps something new may emerge.

At the close of Part II Eliot’s focus returns to the war, though the actual fighting remains outside the poem. The moral of Lil and Albert’s story, recounted in a closing bar, is that Eliot perceives no separation between civilian and soldier where war’s impact is concerned. War fills all of life, manifesting itself in the decaying figure of Lil (seen through the eyes of her uncouth, unnamed friend). Lil’s garrulous friend (speaking to another silent figure) recounts her own suggestion that Lil rehabilitate her wasting body now that her husband, Albert, was being “demobbed” (l. 139), suggesting Lil replace her decaying teeth with “a nice set” (l. 145). N. P. Dawson calls this a chief example of the bathetic nature of *The Waste Land* (39), though it seems obvious this is satire on Eliot’s part, rather than incidental comedy. Further, the narrator thinks Lil should spruce herself up, and “...think of poor Albert, / He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time, / And if you don’t give it to him, there’s others will,” (ll. 147-9). Eliot here satirizes the nobility of war or soldier: there is no sense of duty or faithfulness, in love or war, only base animal drives. The war was not fought to preserve life, but *death*, as even war’s ending results in a desiccated world of “hollow men” (and women). “You ought to be ashamed,” the narrator goes on, “... to look so antique. / (And her only thirty-one.)” (ll. 156-57). Lil tells her friend why she looks so “antique”: “I can’t help it, she said, pulling a long face, / It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said. / (She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George.) / The chemist said it would be alright, but I’ve never been the same” (ll. 158-61). Life leads to death, but does the converse hold true, postwar?

Yet within its scenes of decay the pub represents another site where Eliot’s ironic narrators open up the poem. Jennifer Emery-Peck notes that Vivien Eliot’s marginal comments on original drafts of *The Waste Land* suggested using a “Cockney specificity” in the characters’ accents. But Eliot does not do this: his choice of chatter is “more broadly applicable, working-class speech that would not point to a particular people... but

rather to different modes of speaking and narrating” (Emery-Peck 337). The effect is an “intimate” one, Emery-Peck argues, using “working-class female voices of narrative—and not the high lyric allusive speakers invoked elsewhere... [inviting] the most intense readerly desires” (341). Irony is not mockery but an invitation; Eliot does not satirize his characters either through class-laden dialect or by making them irreproachable; he instead evokes “readerly desires” over his own aims, shaping a site of discourse ethics where the audience and the poem’s speaker may meet without Eliot interrupting.

Eliot’s wasteland spreads not upon the land but from person to person. We can see this with our irony-tinted glasses: like Sosostrius we must look through a murky crystal ball. Thus Eliot attempts to reveal reality through strange, jarring ironies. All have felt a “sea change,” not just those who went to war. Everything is once removed from war’s horrors, but, crucially, death and decay is manifest not in the soldier Albert but the *civilian* Lil. The fact that these figures are not even *present* in the poem’s account pushes us further away from seeing clearly. Part II ends not in parody but with the depiction of a society that is desperately in need of renewal—culturally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Something must change, implies the non-parodic Eliotic voice as the bar and chapter two both close. There is little real wordplay here as Eliot’s ethics slant toward the utilitarian, as he feels frustrated by a society seemingly unaware of its slow death.

Part III, “The Fire Sermon,” uses parody to depict not a war-torn society but one having lost its spiritual tether. The title references the Buddha’s eponymous teaching to an audience of fire-worshipers in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, XXXV.28 (see Armstrong 126-8). The sermon described lust and desire as burning flames that dispel inner peace (see North 54-5). *The Waste Land* opened with April, at Easter, and has traveled through summer to autumn now, where the flames of hidden lust and frustrated desire are reflected in the trees: “...the last fingers of leaf” which “[c]lutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind / Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed” (ll. 173-5). Death returns to the ground from the dead souls walking upon it. Nevertheless, there is some life in this place: Sukhbir Singh writes that the term “crosses” may suggest biological “crossings” engendering new creatures (Singh 35-8). In support of Singh’s theory is Eliot’s parody: the repeated line 176 says, “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song” (ll. 176, 183), parodying Edmund Spenser. The line is recycled from Spenser’s “Prothalamion,” a poem

praising marriage, though it becomes satirical in this context. Singh may be right that the literary “crossings” embodied by parody may engineer new life, but even in Eliot the laws of natural selection are at work: for every successful renewal of language, there are many broken, ineffectual, nonviable attempts.

However, any real renewal will have to wait until Part V of *The Waste Land* as the majority of Part III’s first few stanzas—depicting the River Thames (ll. 173-86), the rats in the canal and “the [Fisher] king my father’s death” (ll. 187-202), the nightingale’s interlude (203-6), and the satires of the typist and “young man carbuncular” (ll. 215-56)—function largely as Eliot’s “heap of broken images,” not as successful ethical revisions. Thus we should not be surprised that Part III’s opening pastiche of satire and allusion has almost no actual *parody*. Eliot’s aims here are little more than universal critique. His identification with the figure of Tiresias is probably the most complex puzzle piece to “The Fire Sermon” as it leads to Eliot’s implication in the critique. Nevertheless, the result is dogmatic: Eliot is soliciting no opinions about the morality of the grotesque figures of “the young man carbuncular,” whom Eliot deems “[o]ne of the low on whom assurance sits / As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire” (ll. 231-4). Bradford housed a class of nouveau-riche built upon wool money during World War I (Rainey 109), so Eliot’s criticism is plain: contemporary persons and relationships revolt him. No better is the object of the man’s “amours,” the typist who, once their copulation is through, is “[h]ardly aware of her departed lover; / Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / ‘Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over’” (ll. 250-52). The scene is a satirical parody of the ideal of romantic love and the belief in its link to rebirth—a link that the man-woman Tiresias finds absurd. Tiresias actually parodies the platonic reunion between male and female halves of the same self, but is no more helpful at directing us toward social rebirth than the pair of “lovers.”

But despite its situation amidst images of a muddied, garbage-loaded Thames and the filthy, brimming “Unreal City” of London, there is nothing substantial to Eliot’s sarcastic moves in these passages: he allows readers only to share his disgust, without a shred of pity or hope. For how can we pity the “human engine” (l. 215), a shell without a soul? The result is a society adrift like that of “Elizabeth and Liecester” of old (l. 279-80): a fruitless, loveless affair that follows the dirty river’s course rather than blazing a

new trail. Their boat is a “gilded shell” (l. 282), the perfect chariot for the superficial. Just as society at large had no access to Elizabeth or her court, we readers have no emotional access to anyone in this passage. Eliot’s ironies form a wall of critique allowing only for disgust. Here Eliot’s discourse ethics are ruined by his arbitration of taste: “The Fire Sermon” is based upon revolting imagery and the lowest kind of culture. But unlike in “The Shakespearian Rag” Eliot takes a coercive stance, offering his readers no choice but to reject these images of Unreal City as planted on soil that cannot possibly grow a new society. The frustrated Eliot for now makes his poetry give way to his ego.

However, there is a piece of true parody that sneaks in at the last moment, as Eliot manages to trouble his own dogmatic certainty briefly. The passage finishes, abruptly:

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest

310

burning (ll. 307-11)

Part III began with the Buddha’s “Fire Sermon” and it ends with another fire sermon from St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. Augustine recollects the sensuality of his misspent youth, writing, “I came to Carthage and all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves.... I sought an object for my love; I was in love with love” (*Confessions* III.1). Augustine then seeks salvation: “I also entangle my steps with beautiful externals [endless temptations]. However, you rescue me, Lord, you rescue me,” (X.53). Kermode translates it closer to Eliot’s usage: “I entangle my steps with these outward beauties, but thou pluckest me out, O Lord, thou pluckest me out!” (*Waste Land...* 105). In Eliot’s “Notes on *The Waste Land*,” the poet drily points out the mirroring: “The collocation of these two representatives of Eastern and Western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident” (74). Eliot wants us to see the mirrored parody clearly, composing a complex image for the student of ethical poetry. Fire burns, purges, drives, and cleanses (Tamplin 368).

Despite feeling he must point it out to us, Eliot wants his readers to see one thing in this final image: in spite of Part III’s emphasis on the failed experiment of the “human engine,” Eliot has not given up on society entirely. The flames that surround Part III

make for either destruction or creation, and this ultimate ambiguity is built into the fabric of the poem's center. When Eliot presents his own version of Augustine's words without in-text commentary, quotation marks, or a specific speaker, he reminds us that there are more goals for irony than the satirical dismantling of society. Fire can forge new art just as easily as it can destroy the old, and Eliot's choice to back up here and let the imagery burn itself into our minds is indicative that *The Waste Land's* ironies are not only meant to destroy but also to rebuild, and to bring all readers—from East or West—into the same ring of renovating possibilities.

The brief Part IV, "Death by Water," is another mirror, returning us to Madame Sosostris's warning to fear such an end. In water we will build upon Part III's fiery ambiguities, as the figure of "Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead" floats among the fishes and catches our attention (ll. 312-16). This fourth section of *The Waste Land* is crucial in presenting readers with the final turning point of the poem: either society is doomed, or it may be saved; it all depends on whether the drowned man can rise again. Like the fire of Part III, water is an unpredictable element: it both sustains and drowns us, and thus makes us wonder about the poem's ability to inundate society or revive it. After the autumn of "The Fire Sermon" comes a deathly winter of cold seas, the "nadir of the spiritual journey" for the Fisher King and the wasteland's inhabitants (Spanos 249-50).

Phlebas's death may mean little to us except as proof of Sosostris's divinations. Yet Eliot ought to know him a little better, having first met Phlebas in his 1918 poem, "Dans le Restaurant," whose final stanza reads:

Phlébas, le Phénicien, pendant quinze jours noyé, 25
 Oubliait les cris des mouettes et la houle de Cornouaille,
 Et les profits et les pertes, et la cargaison d'étain:
 Un courant de sous-mer l'emporta très loin,
 Le repassant aux étapes de sa vie antérieure.
 Figurez-vous donc, c'était un sort pénible; 30
 Cependant, ce fut jadis un bel homme, de haute taille. (*Poems* 1920, ll. 25-31)

Phlebas the Phoenician, fifteen days drowned, 25
Forgot the cries of the seagulls and the swell of Cornwall,
And the profits and the losses, and the cargo of tin:
A current from under the sea swept him far away,
Recalling for him the stages of his previous life.

the wasteland's outer seas, coupled to Eliot's revision, reworking, and parody of his own work, shows a commitment to positive social change that the elitist cultural critic Eliot has not always demonstrated.

Ellmann suggests that there is little commitment to *anything* in the poem beyond its maze of Eliot's own mystifying footnotes and his critics' quest to make the poem cohere (259). But Eliot's wish for his readers to "Consider Phlebas"—a request that did not exist in his French-language source poem—stands in contrast to this nihilistic reading. We are not to judge Phlebas, nor ignore his suffering, nor even praise the drowning man. Eliot admits that he himself does not know what to make of the dead man floating in from an earlier poem (written near war's end) only to die again. But this ambiguity adds an ethical element, a responsibility that we readers must sort out from the image. Eliot gives no heavy-handed explanations or promises of healing within the figure of Phlebas, but the trust he offers his readers to discover what they will from the image of a broken fellow human demonstrates his shift from self-absorbed aesthetics into the kind of Kantian or Habermasian give-and-take that is socially efficacious.

Part V, "What the Thunder Said," is the culmination of our parodic wanderings and it does not disappoint, offering the ultimate human parody—the figure of Christ—and thus offering the possibility of total renewal. "What the Thunder Said" fulfills the prophecies of the previous sections through parody. Act V opens in Eliot's "gardens" of Gethsemane on the night of Christ's betrayal and death (see Luke XXII-XXIII for comparison). The end of stanza one signals this:

He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience (ll. 328-30) 330

It is a striking parodic treatment of Jesus's crucifixion, using biblical tones to ironically reverse our expectations. The syntax we *expect* is "He who was dead is now living" (cf. Luke XXIV.6). The result is comic: of course the crucified Christ is dead, thus this mundane declaration in prophetic language feels all the more absurd, if not tasteless.

But Eliot is not finished. After walking through the desert in stanzas two and three, stanza four broadens Eliot's irony within the figures on the road to Emmaus:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together 360

But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you? (ll. 359-65) 365

This passage is a dual parody and Eliot in his “Notes” tells us the sources of both (25). The journey to Emmaus concerns two men walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus after Christ’s resurrection: “And it came to pass, that, while they communed [together] and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him” (Luke XXIV.15-16). Eliot mingles this story with a second one, from polar explorer Ernest Shackleton’s journals of his Antarctic travels:

I know that during that long and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia it seemed to me often that we were four, not three. I said nothing to my companions on the point, but afterwards Worsley said to me, “Boss, I had a curious feeling on the march that there was another person with us.” Crean confessed to the same idea. (qtd. in North 60)

Eliot’s fusion of these two episodes is not a case of parody-on-parody, but a parody with multiple sources, and his willingness to meld two disparate episodes in literary history and employ them for a new function raises this irony to the level of ethical social commentary. Just as it has dual sources, Eliot’s parody leaves his readers with two choices: Emmaus or Antarctica. Either there is another—Christ, the new human—walking alongside humanity to symbolize society’s ability to rise from the ashes (Emmaus), or, alternately, we only imagine such a figure (Antarctica). Eliot is skeptical in his “Notes,” saying the explorers “had the constant delusion that there *was one more member* than could actually be counted” (“Notes” 25). The use of “delusion” and the italics depict an Eliot with one eyebrow cocked. But whatever skepticism exists in the “Notes,” the poet has not made it so easy to resolve the paradox of faith and doubt he depicts in the text’s joint parody. One element to take from the Emmaus story is the importance of *recognition*; in this account, external truth exists, but “their eyes were holden that they should not know [it]” (Luke XXIV.16). Such is the case with all parody: we have to *acknowledge* it to participate in its meaning-making work of re-purposing the past. Once again, that is the Habermasian risk the ethical parodist takes—to require something from a reader besides just following orders. Parody is a gamble, but its risk is

crucial to its success; ultimately there is something therapeutic about having to trust another (Kennedy 161-2), there is freedom in letting go of all meaning and responsibility, as an artist. Eliot knows this means leaving the answers to his readers. “What the Thunder Said” demands of us a response, asking us how to reconcile the presence of an unseen other with a perceived (but absent) other. Furthermore, Eliot’s lack of annotated editorializing on the Road to Emmaus account differs from his skeptical commentary on Shackleton and tempers the cynical tone: he will not make it easy for us to be cynics who doubt the possibility of individual and collective renewal. This is his most ethical move in the poem, forcing the reader to make a conscious choice either to *trust*, or to *refuse* belief. Agency in creating meanings within art here seems to be a path to finding meanings in life.

Adding to the urgency of this choice, Part V builds in intensity as the world rends itself, with horrific scenes that might just as easily have originated in Yeats or Poe:

What is that sound high in the air
 Murmur of maternal lamentation
 Who are those hooded hordes swarming
 Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
 Ringed by the flat horizon only 370
 What is the city over the mountains
 Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
 Falling towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London 375
 Unreal
 A woman drew her long black hair out tight
 And fiddled whisper music on those strings
 And bats with baby faces in the violet light
 Whistled, and beat their wings 380
 And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
 And upside down in air were towers
 Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
 And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells. (ll. 366-84)

There are echoes of the future here, as well: “The Second Coming” is an appropriate comparison, and Yeats’s poem would also later appear in *The Dial*. Both it and *The Waste Land* are attempting to come to terms with the war and a potential end to civilization. Also like Yeats, Eliot is not joking: he firmly believes society is falling apart, but he is brave enough to offer us the *choice* to fall with the Unreal Cities or to believe

another way is possible. We must choose for ourselves between faith or doubt in rebirth, even as “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (l. 426).

Yet even as he describes a world falling to pieces, Eliot still offers a choice to believe otherwise; his own voice pierces the narrative within the flurry of allusions at poem’s end: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (l. 430), he cries. These “fragments”—Eliot’s rejuvenated parodies—may not be enough to save the poet from his *own* ruin, but he has “shored” them up against the “ruins” of the past. This is the poem’s greatest moment of self-awareness, as Eliot—speaking as *himself*—affirms that like the artist of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” one can only reinvent the present by combining it with the past. Philomel, Tiresias, and the *Upanishads* may dwell in the esteemed ancient past, and Lil, the Carbuncular Man, and “The Shakespeherian Rag” may exist in the absurdist present, but when Eliot combines the former (the “ruins” of the past) with the latter (the “fragments” of the present), he realizes that parody has the power of opening up a new literature, prefiguring a new future. Just as the thunder offers three choices of interpretation within the space of one syllable, “Da” (ll. 401, 411, 418, 433), Eliot’s parody opens up a world of possibilities for the wasteland.

Thus parody acts as the central trope of the poem and also the piece that redeems *The Waste Land*’s ethics, counteracting the volleys of satire and mockery that the frustrated Eliot sometimes pours over the wasteland. The poem’s central figures have all concerned parody, for the revival of the Fisher King’s dried-out land, the Quest for the Holy Grail, and the resurrection of Christ are all attempts to combine the past—death—with a revived future. Brooker writes that the poem is really one of “self-‘annihilation,’” saying of Eliot that the “single most important pattern in early Eliot is that of the dying God, which is based on the tension between death and new life” (Brooker 148-9). Eliot’s realization that the self must be sacrificed—the power and authority of the lyric narrator—is what opens the door for his readers to contribute to the drama. David Rosen alludes to this self-annihilation when speaking of Eliot’s use of “‘the self’” as a projector not of an individual identity but of the “multiple consciousnesses through which it passes” (485). Eliot realizes he must sacrifice his authority as sole lyric speaker in order to reach his dying society. This sacrificial element is made literal in the figure of Christ in Act V, for the burlesque of the God-man’s death in the opening of Part V becomes the

culmination of this ethos. The opening parody of Christ in the garden is pivotal: for what is Christ but the parody of the human? The familiar, the man made from dust, fused to something new, vital, and divine, the union of the Old Man and the New Man, in the Christian tradition. In figures like this, Eliot's text embodies what Hutcheon says about parody: the trope is not just a "structure" but a "spirit" indwelling literary works (115-6), filling them with new purpose. Thus, though Eliot dips in and out of conventional parody, his work is really about the great parody, the union of earth and heaven, low and high, old and new.

Habib writes aptly that "the notion of irony embraces the major problems which Eliot confronted as a poet and as a philosopher: the connection between the One and the Many, the unity of the self and its mode of engagement with the world, the connection between thought and feeling, and the imperative to unite poetry and philosophy" (Habib 97). We know this implicitly from reading *The Waste Land*: Eliot constantly refuses to resolve our doubts about social renewal completely. At the climax of the poem, in the image of Immanuel, the poet hands the wheel to us and shrugs, saying he has no dogma, no truth to instruct us. Either this image is true, as on the Road to Emmaus, or it is false, as in the Antarctic wastes. But if we are willing to wrestle with the undecidable nature of parody—the new knowledge we have no name for—that Christ and humanity embody, perhaps the wasteland can be revived. And at least in the space of parody we are given a choice to accept or reject its process and results, and that freedom to choose is all we are likely to get in the wasteland. Oser writes that in "What the Thunder Said," Eliot finally manages to sacrifice the "Ego" in service of resurrection (53). I agree with this assessment as I consider satire to be a piece of that ego, the forceful ethic that trusts itself above all others, which *The Waste Land* manages to overcome through the more-amenable work of parody.

Robert Lehman demonstrates that Eliot's early versions of *The Waste Land* were rife with harsh satires, but he writes that Pound and Eliot realized this and decided that the satires of "Fresca," and the "seventy-two lines of heroic couplets" of Popean satire would detract from the final poem (66, 74). They were right, not just stylistically, but ethically: the choice to remove satire and leave parody as the prominent moral mode of the poem is crucial to the poem's lasting impact. Justin Evans is correct to point out that

Eliot's poem ends with a "prayer for a peace that must be pursued in the burning of what burns us" (159). This is no vacuous hopefulness in Eliot's text; it is the deliberate effect of the choice to open up memory and language to renovations. The war lingers in Eliot's consciousness, despite having been far from the war's front, and he speaks for the vast majority of society who must press on to create a better world while having no idea how the old one failed so completely. Parody is Eliot's great compromise, just as it was Pound's great concession.

"Shantih shantih shantih" (ll. 433), the final line of Eliot's poem, is not a string of empty syllables but the culmination of *The Waste Land's* offerings and hopes. Though this final line must be a parody of prayers prayed for thousands of years in the times and places where the chant represented incontrovertible truth, it now exists as a parody that gains its own truth in the *telling*, just as the poem does. It is not an order given to heal the world, but a request, asked of all the others who share that plane. That acknowledged need of and identification with the other is what makes Eliot's poem ultimately salvific.

CHAPTER IV

DISABILITY, DADA, AND THE DOCTOR OF GROTESTHICS

William Carlos Williams's 1923 poetic sequence and modernist critique *Spring and All* is as much an answer to Eliot's vision of *The Waste Land* as it is to Williams's own perception of stagnancy of modern culture. In *Spring and All*'s opening prose Williams addresses the kind of stuffy, institutionalized poetry his collection aims to overthrow. To his would-be detractors, who believe that suffering alone creates authentic experience (in the tradition of the war poets), Williams writes:

What do they mean when they say: "I do not like your poems; you have no faith whatever. You seem neither to have suffered nor, in fact, to have felt anything very deeply.... the poems are positively repellent. They are heartless, cruel, they make fun of humanity. What in God's name do you mean? Are you a pagan? Have you no tolerance for human frailty?... Is this what you call poetry? It is the very antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry. It is the annihilation of life upon which you are bent. Poetry that used to go hand in hand with life, poetry that interpreted our deepest promptings, poetry that inspired, that led us forward to new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltation. You moderns! [I]t is the death of poetry that you are accomplishing....

Perhaps this noble apostrophe means something terrible for me, I am not certain, but for the moment I interpret it to say: "You have robbed me. God, I am naked. What shall I do?"—By it they mean that when I have suffered... I too shall run for cover; that I too shall seek refuge in fantasy.... (*Spring and All* 177)

This "noble apostrophe," as Williams jokingly dubs it, is interesting as an ethical critique of Williams's poetic aims, suggesting that his poems are immoral for their *lack* of feeling (predicated on Williams's presumed inexperience with suffering). Thus his poetry is wrong because it makes "fun of humanity," and because rather than ignoring "human frailty" it exploits it. To Williams this critical viewpoint is not really a call for decency or morality, but actually an expression of *fear*, the fear that some critics of ironic modern poetry felt at being discovered as broken, malformed humans beneath their society airs and moral platitudes. Nakedness—the fear of the foolish, weak self being finally exposed—was the terror that poetry like Williams's could inspire.

Williams's formulation of the fear behind critiques of his poetry is the perfect entry into his (ironical) poetic ethics. Oddly, the physician offers his critics some credit,

calling his works “positively repellent”—ironically both attractive and repulsive. His poems will tend toward an authenticity offering a more complete picture of life in the space of “antipoetry.” In fact to his naysayers, Williams says, you need not fear your nakedness—humans all share in beauty and grotesqueness. Further, Dr. Williams can support his claim to a better poetic ethos than his detractors because despite these accusations to the contrary we know the doctor is not cruel; he has felt the pain of human frailty and empathized with many of his actual patients. He has a different poetic ethic than his critics imagine, but it is not made weaker for its ironic approach, nor for its focus on the paradoxes of the embodied grotesque.

As both doctor and poet, Williams’s lifework was diagnosing and curing the ills of those he encountered (Bremen 7). Williams studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, completing his studies in Leipzig, Germany and graduating in 1906—precisely at a time when medicine was transitioning from the messy, dangerous domain of quackery to its current position of scientific and cultural authority (Crawford 4-5). While his fellow poets (Stein, Stevens, Eliot) were adopting the pragmatism of Harvard, Williams was listening to William Gibson Spiller’s lessons in neurology and synapses; thus Williams’s psychological poetry would be rooted in the bodily, physical forms, not the abstract psychologies his contemporaries adopted (Corlew 72). T. Hugh Crawford notes that Williams was divided continually between worlds: the modern cultural capital garnered by his medical credentials clashed with the backwater practice he kept among the suburban folk of Rutherford, New Jersey (5). But he never divided the patient’s body from his or her soul: both informed each other. Williams never reduced his patients to mere physical problems or illustrations, even while attempting to remain the “objective” artist (Graham “Courage of his Diversity” 9, 14).

Despite occupying a liminal era in medicine, Williams believes it unnecessary to plead his case for poetic and scientific authority: he undercuts any detractors before his anti-modern manifesto even begins by opening with the jocular, self-effacing comment on his work, “If anything of moment results—so much the better. And so much the more likely will it be that no one will want to see it” (*Spring and All* 177). The language is still iconoclastic, like many preceding modernist manifestos (Lambeth-Climaco 41-43), but it is still his *own* voice. Williams’s opening says, “I love my fellow creature. Jesus, how I

love him: endways, sideways, frontways and all the other ways—but he doesn't exist! Neither does she. I do, in a bastardly sort of way" (178). This love is palpable: Ian D. Copestake outlines the development of Williams's ethic, writing that Williams was not just peripherally but powerfully influenced by the Unitarian beliefs in which he was raised, a religion "built around the deliberate and almost total avoidance of dogmatic statements of belief" (16). The only dogma Williams absorbed from his interracial, multilingual, and interdenominational parents was the Unitarian precept "nothing that is not true" (Copestake 15, 17). When Williams tells us he loves his "fellow creature" in the opening to *Spring and All* we must trust him. As Copestake explains, "To pursue the expression of an individual's intrinsic self was for Williams a moral act, constituting the highest expression of love of which a man is capable, and poetry was the means by which he sought that expression" (10). We may read Williams's poetry as more than an aesthetic outpouring of the individual mind but also an expression of empathy with and care for his fellows, and its positive ethos reflects a desire to love broadly.

My argument will be located in the often-clinical examinations of individuals the doctor provides: Williams in *Spring and All* explores the category of the literary grotesque as part of a complex study of disability and disjuncture that makes his readers apprehend and assess society's often-impermeable walls separating normality and deviancy. Williams, though sometimes crude or blunt in his images of disability or the grotesque other, offers an ethical motivation throughout much of *Spring and All*'s poetry, demanding from readers an honest discussion of the line between self and other, familiar and alien. Williams's approach will claim that the distinction between the reading "you" and the speaking "I" is no greater than when "you" and "I" are visibly, even grotesquely, different. Our universal "deviancy" forms a connecting link with our fellows. Williams tests the authority of the institutions of "normalcy" and "health," always more interested in studying the categories of the "abnormal" or "deviant." The result is a hopeful if imperfect ethics in *Spring and All*, and though at times it silences the other when it ought to invite her or fashions a hierarchy beyond the doctor's scope, we must acknowledge the tremendous risk Williams runs in delving into the complex subject of disability and admit the success he finds in forcing his readers to engage with the othered. Through this his work promotes the development of an egalitarian modernist social ethos.

Imagistic Roots in Williams's Grotesthics

Patrick Durgin's essay on "Post-Language Poetries and Post-Ableist Poetics" helps link the two major aspects of my argument, relating the grotesque of Williams's brand of modernism (from the gothic to Dada) to the study of disability in contemporary culture. Durgin is especially concerned with the idea of "witness" in modernist narratives (159). In particular, Durgin explores the kind of witness Williams employs in *Spring and All* where poems display a "persistence of... insights into interdependent subjectivity," as well as having their source in Williams's medical practice, where he was a "physician and caregiver particularly attentive to liminal states of impairment and ability" (161). To Williams's credit, Durgin identifies the poet's work as one of the earliest "post-ableist frameworks" (161), allowing us insights into the social categories of normality and grotesque that are often ahead of their time. However, we have to temper our lauding of Williams's ethics of the grotesque (or *grotesthics*, as I dub them), as Durgin notes that the Disability Rights Movement's motto, "Nothing about us without us" should also be applied to Williams's work (163). As an external witness to such social categories it is easy to treat others unjustly, often unconsciously. Thus at times (as we will note in the poems "The Right of Way" and "To Elsie"), Williams will show us the "grotesque" or differently-abled other without offering that figure a voice or the opportunity to represent herself—complicating his grotesthical aims. But Williams's duty as a witness often transcends his shortcomings as a chronicler of disability (Durgin 171), something apparent in the best poems of *Spring and All*. Though on occasion Williams silences others, more often he offers them a voice. This was literally the case, as well, based on the continual support Williams offered to female modernists, in particular, working as an "enabling predecessor" to aid a continually-othered category (Kinnahan 2, 21). Williams's feminism is a first step toward ethically embracing the other (Soto 135).

In writing about the modernist domestic grotesque of the American interwar period, Susan Edmunds finds herself drawn to literary depictions of the domestic sphere made grotesque through close examination (7). In modernism, American domestic scenes, instead of arbitrating tradition, became instead dramatic playgrounds of the strange and uncanny (Edmunds 4-5). Notably, Edmunds claims she is not seeking "the real revolution in the shell games" of grotesque re-representations, but wishes "to track

the blurry motions of the game itself” (10). Thus her study of fiction is concerned less with the results than with the *actions* of the literary grotesque—precisely what I am concentrating on in Williams’s poetry. Modernists throughout the twenties and thirties, Edmunds argues, started to frame middle class, bourgeois domesticity within grotesque imagery (32). This is precisely what Williams will do in his poetry of illness, as he treads the line between medical respectability and the sometimes playful, sometimes heartrending representation of estrangement. The result is a unique poetic and medical ethics of viewing and listening.

Ultimately, *Spring and All* demonstrates that there is more than one way to be ethical within ironic play: as we have found, a major way to facilitate this is by limiting one’s authority as poet and speaker. Different from Pound or Eliot, Williams manages this by giving voice to the social other. Another central aspect of ironic ethics is to present an audience with a puzzle or problem to solve, though not an obvious or coercive one, and then allow these reading others to make of this what they will. Williams does not always abide by these methods: the doctor has difficulty setting aside his medical authority, sometimes at the expense of a patient’s input. Nevertheless, he always presents his readers with puzzles demanding our participation, often using the literary grotesque to direct our attention (but, crucially, not forcing our response) toward ethical dilemmas.

Returning to the opening volley of *Spring and All*, Williams asks, “To whom then am I addressed? To the imagination” (178). But Williams, lest he be thought a mere aesthete, clarifies his idea of the imagination: it is not a limiting, individualistic vision, but a unifying one. Peter Nicholls writes that this imagination is a means of seeing familiar things as new again (213). Imagination thus frees us to move within the world and exchange ideas with others, trusting that what will materialize from them will be the truth, not misheard, misrepresented nonsense (Nicholls 214). It is the “barrier” between the reader and the reader’s immediate connection to the world that Williams would destroy (Nicholls 215). Further, Charles Altieri believes that Williams’s sense of the personal imagination was always mixed equally with empirical fact (*Art of Twentieth-Century...* 41). This is fundamental to understanding *Spring and All*: as both of these critics note, Williams does not treat the imagination lightly for it is the primary link between one mind and another, as Williams illustrates in his opening epistle.

To any detractors, Williams writes, "...[Y]ou believe that I thus divorce myself from life and so defeat my own end, [but] I reply: To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination. This is its book. I myself invite you to read and to see" (178). This invitation and the direct address to the reader is the underlying ethical appeal of Williams's masterwork. In addressing the imagination Williams does not reject the world of reality; instead imagination represents the point of equality *between* minds. In the imagination all minds meet; apart from class, education, knowledge, or belief there is the realm of images, the root and trunk of the imagination. Importantly, Williams's free verse originated in the Imagist movement, leaving the movement later than Pound and others (Pratt 173); yet Williams's long-term investment in the indecipherable, iconic, insolvent image does not fade when his poetry outgrows imagism, as *Spring and All* illustrates. Therefore an entry point into his verse remains the visual portal, the imagistic figures that minds can gravitate toward without verbal explanations. Surprisingly, through these spare visuals, we will see that Williams's poetical forms are always also political (Billitteri 44-45). A strong democratic element undergirds the American Williams's poetry, an element that becomes more interesting when coupled to *Spring and All*'s radically-equalizing use of the grotesque literary figure. Ultimately it offers the possibility of an ethical poetics. Always, the spectator or reader is must participate in Williams's work (Siraganian 126-27), for better or worse. Democracy demands participation.

Thus, even a decade after, Williams is still largely adhering to the course laid out in Pound's 1913 essay "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." Pound writes, "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term 'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as [Bernard] Hart" (Pound 38). An imagistic "complex" is knowledge without prerequisites—and *invitingly* so. Williams knows this, finishing the introduction to *Spring and All* with a gesture of generosity toward his readers: "In the imagination we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say 'I' I mean also 'you.' And so, together, as one, we shall begin" (178). We enter Williams's poetry of ethical healing framed by the doctor's "caress"—not just contact, but immediacy and tenderness.

Williams claims an almost uncomfortable closeness to his readers, but he knows that this is the only way to cross the social divide between self and other, to heal by touching and feeling, by setting aside comfort for therapy. Williams demands of readers not that they be *imagistes* or aesthetes but simply that “you read.” His work will be made from images from life; his opening facetiousness about poetry’s probable uselessness, his cheek in making “fun of humanity” (177), and his willingness to embrace the reader directly, unflinchingly, fully all contribute to Williams’s poetic ethics of healing.

In contrast to this vision, in *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt describes the history of the imagination which, since Plato, has been considered a “thinking dialogue between me and myself [that] takes place only in solitude, in a withdrawal from the world of appearances, where ordinarily we are together with others” (64). Likewise, Aristotle believed dialogue could only exist with others who are like “‘another self’” (Arendt 200). But Williams’s approach to the imagination is radical in its willingness to incorporate all other selves into the personal “we” of the imagination. Williams does not separate the self from others, not labeling what Arendt deems “Human plurality, the faceless ‘They’ from which the individual Self splits to be itself alone” (201). Williams eliminates the category of *They*, replacing it with the familial “You and I,” a universal *We*. Charles Taylor has said that “The fundamental feature of human life... is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression” (32-33). As a doctor, Williams is aware that he cannot speak to and heal hurts until he has listened to his patients. Unilateral speech lacks the ethic of empathy and caring that Williams made his life’s work. His emphasis on the “you” addressed, his resignation of his own power and authority as a man of medicine—even his sacrifice of his own identity in the pivotal line, “Whenever I say ‘I’ I mean also ‘you’” (178)—will show itself in poems that beg his “patients” to share their pain with the doctor to find healing. As Altieri notes, the imagination transforms into a tangible rallying point from which to remake the world (*Art of Twentieth-Century...* 49).

To reach out to society the way Williams desires he crafts in *Spring and All* an irony built upon the human grotesque that neither satirizes nor parodies the human figure, but embraces it fully, unafraid to touch the physical body in healing mind and soul. The

grotesque is the disjunctive representation of the “ugly” or “deformed,” though the word’s roots connote something obscured or hidden; in Williams it is linked continually to society’s often-occluded images of disability. Dr. Williams’s life’s work is revealing and healing hidden hurts, and his poetry in *Spring and All* does. Many poems therein will bring back the buried social scars of wartime in an attempt to heal long-festering sores. To do this, Williams must wade continually into the dirty, ugly, and oddly comical ironies of human life, and he will do so as openly as possible.

However, the manipulation of the grotesque is no new method for Williams, nor was it always used only to identify the other. For instance in his 1917 collection *Al Que Quiere* is the poem “Danse Russe,” where Williams broadly mocks his own body and watches it “dance naked, grotesquely / before my mirror” all while comically claiming to be “the happy genius” of his home (ll. 8-9, 19). Mikołaj Wiśniewski explains that this scene is grotesque because the dance abandons intimacy (it is performed in broad daylight), and it frames a “genius” who can teach us “nothing but the perfectly alienated core of the dancer’s self, the radically idiosyncratic and incomprehensible nature of his delight” (Wiśniewski 369). In *Spring and All* Williams revisits this mix of the comic and strange, the laughter at the uncanny; the *mutual* nature of the grotesque is an essential cord linking the omnipresent “I” and “you.” James Schevill writes that Williams, like Sherwood Anderson, saw the grotesque as “beautiful because it is openly human and exposed. As a doctor Williams exposed himself deliberately to the ways in which poverty distorts life” (Shevill 235). Furthermore, Williams writes in “A Beginning on the Short Story” about the socially grotesque, saying, “I lived among these people. I knew them and saw the essential qualities (not stereotype), the courage, the humor..., the deformity, the basic tragedy of their lives—and the importance of it. You can’t write about something unimportant to yourself. I was involved” (qtd. in Schevill 235). Within grotesque imagery Williams will mix the social and ethical with the economic and political, drawing attention to class and other hierarchies (for the grotesque is really only grotesque to those who consider themselves *above* it). This will become apparent in poems like “To an Old Jaundiced Woman” and “To Elsie,” in particular, as I will illustrate. Williams saw the worth of the grotesque and intends to use its irony to claim a radical equality between self and other.

Stallybrass and White write in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* that the grotesque is a space fraught with potential where many categories of society intersect—gender, sexuality, class, territory, family (Stallybrass and White 24, 132). Williams agrees, and he knows that the grotesque, as Stallybrass and White explain, is linked to ideas of free play (43). As we have found in Eliot and Pound's parody, play is essential to an ethical literary relationship, dependent as it is upon the participation and free response of another. What makes the grotesque such an interesting ironic device is that it remains largely outside of us. In other words, while parody can mock the self (ethically), the grotesque is almost always a category applied to *another* (Stallybrass and White 108). The result of this realization is the sometimes-enlightening, sometimes-problematic ethics of Williams's poetic text: the poetry always engages with the other—and not just the sanitized, safe other—but, simultaneously, Williams rarely makes himself an object of the grotesque, more often remaining outside the scene, as the observing physician.

To understand the grotesque basis for Williams's irony, we look to Bergson's 1900 treatise on *Laughter*, a work proposing that “we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing” (2). Though to Bergson laughter is alive in the sense of its flexibility and enigmatic nature, to Williams it is “a living thing” because such laughter arises from and within *living things*. Thus, whether we acknowledge it or not, to be human is to share in the grotesque, to whatever degree, and thus we live within an ironic conversation. Bergson alludes to this when he opines that “Our laughter is always the laughter of a group” (6). Bergson's essay argues that laughter is always a social action, never done totally independently; further, it is often society's method of corralling eccentricity in the body public, through fear or embarrassment (Bergson 20). Thus we laugh at what strikes us as inappropriate, improper, gross, or grotesque in a conscious or unconscious attempt to reign in the strangeness of the body's reappearance. In the poems of *Spring and All* we will find Williams's struggle between laughter's controlling impulse and the desire for free play.

Dada and the Doctor

Williams's interest in the grotesque was the result not only of his clinical practice but also a product of his age, the time of Dada. Williams's ironies were heavily

influenced by his interactions with the New York Dada movement in the late teens and twenties. In the years surrounding the outbreak of World War I, the libertarian artists' conglomerate in Ridgefield, New Jersey was where Williams first met and exchanged artistic ideas with his influential friends Man Ray and Alfred Kreymborg (editor of the influential little magazine *Others*) and soaked up the Dada outpourings of Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp (Dachy 69). Williams would gather with the rest of the Others group in Walter Arensberg's apartment, which became a central site of literary invention and expansion as the poets broke with pre-war Imagism and attempted to shape a new poetics (Naumann 29-30). Williams spoke to the feelings of "release" these meetings allowed and the Continental aesthetics he encountered there spurred his interest in creating an American poetics incorporating similar ideals (Naumann 29). Francis Picabia described the confluence of Dada in New York (after its arrival from Europe) as a gathering of all nations in one spirit within a movement that went "beyond the limit of esthetics" (Picabia 13). Likewise, Richard Huelsenbeck called Dada a universal phenomenon, arguing, "Everyone can be a Dadaist. Dada is not limited to any art.... The Dadaist should be a man who has fully understood that one is entitled to have ideas only if one can transform them into life—the completely active type, who lives only through action, because it holds the possibility of his achieving knowledge" (Huelsenbeck 28). Hugo Ball writes of the movement, "What we are celebrating is at once a buffoonery and a requiem mass.... What we call Dada is a harlequinade made of nothingness in which all higher questions are involved" (51). Ball explains, "The Dadaist loves the extraordinary, the absurd, even. He knows that life asserts itself in contradictions, and that his age, more than any preceding it, aims at the destruction of all generous impulses. Every kind of mask is therefore welcome to him..." (51). Williams follows these prescriptions, placing everything that he observes into the poems of *Spring and All*, having spent formative years rubbing shoulders with the New York artistic avant-garde (Jones 12). The open ethos of Dada he echoes in his own wide-flung ironies and grotesques.

Further, the anti-dogmatism we find in Williams mirrors one of Dada's central tenets. Andre Breton, writing about the time of Williams's *Spring and All*, propounds that, in Dada, "The obscurity of our utterances is constant. The riddle of meaning should remain in the hands of children. To read a book in order to know denotes a certain

simplicity” (Breton 200). Williams follows this ideal, not attempting to write a perfect prescription in his poetry for social renewal but simply playing out a number of possibilities for his readers to consider. Williams’s poetry bears the influence of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, and the idea of art as “junk” or a “trick,” the breaking of the illusion of art as rational, elite, and true (Richter 90-1, Sayre 4). Dachy writes that the Dadaists had no interest in beginning yet another art movement but wished to rethink art on a more fundamental level, simply protesting “on behalf of life itself” (34). This is precisely what *Spring and All*’s opening declaration promises: a return to spring and new life after the death spread by war and social disintegration. Yet even in working towards an anti-art, these Dadaists were still making art (Richter 112). They simply broadened the extent of art to include all parts of the imagination, an aesthetic to which Williams is wedded. Thus all observations may eventually become the subject of poetry.

Like Dada’s art of anti-art, Williams’s greater irony in *Spring and All* is the fact that his address to the imagination is not really an address to the mind. We have come to consider the imagination as the product of the mind and knowledge, but Williams returns it to its roots, making it a physical rather than a metaphysical experience—particularly in the crude, elided, grotesque image. In reading Williams’s attempts to resurrect society through visions of its physicality we will be assisted by Bakhtin who, in his *Rabelais and His World*, disagrees with the assumption that the grotesque is merely a satirical caricature of the world and thus always a negative force in art (306). Bakhtin contends that the grotesque, framing the “material bodily lower stratum” of the human, including the realms of “food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body,” instead “bears a deeply positive character” (62). Bakhtin’s grotesque is not a corrective social mockery, as Bergson believed, but the laughter of the working classes, the folk realm, existing always with the aim of producing “abundance, increase” rather than censure (62-64). Laughter here is therapeutic and a privilege unique to the human animal, as Aristotle suggested (Bakhtin 68). There are echoes here and in Williams of Tristan Tzara’s *Dada Manifesto 1918*, a public address where Tzara stated, “I destroy the drawers of the brain and of social organization: spread demoralization wherever I go and cast my hand from heaven to hell, my eyes from hell to heaven, restore the fecund wheel of a universal circus to objective forces and the imagination of every individual” (qtd. in Dachy 47). Williams,

Bakhtin, and the Dadaists all shared the belief that rebirth can come out of destruction, deterioration, and discomfort.

Perhaps Bakhtin's most important remark on the grotesque is that we cannot idealize it (308). To idealize the body—to remove it from the physical sphere and transplant it into the realm of the theoretical sublime—is to do ourselves a disservice. This will be important to remember in studying the figures of Williams's *Spring and All*, characters who we may wish to escape their gross, visceral worlds to somewhere cleaner, more respectable. But to whitewash Williams's characters (perhaps even caricatures) is to miss the point. The French philosopher Henri Bergson was the chief theorist on the comic in Williams's time, but the doctor does not always adhere to Bergson's interpretations of comic ironies. One such insensitive Bergsonian claim about the grotesque or ugly human figure is that "A deformity that may become comic is a deformity that a normally built person could successfully imitate," as in the case of the hunchback, who resembles a person "who holds himself badly" (23). From our contemporary tendency to either ignore or affirm disabilities (at least publicly), Bergson oversteps his bounds in making these offensive claims. But there remains some truth in this indelicacy: if we look further at his assertions, *every* body—not just a body with a disability—is, at its most basic level, "one vast grin" to Bergson (24), and, at least to a degree, Williams agrees. Williams does not flinch from displaying humanity, and he will use the irony therein to promote an ethic of universality, where nothing disqualifies one human from the love of the other. Caricature in Williams is less an abuse than a uniting force kind of comedy.

Of course, contemporary disability theory interprets human ability in a vastly different context did Bergson or Williams. Lennard J. Davis, in his introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader*, writes of the relationship between normalcy and abnormality and between the grotesque and the disabled, as opposed to the "ideal," within modern history. The concept of normalcy is really a recent phenomenon, a modern adaptation of the old concept of an "ideal" (Davis 3-4); but the grotesque—the inverse of the ideal—is not equivalent to disability (4). Yet, following Bakhtin, Davis recognizes in the grotesque a "common humanity, whereas the disabled body, a later concept, was formulated as by definition excluded from culture, society, the norm" (Davis 4). The idea of disability arises from the concept of *deviation*, from mathematical norms or averages, and is

fostered by the rise of eugenics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Davis 4-10). In contrast to the ancient belief in the life-giving force of the grotesque (Bakhtin's lower bodily stratum), modern science separated the idea of disability from the grotesque tradition, as pseudo-scientific research sought genetic connections between disability and unemployment, criminality, and poverty among so-called "defectives" (Barnes 25-26). The rise of Social Darwinism essentially marked the end of the grotesque as a marker of the human, instead adding fear and hatred toward differently-abled bodies.

Beyond science, art has its own complicated history in interpreting and addressing disability. In Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein's introduction to *Points of Contact: Disability, Art, and Culture*, the editors write of the inability of literature and other media to display disability as a complex spectrum, beyond the archetypes of characters with disabilities as being evil (Richard III) or pathetic (Tiny Tim) (6). They laud instead the attempt to achieve a "middle ground" position that avoids an us-versus-them mentality that defines the "blank slate" of abled bodies as unmarked and disabled bodies as permanently categorized (Crutchfield and Epstein 7-9). The most important question these theorists raise resonates with my own project: they wonder whether art is capable of altering society for the better (Crutchfield and Epstein 18). The authors ask if art can ethically interrogate disability, both in terms of the more apparently "grotesque" and the less-apparently disabled (17). This is precisely Williams's question.

Williams is a useful poet for studying the ethics of ability in his age: the modern tradition in science, the revolutionary instinct in art, and the search for social healing all converge in his poetry. Williams is precisely the boundary-crossing and discipline-mixing figure who can usher in new conceptions of art and disability (Smith 1). At the same time, Williams's poetry is still written by a male, nondisabled figure, which may limit the breadth of perspectives it can draw upon (Smith 6). As a doctor, Williams's social task is essentially to normalize or "fix" the problems of disability (Smith 3). Yet his work is much more complicated, situated within complex forces and goals between a patriarchal, normative past and a new future. As a doctor, Williams had something of a "conflict of interest" between his task to destroy the "disease" that disability depicted and his charge to do no harm to his patients, including individuals with disabilities who had no need or desire for treatments (Siebers 20). Therefore in assessing the poet's ethical aims,

we must consider carefully the roles of individuals with disabilities within Williams's work. We should note that disability is chiefly a social construction (in contrast to "impairment," a physical condition of a body) and not a characteristic intrinsic to an individual (Corker and French 2, 4). Thus the ethics of the literary use of disability depends largely on whether individuals with disabilities are offered any agency in their depictions. Corker and French explain the "modern paradox" in disability studies concerning the presence of "reciprocal relationships" between the normative culture that fashions disability and individuals with impairments (7). Can such relationships exist, and do they exist in Dr. Williams's poetry? This we will attempt to answer.

Western philosophy has a long tradition of disowning the body (beginning with Plato's identification of disease as a hindrance to the life of the mind), as Kristin Lindgren reminds us, and this no doubt has an influence on Williams's artistic position (145-6). But is he only patriarchal and normalizing in depictions of disability in *Spring and All*—especially in terms of female disability? The answer is complex. Lindgren writes that authors and society at large must include the experiences and viewpoints of individuals with disabilities in order to produce ethical discourse on the subject (148), something Williams rarely explicitly does. The poet often maintains his position of medical authority regarding the other's body, and can thus perpetuate the separation between the normalized self and the disabled other, just as most artists have traditionally dealt with disability (Crutchfield and Epstein 5). Simultaneously, Siebers reminds us of a catch-22 of disability representations that still remains: as a nondisabled author, ought one to avoid depicting disability in any form, or are we to point out disabilities (35)? Is Williams wrong to use his patients and those with impairments as characters in his poetry? Such questions of visibility versus invisibility will pervade *Spring and All*.

With this query hanging over *Spring and All* we return again to Bergson and the connection of disability and laughter. Truthfully, Williams's sense of irony is not the same as Bergson's: the ironies of disjuncture in *Spring and All* that make ethical claims about the body and its grotesque nature are not meant to abuse individuals and ignore their humanity. Human imperfection amuses us because it reminds us of our failures to be perfect machines; mirth arises in the creative space between non-being/emptiness and perfection/completion. Williams exhibits Bakhtin's medieval expressions of joy in the

happy “drunkenness” of the grotesque human (307), rather than from its mechanization. To Bakhtin, bringing the high things low—deforming the idealized human body—does not degrade people but reinvigorates them. To return humanity to the “material bodily level, to the level of food, drink, sexual life, and the bodily phenomena linked with them” is to return to them their original “positive meaning” (Bakhtin 309). The image and reuse of the body, to Bakhtin and, I argue, in Williams’s poetry, is inextricably linked to renewed life (315). Critically, this life does not exclude the distressed, or disabled human body: “The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (Bakhtin 317). This is the role of art in Williams’s poetry: it is meant to reveal and to give birth to a new society based on recognition and openness; it is not meant to cover but expose, healing through the kind of a universally-shared laughter. As the doctor knows, the physical self is prerequisite to any other selves. Williams’s imagism, Pratt rightly says, is “scornful” of the beautiful or sublime (173). The poet never lost his distaste for the idealized; authenticity, to Williams, is built upon revelations of what society deemed the unbeautiful or infirm.

Thus Williams’s poetry incorporate a democratic ethos based upon the universality of the grotesque; the physical stuff of the human is shared between all people on an equally basic level. Williams’s is a discourse ethic that makes no claims to a knowledge of utilitarian ends, but is interested in a policy of equality between speaker and audience. He would take no issue with readers pointing out his own infirmities. Pointing out the link between the low, the ugly, and the comic is not an end in itself to Williams but a starting point from which he may invite his readers to join him in rehabilitating society. “Openness and inclusivity for Williams acted as counters to the comforts of tradition” Copestake reminds us (152), and we see this every time Williams abandons classical ideals for earthier, more difficult images. These images invite the participation of his audience, I will argue, as we hold as much a claim to them as the poet. Copestake says of Williams, “His work as a poet would constitute an act of faith, a commitment to his own desire to write, which may or may not yield the benefits to himself and to others he believed would be realized by pursuing them, but the greater failure would be in not trying to find out” (Copestake 9). This is precisely the test of

ethics in postwar poets, the willingness to take a risk into the unknown—to have faith in the other’s ability to understand society’s ills and desire to help remedy them. This is the only way to respect the other’s body and mind while allowing for the possibility of tangible social change.

Having said this, we may wonder a bit at the doctor’s ethical intentions in leaving his prescriptions to his patients’ discretion. But in some sense, this is all any doctor can do: Williams as physician had to solicit data from his patients, and he further had to trust them to follow through on their healing progress—he could not heal them without their participation. Thus we should not be surprised that his poetry relies just as much on his audience’s willingness to share in the sometimes-difficult imagery Williams invokes. Williams knew the physical and psychological destruction to self and others caused by hatred and hostility, and instead prefers to aim for the healing power of laughter (Berger 157). Berger adds that laughing at human behaviors or features brings other people to our attention, and that acknowledgment, backhanded or not, helps us begin to understand them (158). What remains is the image of Williams as doctor-poet, one who at times distanced himself from the grotesque parts of his life and practice, and, at other moments, moved within them without a second thought. He was “part participant, part voyeur,” ultimately—both the detached, scientific man of science and the ancient, immediate “medicine man” (as Kenneth Burke once called him) healer (Crawford 6, Bremen 62).

There is an honesty in Williams, partly derived from his work as a scientific healer, to admit his own fallibility, which gains him the faith of his patients (Crawford 19). Despite this, there lingers a challenge to his ethics: the fact that Williams remains a medicine *man*, and that many of his poetic subjects in *Spring and All*—disabled, ill, or otherwise—are women. Although a sense of a shared, equal community is essential for ethical discourse, we know it is a right often refused to individuals with disabilities who exist within a social community that rejects them (Asch 25). It remains critical to see issues from the perspectives of disabled individuals who exist beyond society’s norms, especially of women who are already othered by society at large (Corker and French 10). Williams has trouble at times stepping outside of his own art, his own male perspective, to make this attempt, which can weaken the ethical claims of his poetry. Still, the sum of *Spring and All* is much greater than its parts, and the same is true of the man behind it.

Spring and All: Beauty in the Beastly

Despite some hiccups Williams makes a gesture of good faith in attempting not to hold himself to a separate standard from his audience. He seems content to make himself an object of jest or ridicule. Thus his masterwork on art's effects on life, *Spring and All*, begins with a joke about its own impotence. This may be false modesty, perhaps, but Williams does not leave it at that. Leading up to his first poems in the collection, he marks out more moments where his voice forfeits the preferred position in the hierarchy of author and reader. The first new heading in Williams's prose introduction to *Spring and All* he titles "CHAPTER 19," though it is neither really an independent chapter nor is it the nineteenth section. And the next section takes it a step further, inverting the text of the (already inappropriate) title "CHAPTER XIII" (180). In these minor jokes Williams undermines his authority as speaker and allows the reader to participate in the making of Williams's project—whether by mentally inverting the "CHAPTER XIII" heading or through decoding the hyperbolic rhetoric of "CHAPTER 19." Jokes are a necessary ironic framework to the prose of *Spring and All*; without this disavowal of his own knowledge, Williams's text might at times be disturbing or worse.

Even so, much of the "CHAPTER 19" section is jarring: the speaker begins with the crazed prophecy, "Tomorrow we the people of the United States are going to Europe armed to kill every man, woman and child in the area west of the Carpathian Mountains (also east) sparing none" (178). The joke here, the bathetic parenthetical aside "(also east)," would be at home in the vitriol of Sassoon or Pound. And Williams goes on in the following paragraphs, with such broadsides as: "Kill! kill! The English, the Irish, the French, the Germans, the Italians and the rest: friends or enemies, it makes no difference, kill them all" (179). But we are saved from literary genocide by Williams's continual reversals, his admissions of ignorance or his demands for forgiveness—even his Dadaist expressions of total absurdity. He dabbles in the gross and grotesque not to exploit the actual dead in Europe but because we are *familiar* with these kinds of rhetoric. Thus as soon as he says Europe ought to be decimated Williams reverses course: "First we shall kill them and then they, us" (179). Williams's absurdist reasoning explains: "Because we love them—all. That is the secret: a new sort of murder. We make leberwurst of them. Bratwurst. But why, since we are ourselves doomed to suffer the same annihilation?"

(179). The speaker substitutes paradoxes for straightforward political statements, admitting that he has not the clarity of mind for unambiguous social rejuvenation. A paradox himself, the practical doctor Williams is happy enough playing the fool in his poetics, writing that “If I could say what is in my mind in Sanscrit [sic] or even Latin I would do so. But I cannot. I speak for the integrity of the soul and the greatness of life’s inanity; the formality of its boredom; the orthodoxy of its stupidity” (179). His jab here at Eliot (a student of Sanskrit and classicism) reveals Williams as *ieron*, the wise man pretending at foolishness. He gains freedom to challenge all institutions—history, ideology, or art—if he dons the fool’s motley.

In the next paragraph, Williams reveals the wisdom within this tactless, foolishly-aggressive American isolationism: “The imagination,” he goes on, “intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme” (179). Here Williams the man intrudes upon the speaking *ieron*. The poet reveals that despite the grotesque imagery of slaughtered children in Europe, this has all been a work of the imagination, for the imagination—not a literal call to arms. How can we be sure? Because he has *already* told us his addressee: the Imagination. To Williams, imagination is the point at which “we are... locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one” (178). It is not his fellow man Williams would destroy for he is joined with everyone else in this “embrace.” Instead, he speaks to slaying a *mindset*, a tradition we have outgrown and the disconnect it represents. He would bring down the historical walls between learned and untutored, old and new dogma, the arts of the past and future. In place of the old guard Williams wishes for the union of Imagination to thrive, for his ethos of connectivity to make a new world; to do so he will happily “kill” divisions, hierarchies, and classes, all of which Europe represented to Williams. The tradition, Eliot’s “mind of Europe,” was to Williams the cause of the world’s slow death, and he wished for the democratic, physical, pragmatic ideals of by Emerson and his spiritual descendents to revitalize America.

If Europe represents the world of “prohibitions” then the Imagination will aspire to “drunken heights to destroy the world” (179). Here Williams prefigures Bakhtin’s analysis of drinking and eating as a social activity linked to rebirth (Bakhtin 278-79). It is not the physical “annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth” that

Williams's narrator seeks but a mental, emotional, and spiritual annihilation arising from the recognition of humanity's equality (grounded in our physicality). Williams prefers the "inanity" of the fool's world to a rational, sensible way of living. Williams here echoes the French Dadaist Tristan Tzara's 1922 claim that "The beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of art, but of a disgust," and, further, "Dada is without pretension, as life should be" (Motherwell 250-1). Williams concurs: to accept the orthodoxies of the past when the world has so clearly changed would *actually* be stupid.

"CHAPTER VI" emphasizes Williams's progress toward a renewal built on irony. This section is a collection of paradoxes: first, the speaker says the imagination (our life-force, essentially) has been dead for millions, billions of years, but that now, through a "miraculous miracle," "[i]t is spring!" (181). But newness is paradoxically found in *repetition* as both "EVOLUTION" and the seasons represent repetition. The speaker ironically cries "Good God!" after citing evolution as the maker and remaker of humanity (181). After this ironic invocation of a *Creator*, Williams returns to the idea that nothing is new or invented, life works as a "perfect plagiarism" (181), a *plagiarism* where "[e]verything is and is new. Only the imagination is undeceived." Laughing to himself, Williams follows with, "In fact now, for the first time, everything IS new" (181).

We might dismiss this nearly-nonsensical prose poem as little more than Williams poking fun at the idea of a rational, analytical poetics. But there is some truth in these paradoxes: every artwork *is* new, despite that all images *are* just recycled from the past. It is, *and* it isn't. Likewise, though the natural world constantly remakes itself that does not diminish the uniqueness and miraculous quality of life and thought. When Williams says, "Only the imagination is undeceived," he again privileges the link between speaker and listener as the eye that sees through the present to the recreations of past and reinventions of the future. Society must remember that this exchange—one person's making and another's interpreting art—is a microcosm of all social interactions. There is no invention without the ingredients of the past; there is no art until images are seen, no music until sounds are heard. The imagination—the exchange that ethical art represents—is the key to Williams's poetry, unlocking his paradoxes. Without the marriage of doctor and patient, artist and audience, poetry is dead. This knowledge keeps us "undeceived," a phrase Williams repeats in "CHAPTER 2" to follow (182).

At the end of the introductory “CHAPTER 19” is Williams’s oxymoronic description of the world as a “process of miraculous verisimilitude”—the combination of life’s invention and its recreation—the central tenet to *Spring and All*. These ironies, where our imaginations pair with Williams’s, will be the force by which new healing can begin within the realm of the grotesque and disabled. By entwining our experience of Imagination with Williams’s (in what he promises, through word and tone, to be a marriage of equals), we may agree that our old ideas have faded, and behold that “THE WORLD IS NEW” (182).

The new world begins in the first three poems of Williams’s volume, where images of beauty are placed upon the grimy earth. Poem I, “Spring and All,” plants flowers heralding spring into Eliot’s muddy wastes and marshes; the “contagious hospital” of the first line is the monstrous backdrop to a new life that will acquire its own “stark dignity of entrance” in creating beauty in an ugly world (*Collected Poems* 183, ll. 1, 24). This poem, like many in the eponymous volume, ends with no period: Williams envisions a cycle of rebirth without end. Poem II, “The Pot of Flowers,” works similarly, depicting the colors of a flower seeming to be “Pink confused with white” and showing a bloom with “petals aslant darkened with mauve” (184, ll. 1, 6). Though pretty, the flower is “confused,” almost accidentally beautiful, with colors that do not paint but “spill” (l. 3). There is no principle of perspective or composition at work in this piece of art. The whole arises from “the pot / gay with rough moss” (ll. 16-17), a humble canvas indeed. In these first poems Williams continues to build his aesthetic: beauty rises always from the accidental, the strange, the grotesque; the “gay” is always found in the “rough.” Just as the link between “you and I” is central to his poetic ethics, so is the link between the ugly and the beautiful (and the comic irony that results) at the heart of Williams’s aesthetics. By poem III, “The Farmer,” we are prepared for Williams’s speaker to paint for us, “... the artist figure of / the farmer—composing / —antagonist” (186, ll. 17-19). The farmer-as-artist is a fine paradigm for the making of *Spring and All*: he will harvest life and beauty from the dirt, despite being an “antagonist” to the very beauty he will produce; he is no romantic poet-as-hero but simply a human, a participant in the exchange that composes Imagination from dust.

“Flight to the City”

Poem IV, “Flight to the City,” is the first poem within *Spring and All* to pull back the curtain on the poetic act, and it continues to demonstrate the ethic of author-and-audience interplay already established. Williams has thus far given us prose accounts explaining his motivations, but this is the first poetic cross-section of his process of recreation (in both senses of the word):

The Easter stars are shining
above lights that are flashing—
coronal of black—
Nobody
to say it—

5

Nobody to say: pinholes (186-7, ll. 1-6)

Williams’s view of “The Easter stars” parallels Eliot’s “April is the cruellest month” in planting us firmly in the season of rebirth. But for Williams, a great deal has changed in a year. He has left parody to Pound and Eliot and he certainly has fewer qualms about maintaining order and control over his world than did Eliot. This allows Williams’s narrator to feel comfortable as an *ieron*, pretending ignorance of the sky. He is free to make a joke: looking at the stars, the figure voices concern that there’s “Nobody to say: pinholes,” when, of course, the *speaker* is there to say it (and does). This ironic proclamation has two effects: the bathetic repetition of “Nobody” works as a joke on Eliot’s pessimism (and, beyond Eliot, it mocks the nihilist who could look at the night sky and see only the blackness, not the “pinholes” of light and hope). Secondly, Williams subtly makes a case for a transactional ethic in poetry: he recognizes that the art or voice alone is not enough—it requires an audience, an interpreter. Even the sky alone, though beautiful, cannot *mean* anything unless it has a viewer to *read* the stars and interpret them as “pinholes.” If even nature’s artistry is not complete without an eye to recognize it, how then can poetry be exempt from such transactions?

The poem gathers itself, continuing its response to the skies:

Thither I would carry her

among the lights—

Burst it asunder
break through to the fifty words

10

necessary—

a crown for her head with
castles upon it, skyscrapers
filled with nut-chocolates—

dovetame winds—
stars of tinsel
from the great end of a cornucopia
of glass (187, ll. 7-18)

15

Williams noted in a marginal comment that the “her” he refers to is “the 13-year-old girl next door in Rutherford. Fresh, and rough and tough” (*Collected Poems* 502). Although the poem is not obviously grotesque, this extra-poetic note from Williams fits in with the maneuvers of the rest of *Spring and All*. To illustrate, had we imagined the female to which this poem is addressed to be some kind of Petrarchan beloved or porcelain doll, we would more likely read Williams’s speaker as a purveyor of one-way communication. He would be the hopeless lover speaking only to his own ears, unable to communicate with his beloved. But Williams’s target “her” is not an amour but almost an element of nature, “Fresh, and rough and tough,” as he puts it, someone to whom he could speak and hear back a response. Importantly the speaker expresses his need to break up the stillness of the sky-as-art, “Burst it asunder / break through to the fifty words / necessary—” (ll. 9-11) to connect with it and “crown” the girl with his speech. Words, the speaker knows, are his only tools of art: if he can find the right “fifty words / necessary” then he can create for the girl a crown “with / castles upon it, skyscrapers / filled with nut-chocolates —” (ll. 12-14). From this abundance of word-stuff he could create a “cornucopia / of glass” to pour out new “stars of tinsel” and recolor the sky. The result would be a conversational response almost equal to the sky’s aesthetic statements (ll. 16-18).

This is fundamentally a poem about audiences: Williams’s figure replies to the sky’s metaphorical reality (for the stars *become* pinholes, once named as such) as well as to the naysayers who would believe “Nobody” could respond to the darkness. Further, he speaks to the female figure, one who could respond to his literary creations (“pinholes,” “crown,” and “cornucopia”). More broadly, Williams the author speaks to his readers from outside the poem when he describes the specific girl he had remembered. His poetic character does not speak only to the learned or to the artists: he addresses himself to a

young, local girl believing that if he can find the “necessary” words he can cross any interpersonal distance. Though not a poem of the grotesque, it is a poem of a deliberately awkward structure, constantly broken up between lines and thoughts. The result is a lyric with multiple audiences woven into its lines, reminding us that words can cross the gaps between people, even when they are more perfunctory than perfect, not noteworthy but “necessary.” Peter Robinson is right in saying that at times these offers of poetic communication, these figural transactions, may actually fail (140-41). But Williams is willing to take that risk, offering awkward images and forms to multiple audiences, genuinely unconcerned with the result. This willingness to serve the other will be an ethical foundation of *Spring and All*.

“The Right of Way”

With his doctoral authority to diagnose and identify, Williams often points his microscope at the fracturing of and between individuals before he can begin to find an antidote. The first step toward healing is to study the wound, to make the social disjuncture clear to his readers. Williams does this by arresting our attention visually, as we see in poem XI, “The Right of Way”:

In passing with my mind
on nothing in the world

but the right of way
I enjoy on the road by

virtue of the law—
I saw

5

an elderly man who
smiled and looked away

to the north past a house—
a woman in blue

10

who was laughing and
leaning forward to look up

into the man’s half
averted face

and a boy of eight who was
looking at the middle of

15

the man's belly
at a watchchain— (*Collected Poems* 205-6, ll. 1-18)

The poem's early focus on "the right of way" that Williams possesses while driving through New Jersey (a privilege he demands "by / virtue of the law") establishes the poem's locus in a familiar, middle-class normalcy. The fact that the poem's speaker has the time and disposition to comment on his place in the social contract pushes it far away from the Bakhtinian grotesque and into the realm of abstracted ideals. The poem stresses the distancing of mind from body by accentuating the stark, two-word line six and its unemotional comment, "I saw." He sees the "elderly man who / smiled and looked away," and the "woman in blue / who was laughing" and the "boy of eight." He observes them without interacting. Thus the driver is separated from the rest: the other figures in the poem interact—the old man smiles at the speaker, the woman laughs at the man, and the boy studies the man's belly and watch. Yet the speaker's mind-without-a-body drives the car and observes life from behind a windshield, separated from the bodies of his fellow citizens by his vehicle, his class, and his abstract language of "rights" and "law." His vision elicits no real response from those around him: it is unilateral, looking outward but shielded by the car from having any effect on the world beyond.

But the significance of the scene is not lost on Williams's speaker. He explains:

The supreme importance
of this nameless spectacle

20

sped me by them
without a word—

Why bother where I went?
for I went spinning on the

four wheels of my car
along the wet road until

25

I saw a girl with one leg
over the rail of a balcony (*Collected Poems* 206, ll. 19-28)

Why should the “supreme importance” of what he sees propel the speaker forward? Ought it not to have arrested his motion, forcing him to interact with those he witnesses? The truth is that the narrator, presumably thinking back over the scene (since line 23’s “Why bother where I went?” employs the past tense in the midst of a poem that alternates between past and present), knows that he has *yet* to meet with the figure he will interact with. He is not callous in ignoring the first three others, but is on a mission.

He reaches his goal in the final two stanzas, driving “until / I saw a girl with one leg / over the rail of a balcony” (ll. 26-28). This is the “nameless spectacle” that drove him forward, and, as is his wont, Williams does not make this ending’s meaning easily resolvable. The line break dividing the poem’s final couplet muddies the image: instead of a clear picture of the girl on the balcony we have a dual vision—just as the girl herself is divided over the railing. Williams offers us two images: either we see the expected image of a (bipedal) girl who has one leg over a balcony railing, or we view a girl with *only* one leg, perched on the railing, as Cappucci also notes (81). The effect is not unlike some Dadaist “irrational machine,” particularly as the scene’s language also conflates the speaker with the *car*, his arms and legs mixed up in the machine (Jones 124). The ambiguity of this image is largely due to Williams’s puckish line break which makes it difficult to tell whether “over” modifies “leg” or “girl.” Further, Williams’s typical refusal to use punctuation conventionally contributes to the scene’s strangeness.

One way to read this poem is as a (rather anticlimactic) modern fairy tale or heroic quest: the hero-driver must avoid distractions and defeat foes (driving past the people on the street) until finding the damsel he must rescue from a dungeon (or tenement balcony). But as per Williams’s ironic deflations, our hero is apathetic and unsure of the point of his quest, his enemies are neutral, and the princess is potentially a working-class girl who may have a disability. Williams here shapes an *artificial* instance of the grotesque: merely by dividing a line of poetry at the right moment, he has transformed a scene of union or reunion between man and woman (a basic human trope) into a scene of monstrosity (marked by the alterity of the uncanny girl). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out that this public display of what might be *either* a beauty or a “freak” still promotes the *same* effect of codifying and regulating social normalcy (“The Beauty and the Freak” 181). Both idealized beauty and the grotesque figure of disability

have the same social purpose—defining acceptable human space—and the public exhibition of this female body is really quite typical (Garland-Thomson 182).

Yet Williams manages to trouble this social hegemony by disallowing us the objective knowledge of *how* to categorize this girl as beauty or “freak.” Further, Williams performs this ironic reversal of our expectations (his version on the hero’s journey) in order to make a point about social renewal. He is jump-starting his project by making a grotesque image out of a common one, a misshapen scene from one that might just as easily been completely, unobtrusively boring (for we have no strong evidence that his figure is anything other than a two-legged girl on a balcony rail). Williams is forcing us to actually *see* her body. Whether her body is stigmatized or not, we are not allowed to read her as an idealized, abstracted figure like a princess of myth. Williams intends for us to see others not as types or figures who have no agency beyond the roles they play in our own dramas, but to encounter their real, physical selves. He does this through the use of the real or the *pretended* grotesque. The first half of the poem evidenced this effect: we took essentially no notice of the first three figures the driver encounters; they seemed normal characters in a scene, offering us nothing of interest. But this final figure abruptly awakens us to our own apathy.

This, to Williams, is poetry’s purpose: awaken us to the reality of another, not to keep us in the idealized world of “right” and “law” but to force us to engage with the mind of the other. He writes to this effect in the prose passage following poem XI: “The writer of imagination would find himself released from observing things for the purpose of writing them down later. He would be there to enjoy, to taste, to engage the free world, not a world which he carries like a bag of food...” (*Collected Poems* 207). Williams mocks the poet who sees the world only through a car window, calmly watching it go by or idealizing it with phrases disconnected from the fact of communication. The “writer of imagination,” on the contrary, must be the liver of life. That artist must make a “work of the imagination not ‘like’ anything but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth—” (207). Writing is not meant to be isolated from lived reality or a copy of a copy. If we need the interjection of the grotesque, strange, or uncomfortable into poetry to make that point apparent, Williams has no qualms in doing so.

“The Agonized Spires”

Poem XIII, “The Agonized Spires,” builds on this experience of the grotesque. It emphasizes visual irony and recalls the cubism of Williams’s imagist poetry while acknowledging the Post-Impressionist aesthetics entering American modernism from Europe. In poem XI, Williams demonstrated the conversion of the normal into the grotesque, and in XIII he performs the same trick, though applying it to inanimate objects instead of humans, this time around:

Crustaceous
wedge
of sweaty kitchens
on rock
overtopping 5
thrusts of the sea

Waves of steel
from swarming backstreets
shell
of coral 10
inventing
electricity— (*Collected Poems* 211, ll. 1-12)

Williams revels in the scene’s discomfort. He has breathed life into inanimate shapes, but not in a stylized way: these are unbeautiful, workaday “sweaty kitchens”—not elegant rooms carved from the “rock” but some naturalistic “wedge” encrusted upon it like a barnacle (ll. 1-5). The sea around this rock-borne kitchen “thrusts,” pulsating sensually. Unromanticized waves are hard as “steel” and coral is not pretty but machinelike, “inventing / electricity” (ll. 6-12). Williams’s image is alive, dirty, intense enough to waft the “sweaty” brine toward its readers. The sea is not an image or an ideal, but a beast, alternately revolting and enthralling.

If we back up a moment to the prose section following Poem XI, Williams explains the aesthetic at work in poems such as XIII, writing in his discussion of Shakespeare and nature that “Nature is the hint to composition not because it is familiar to us... but because it possesses the quality of independent existence, of reality which we feel in ourselves. It is not opposed to art but apposed to it” (*Collected Poems* 207-8). Thus for example Shakespeare, like all great artists, “holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature’s composition with his own” (208). This aesthetic

matches with the cubism Williams had subscribed to in the 1910s. In 1912, Fernand Roches wrote negatively about the movement that “cubists do not paint nature, but their theories about nature.... They do not paint, they describe, giving themselves over to scientific analyses” (qtd. in Weiss 75). A decade later, elements of this cubist ethos still color Williams’s work in *Spring and All*. This is a means for us to decipher the world of nature that Williams intends to renew: he makes the world over by painting in the style of nature, *without* stealing its images. He produces a nature that maintains a cubist perspective, in arresting our vision. Like the girl on the balcony in poem XI who vacillates between normalcy and deviancy, Williams holds up a *broken* mirror to nature, and draws from it all the possibilities he sees.

This image of the shattered mirror (and the “scientific analyses” Roches derides) is highlighted in the next two stanzas, as Williams clarifies his task:

Lights speckle El Greco lakes in renaissance twilight with triphammers	15
 which pulverize nitrogen of old pastures to dodge motorcars with arms and legs— (<i>Collected Poems</i> 211-12, ll. 13-25)	 20

The invocation of El Greco in describing Williams’s vision of the lakes helps to frame this scene, as the sixteenth-century painter was an early inspiration to the cubists. These images revisit the composite structure of Dada and cubism, with triphammers mixed up with twilight, “pulverized” nitrogen in pastures, and “motorcars / with arms and legs—” (ll. 24-25). Terence Diggory writes that despite Williams’s reluctance to fully embrace the art that Duchamp and Breton brought from Europe to America, the poet still leaned upon these and Picasso’s work, in particular, in his new poetics (28, 97). Here Picasso’s influence and the postwar Dada ethos is evident: Williams’s grotesque “motorcars” of man-machines echo some of Picasso’s actual creations, including his 1917 construction

costumes for a “French Manager” and a “New York Manager” (see Weiss 217-19). These costumes, based on advertising posts known as “Morris columns” that originated in Germany and France in the nineteenth century, evolved eventually into “walking” versions with individuals strolling cities in column costumes for advertising purposes (Weiss 220). The cubist mixing of organic and mechanical, whether in walking Morris columns or in “motorcars / with arms and legs” works to a similar effect, distancing viewers from their usual associations and assumptions about nature and the human.

From this estrangement arises a heightened sense of irony. In his discussion of the Romantics in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” Paul de Man writes of the ties between allegory and irony, calling them two faces of the same figure (225-6). The difference is that “Irony is a synchronic structure, while allegory appears as a successive mode capable of engendering duration as the illusion of a continuity that it knows to be illusionary” (de Man 226). In “The Agonized Spires,” the references in content and form to cubism are indicative of the kind of irony Williams is endeavoring to highlight. As a school of post-impressionism, cubism attempted to do what Williams does in this poem: apply new paradigms to visual artworks to broaden their effects beyond mimesis. In particular, cubism applied a mechanical framework meant to show multiple perspectives, angles, and motions simultaneously—all while remaining within two dimensions. In Williams’s poem his stanzas retain this cubist element: each one, roughly the same size and length, may be seen as layered, one atop the other. We are invited to look extra-dimensionally *through* the poem, all at once, in order to read it, seeing six stanzas at once, just as in a Picasso or a Braque we are led to see multiple perspectives simultaneously. Though an impossible goal in visual or literary media, the effect is unmistakable.

To wit, Williams further encourages this cubist reading in the last two stanzas:

The aggregate
 is untamed
 encapsulating
 irritants
 but
 of agonized spires
 knits
 peace

30

where bridge stanchions

rest
certainly
piercing
left ventricles
with long
sunburnt fingers (*Collected Poems* 212, ll. 26-40)

35

He emphasizes the cubist approach by writing that “The aggregate”—the sum total of the images, perspectives, and times in these stanzas—remains “untamed” (ll. 26-27), it escapes our total comprehension. Furthermore, Williams writes that these differences, these ironic revolts in poetry that transform the rational and typical into the radical and estranged, are a group of “irritants” to the audience’s sensibilities, yet an irritation that paradoxically “knits / peace” (ll. 32-33). Importantly, this “aggregate” has not left the direct experience of reality behind: the perforated “left ventricles” and “long / sunburnt fingers” of the final stanza recall the opening stanza’s “sweaty kitchens / on rock” and remind us of the necessity of employing the physical to heal and rejuvenate the soul. Williams does not pursue these grotesque images for their own sake but is interested in them only as far as they create ironic disjunctures forcing his readers to invest themselves in his project. Williams’s theory of social “renaissance” (alluded to in line 17) is built the same way this cubist poem is: we are meant to see all layers of complex reality at *once*, *through* each other; we cannot leave the physical body for the mind, or vice versa.

Poised in the middle of *Spring and All*, Poem XIII makes some claims that are crucial to Williams’s vision for a poetic and social renaissance. The odd ironies of calling barnacles rock “kitchens,” making water waves into “steel,” and finding electricity in “coral,” all arrest readers’ attention. These abstract, imagistic *non sequiturs* mix with a tangible coarseness: the “sweaty” scene houses “triphammers / which pulverize” and “motorcars / with arms and legs,” as well as “irritants,” and “long / sunburnt fingers.” All of these are pressed together, piled atop each other in an “aggregate,” and this pile is the key to the “renaissance” hinted at in line 17. In this messy *pile* of images we find faith that the *multiplication* of perspectives, experiences, and voices can result in social purgation. If poetry is lucid—if it is logical, following from a clear beginning to a tidy ending—then it may not touch us at all, Williams argues. We must be forced out of a comfortable position as readers through the assault on our senses his poems provide. This

work is an exercise in experiencing multiple possibilities at once. In place of a clear vision, we find many complicated options, inviting an ethical conversation. Williams is not afraid to place the audience in a position that is self-contradictory, forcing us to think about what we actually *see* rather than just reading blindly.

Thus this poem broadens our paradigm for understanding *Spring and All* at large. If we return to de Man's concept of irony as "synchronic" we find a useful way to encapsulate Williams's project. Synchrony is present even in the title: *Spring and All*. Were the collection entitled *Spring Then All* or something similar, the emphasis would be upon the chronological progression of *time*, spring as one time among others. But for Williams *Spring* cannot be separated from *All* about it—rebirth is not a passing season, but a perpetual process. His *Spring* is not Eliot's cyclical Easter—it is everything all together at once. It is an irony of *time* for it conflates all time into the eternal present and refuses the possibility of a slow season or downturn. Rebirth here is ironic not because it is false but because it is unexpectedly *true*. There is no life without constant refreshment; the ironic eye cast upon the world revitalizes our repeated thoughts and experiences and transforms them into a radical, shared renaissance. Seasons may change, but *this* moment (which may be thought permanent, so long as it lasts!) is eternal springtime.

Charles Altieri writes that although traditional poetics is shaped upon semantic meanings and mimetic imagery in a text, Williams, influenced by the Post-Impressionists, sought a semantics built upon the forms of poetry, not its contents (*Painterly Abstraction* 13). Altieri argues that this was Williams's attempt to adapt French and continental painting to a renovated American poetry (20). Altieri further says that Williams was intent on using poetry to reveal what Matisse's art did, that the mind can be as much a part of the physical world as of the intellectual and that society could be renewed if it was infused with the pent-up artistic energies buried beneath it (22). Williams, in his pursuit of the inverted, ironic, mixed-up, and monstrous, is extending Matisse's project into the disorienting postwar world.

Williams's life was lived at a frenetic pace, and his work and art forever bled into one another. Cappucci writes of the symbiosis between Williams's twin callings: his professional practice gave Williams the resources (both monetary and intellectual) to moonlight as a poet writing as he wished, indifferent to the publishing market (26). At the

same time, the constant business of healing meant Williams had to write in short snatches as he was often on call or on the road, jotting ideas on whatever scraps were at hand (*Autobiography* 289). Yet Williams did not see the interruptions of life upon his work as a negative force: he felt his medical work was necessary to his poetry (Cappucci 28). In this, Williams embodies Poirier’s argument about the pragmatic work-poems of Emerson, Frost and their type: within these poetics of *work*, writing shifts from the domain of the elite to the realm of labor (Poirier 84). Specifically, the speakers of Frost’s poetry, for instance, *become* poets through their labors (Poirier 89), and for Williams the same might be said. And although Williams’s poetry often treads the uneasy line of representing versus exploiting reality—of serving as a healer versus judging as a voyeur—it remains part of a larger commitment to authenticity, one that demands that Williams not censor or limit the realities of his work and life as far as these experiences contribute to his poems (Cappucci 28). Work, experience, reality, and truth must all anchor poetics.

“To an Old Jaundiced Woman”

In this vein Williams moves from the exoticism of “The Agonized Spires” to a much more concrete consideration of disability and gender in poem XVI, “To an Old Jaundiced Woman.” Williams’s title, which appeared in the poem’s first printing in the August 1922 *Secession* (*Collected Poems* 501), offers us three characteristics that compose the entire identity of the poem’s subject. The “Woman” is purely non-normative, a total other to Williams on three accounts, her age, health, and gender. Thus she represents a pivotal case study of the ethics of *Spring and All*. Poem XVI is a confluence of Williams’s various streams of thought, the combination of work and word:

O tongue
licking
the sore on
her netherlip

O toppled belly

5

O passionate cotton
stuck with
matted hair

elysian slobber
upon 10
the folded handkerchief

I can't die
—moaned the old
jaundiced woman
rolling her 15
saffron eyeballs
I can't die
I can't die (*Collected Poems* 215-16, ll. 1-18)

The poem is an exquisite grotesque: the physical body broken becomes a site where life and death meet. Williams fashions a meeting of the physical and the platonic, marking down the immediate symptoms of his patient while linking them to the “elysian” eternal. The repeated “O” to open the first three stanzas works as both an ethereal musical note of invocation (he could insert “sing muse” after each “O”) and as the pragmatic bullet point or circle on a hastily-scrawled list of his patient’s complaints. The mixing of temporal and eternal continues throughout the poem, beginning with the woman’s tongue that licks her “netherlip” in line four, an unusual phrase that connotes a vision of the netherworld rather than a lower lip. These images of an ageless world contrast sharply with the figure of decay that the cold “sore” marks in line three. An absurd sexuality presents itself in the motion: a woman licking her lips is sensual—unless she is old and licking a cold sore. The poem revels in these ironic juxtapositions.

The second “O,” before line five’s “toppled belly,” sounds and stands alone, symbolically abandoned. The woman’s belly, fallen and shapeless with the weight of time, marks her loneliness: she is left at the end of her life with an emptied womb, poured out (stretched and then “toppled”) for children who are nowhere to be found. Her belly is a ruin, a Troy long-since fallen to the siege of time. She might have been Helen once, but this woman has crumbled, her body a testament to a long lost past. The third stanza, and final “O” makes the same assessment in a strange reversal. Her laurel, her youthful crown of hair, has faded to puffy, white “cotton” (l. 6). To Williams’s speaker it looks as though her head is cotton “stuck with / matted hair” (ll. 7-8), rather than locks of her own. Perhaps a wig—or simply the blankness of her aged head—crowds out the last of her own “matted hair,” cutting a pitiful figure. Grotesque though she may seem, she must

once have been beautiful, Williams's sparse language hints. Age has crowded out the life from her body, and left her in this ragged shell.

But the poem turns upon that image; it seems the doctor has put down his pad as the "O" markers vanish, while he continues to observe the patient. With mild irony Williams's narrator continues his linking of the present life and the life eternal by calling the woman's spittle "elysian slobber" (l. 9). Before she seemed to be a figure of the underworld or of long-lost history but here Williams links the patient to heaven. Her status appears to be climbing, as even her slobber, ironically, displays something heroic. But this is precisely the point of the grotesque: it links the present to the hereafter; the bodily to the ethereal. What is more heroic than living, Williams wonders. The paradox of a great spirit within a broken body is heightened in the next stanza, where for the first time the words of the woman herself find their way onto the doctor's notebook: "I can't die, / —moaned the old / jaundiced woman / rolling her saffron eyeballs" (ll. 12-16). A transformation occurs before our eyes: the sickly "old / jaundiced woman" now has eyes of "saffron." Amid yellowed skin the woman's bloodshot eyes morph into beautiful, precious saffron orbs. What was poor is suddenly priceless.

After this transformation, the woman intones twice more in lines 17-18, "I can't die / I can't die," the last words of the poem and her consultation. When Williams's patient first made this claim in line twelve it felt ridiculous and absurd, like the ludicrous suggestion of beauty and fertility in the opening stanzas. To think this woman might once have entranced men with her lips or birthed a child from her womb seems absurd when confronted with her present shape. When she first said, "I can't die," it sounded like false hope, or senility. But Williams's decision to make this refrain the last lines of the poem creates a shift in our reading. The first refusal to die proceeded from the mouth of a decayed, yellowed body; but the final echoes are flecked with "elysian slobber," for they are the declaration of a superhuman with "saffron eyeballs," not the cough of a coward or the spittle of the aged. The woman has turned golden—yellow with youthful sunshine, not with age and bile. Perhaps Eliot's Cumaean Sybil may be saved, after all.

The woman's assertion of agency on her own behalf—her refusal to bow even to the demands of death—are surprising. In fact it seems ironic at first glance; what right does she have not to die? She is a shattered old woman, sick and repellent. She must, of

course, die, and spare us her grotesqueness. From the poem's beginning we have been groomed to take on this viewpoint of her: we readers have quietly filled her operating theater. We are spectators or voyeurs observing a dissection of a woman down to her component parts, and we have made our own bullet points of her maladies—and left the woman's individuality, agency, and personhood out of the equation. She cannot escape our observing eyes and we are, in a sense, a part of her impending death: we are positioned close by the doctor, and we (as reasonable, logical empiricists) quietly agree with the grave judgment that this woman will—must—die. However uncomfortably, we are participants in time's slow demolition of this woman.

T. Hugh Crawford considers Williams an observer of humans, arguing that to the poet the hospital ward or examination room was a symbolic site, clarifying the doctor's vision and creating drama between observer and observed (46, 50). Tobin Siebers adds to this that the doctor's office is traditionally a place where patriarchy reigns; the doctor (working objectively from empirical evidence) offers advice and performs treatments while the patient is allowed little or no part in making decisions about her health (144-45). The hospital stands as a scientific monolith, professing a perspicacity that allows no discourse with its patient (Siebers 146). In the typical medical examination there exists zero doubt about who the rational, empirical observer is, and there is little agency left to the patient. The doctor's office thus appears to be a site of unequal, unethical discourse. The reduction of the patient to body alone is in itself an assault on agency, and the limitation of agency in treatment is troubling.

But this is not entirely the case. Garland-Thomson writes in her essay on "Beholding" that there is an ethics of observation at work when disability and impairment mix with mainstream society. She writes that we are *all* voyeurs, that "we all stare;" whether we live within the ring of social acceptance or exist beyond it, everyone has the potential to take on the position of observer or observed (199). Intriguingly, Garland-Thomson believes that we *ought* to stare, arguing that a positive ethics can exist within the observer-observed dynamic. For example, she writes that staring at the beautiful can raise our sense of social responsibility, as the recognition of beauty may be a reminder that everyone ought to have a space in which to be felt beautiful ("Beholding" 201). Even staring at "repulsive attractions" in figures of disability or the grotesque can create an

ethical response in the viewer, she argues, as we may find a “rare beauty” in strangeness or even ugliness that also moves us to action (202).

This complex reading of objectification offers us a context for what Lowney calls the “desperate dignity” of the old jaundiced woman (66). Perhaps we may find in the grotesque figure of the patient a returned, two-way stare (Garland-Thomson “Beholding” 205). The poem’s narrating viewpoint, even in its cold descriptiveness and disconnected irony, seems to allow the woman to stare back at *us*. She refuses to listen to the doctor’s prognosis or prescription, instead giving *him* the order, seizing control of the final lines of Williams’s poem with her promise, “I can’t die, / I can’t die.” We know that she is old, sick, and tired, and our prognosis for her is bleak. But she ignores our judgments—defies the objective wisdom and authority of science—and flatly refuses to die. Most crucially, the woman does not let us drown out her voice. Once the complaint has been explained, we expect, the patient need not give orders to the doctor. But this patient *does*, telling Williams’s physician-speaker that her death is impossible, and demanding that he do the impossible by complying with her diagnoses.

Williams’s stripped-down poem transforms into a proof of the grotesque figure’s dignity and her ability to force bourgeois life to accommodate her. Williams’s eschewing of direct discourse in the final two lines of Poem XVI—quotation marks are nowhere to be found, nor are any stage directions indicating who exactly speaks the final lines—works to suggest the woman’s very imposition on the scene. The narrating doctor was not even *ready* for her statement the first time she says “I can’t die,” but the words simply break through the poem (l. 13). The doctor recovers a moment after this first intrusion adding the exposition, “—moaned the old / jaundiced woman” (ll. 14-15). But then her final repetitious pronouncements shock the narrator into making him forget any contextual indicators. The surprise of her apparently-absurd statement catches the doctor totally off-guard, as this poem’s sudden ending hints; the woman’s words break up what began as a classic example of unidirectional, unethical discourse. Her assertion is bold: she will not be a test case or lab rat, she will not be evaluated and found wanting or treated as a problem. Instead she turns our gaze away from her body and back toward the narrator who is so surprised by her words he cannot even frame them. She has spoiled the ending, turning the gaze back on the observers—including we readers who have entered

uninvited into the examining room. Her sudden transformation of one-way speech and vision into a two-way stare represents a kind of activism (Garland-Thomson “Beholding” 204-5), and adds an unexpected agency to Williams’s caricature. This figure of the grotesque asks for no pity from her viewers and tells us, instead, that we need not worry about her for she has no plans to die.

Paradoxical irony structures the poem, as we see a woman who appears to be nearing death claim that the opposite is true. Yet the speaker does not satirize or ridicule the woman; he does not call her eyes “saffron” to mock her jaundice, but because he is taken aback by their beauty. As the woman asserts her unquenchable life-force, Williams’s narrator cannot deny her this power and sees in her “slobber” something “elysian” (l. 9), something heroic and everlasting rather than death’s sudden halt. By allowing the woman to end the poem on her own terms—to say her piece without editorial arrangement or interference—Williams allows the observer of the poem to meld with the woman observed. This identification is crucial to the poem’s ethical component; the poem began by placing readers very firmly on the side of the speaking narrator, but by the end we have moved around and joined the perspective of the woman at the center of the operating theater. The give-and-take of ethical discourse that had seemed impossible in the hospital or clinic is, at the end of the poem, the only thing left. We know nothing of the woman’s fate beyond this poem, all we have is her assertion of power over death and the doctor’s diagnosis. The irony is a trick played on the reader, not on the woman observed; our automatic assumption we could understand and judge her is more foolish, ultimately, than her ironic belief in her own immortality.

This shift of identification and irony functions as a defense of the grotesque in this poem and in *Spring and All*. Siebers writes that society as a whole often sees individuals with disabilities as a burden, absurdly seeing their choice to exist as “selfish” (59-60). This is the sort of mentality that the woman in the poem, and Williams, by extension, argues against. Williams realizes a truth that Siebers is right to recognize: we are all either disabled or heading towards it (Siebers 60). Sooner or later entropy takes its toll. Thus the disabled body should not be thought foreign or other to us at all, as something we have either encountered or will encounter; it is the “abled” body that is the myth (Siebers 60), which is what Williams’s woman points out to us. This is because the

woman's claim that "I can't die" is only as ironic as a reader's implicit belief that he or she is similarly immortal. This is not to say that all disability is equal or that all of society is somehow evenly impaired; instead it is an astute observation by Williams that disability, the grotesque, and illness or impairment are only deviant in relationship to a hypothetical norm. The irony is thus located within the *reader*: to believe that this old woman is different than what we ourselves are or will one day be (as many readers will automatically do) is absurd. Here is shared laughter and the affirmation of grotesque on the part of Williams: we all believe we can somehow cheat death, that we are not at the mercy of fragile, cracking bodies—while sometimes believing the *opposite* is true of others. We find the statement "I can't die" absurd because we have already decided that the patient's death is inescapable, precisely to the extent that we believe our fates are in our hands. With the perspective shift and the power transfer in the last lines of Poem XVI, Williams undoes objectivity and takes a clear ethical stance within this stark lyric.

Williams offers not only this character but also his readers the opportunity to speak for themselves as the poem closes. When Williams hands over the reins of narrative perspective from the doctor to the woman he excuses himself from the conversation. He elides his medical and poetic authority and forces his readers to choose for themselves what the central irony of the poem is. This is his ethical crux: he allows us to decide whether the key irony is merely an old woman suggesting she can will herself to stay alive, or whether the joke is not on the woman but on us as readers, in doubting her ability to do that very thing. There are moments earlier in the poem where the woman is gently mocked, made to seem foolish as a grotesque figure. But the flashes of eternity in her spit and tears keep the "passionate" figure boxing away at death. Thus we may believe Bakhtin's assertion that, "In the grotesque body, on the contrary, death brings nothing to an end, for it does not concern the ancestral body, which is renewed in the next generation" (322). The sense of life this woman possesses transcends the temporality of her decaying body even if it does not deny it. We will look like her when faced with the inescapable pall of death and we should be glad to have equal passion. The dead returns to life; the gross assumes the beautiful, the woman's saffron eyes flash as she stakes a claim to life. And who is to say she cannot claim it? William James would find in her performance a belief that could keep her alive beyond her doctor's assessment. No matter

what we make of this woman, whether fool or oracle, Williams leaves it to us to decide. He lets the patient speak (his first ethical move), and he refuses to tell us what to make of her (his second).

“To Elsie”

Returning to the historical context of Williams’s project, we should look briefly at Garland-Thomson’s discussion of social normatization in America. She writes, “The Golden Ages of American freak shows and beauty pageants were more continuous than overlapping. Freak shows burgeoned from about 1850 to 1920, while beauty pageants flourished from about 1920 to 1970” (“The Beauty and the Freak” 183). Both types of spectacles performed the same task: they established social standards of normalcy and deviancy. Garland-Thomson writes that these were both heavily “structured” displays, meant to make the public into voyeurs who would agree implicitly with such judgments of normalcy (185-7). Living at the end of the freak show’s height and the start of the era of the beauty pageant, Williams seems intent on breaking up this highly-structured perspective on the other, particularly on the female, differently-abled other.

Which leads to our next major poem, Poem XVIII, “To Elsie,” which pairs interestingly with Poem XVI. Here the ethics are more complicated, as Williams presents a woman, “Elsie,” with a mental disability that disbars her from the verbal agency found in the “old jaundiced woman.” The noteworthy and notorious Poem XVIII opens:

The pure products of America
go crazy—
mountain folk from Kentucky

or the ribbed north end of
Jersey
with its isolate lakes and

5

valleys, its deaf-mutes, thieves
old names
and promiscuity between

devil-may-care men who have taken
to railroading

10

out of sheer lust of adventure— (*Collected Poems* 217, ll. 1-12)

The poem is in praise of variety: Williams paints a picture of Americans as the paradoxical “pure products” of a diverse environment. He glories in the idiosyncrasies he recognizes in his nation, writing that America’s “pure” greatness arises from all its muddied categories. He values the “mountain folk of Kentucky,” who represent the lower class and rural, as well as the suburban folk in the “ribbed north end of / Jersey,” a state which seems a living thing, enclosing a beating heart, rather than an arbitrary political demarcation. The lands themselves take on life in Williams, with a Jersey landscape animated by “its deaf-mutes, thieves / old names” (ll. 7-8). Class is no barrier to inheriting the multifaceted purity of America. Neither is disability, as Williams claims the “deaf-mutes” as a fundamental part of its culture. Further, the poem welcomes those who fall outside typical citizenry, those “thieves” who break the social contract. Williams lived through the heyday of eugenics in the early twentieth century, with legislation seeking to control or confine the disabled by linking genetic “defects” to criminality (Davis 10-11). But Williams rejects such theories, celebrating the multifarious denizens of his nation, a land that is pure only insofar as it is diverse. His nationalism is not exclusive: he praises America as a country of complex communities and idiosyncratic individuals. Williams lauds the rogues, the “devil-may-care men who have taken / to railroading / out of sheer lust of adventure—” (ll. 10-12). Notably, these “railroading” men are not forced out of mainstream society by lack of work (as would happen to many in the next decade) but because they choose this life, wishing for freedom from the social norms of work, responsibility, and respectability. Williams would build his pure America on figures like these outlaws and the land’s illegitimate children.

But that “lust for adventure” and the “promiscuity” within it complicates matters; wild, masculine Americans converge with their female compatriots in the next piece of the poem, and here Williams’s words take on a darker tone:

and young slatterns, bathed
 in filth
 from Monday to Saturday

15

to be tricked out that night
 with gauds
 from imaginations which have no

peasant traditions to give them
character 20
but flutter and flaunt

sheer rags succumbing without
emotion
save numbed terror

under some hedge of choke-cherry 25
or viburnum—
which they cannot express— (*Collected Poems* 217, ll. 13-27)

Like the previous “pure products” Williams continues to people his America with antiheroes, including “young slatterns” who spend their days between dirty streets and dirty sheets. They fit in well with the rest of Williams’s rogues’ gallery, particularly if we place their earthiness within the context of Bakhtin’s grotesque. Of the lower bodily functions, Bakhtin writes: “Finally, debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images” (370-1). The “filthy” feet of the “young slatterns” are markers of their vitality; “debasement” serves to symbolize their fruitfulness, even their *sacredness*. They embody a new, “pure” America even as they live “bathed / in filth” (ll. 13-14). Stallybrass and White note the close connection of the grotesque to class and labor: working-class women like the “young slatterns” were liminal figures, seen by their society as objects of both contamination and cleanliness, at once familial and foreign (126, 150). Racially, sexually, and economically, they are both desirable and unwanted (Stallybrass and White 161, 191).

An uncanny discomfort creeps into Williams’s poem as these middle stanzas sharpen in tone. The new world is not immaculately born from these vital figures alone: the mothers of a new generation are impregnated not by the adventurers and outsiders of the first few stanzas but are instead “tricked out that night / with gauds / from imaginations which have no / peasant traditions to give them / character” (ll. 16-20). This is the most dramatic statement about the imagination we have seen since *Spring and All* opened. If imagination is the link between “you” and “I” that ensures ethical discourse, then imagination is also the guarantor of a future to improve upon the past. But Williams excoriates his society: we *might* have had the promise of a better world through the

variety inherent in the Bakhtinian “peasant traditions” that promote the imagination, he implies, inventing new connections between individuals. But instead we are doomed to a world where the colorful, earthy, female Columbia is wedded to a masculinity lacking imagination, emptied of the Bergsonian vital force of renewal. That masculinist force is self-seeking, with “tricks” that only serve selfish lusts, doing nothing for others. Without the “peasant” heritage—the Levinasian consciousness of the needs of others—to force them to claim the country’s rebirth as their own, these false “imagination” rape and destroy, threatening to waste spring’s resurgence. The scene ends grimly: the girls, reduced to their surfaces, are merely “sheer rags succumbing without / emotion / save numbed terror / ... / which they cannot express—” (ll. 22-24, 27). The terrible silence, the inability to prevent their continual destruction, is painful to witness.

Williams’s coolness is lost as he grows angry at the suffering he witnesses and frustrated at his powerlessness to dispel the violence. His language matches his mood, sharply depicting the violent rape of a young, female generation by an aggressive masculinity that forces society backwards. But even seeing the violence these imagination-less “gauds” inflict on their female counterparts, I have trouble reading these stanzas as a critique of femininity. Amelia Jones argues that the postwar Williams absorbed and reflected the anxious masculinity of an era that saw women taking on new gender roles during the war and its aftermath (13). She suggests that in this poem Williams wishes for a “new-world masculinity” that solidifies the categories of sex, ethnicity, and class in an era of change (23). But Williams’s poem argues otherwise: he sees these “young slatterns” who are of the “wrong” sex, class, and occupation as the mothers of the new world. The men who would use them only to “flutter and flaunt” their own status (l. 21) are the *actual* threat to the future. Williams favored women’s suffrage and supported women’s roles in the public sphere, working to support female artists and medical practitioners all his life (Graham “Williams, Flossie, and the Others” 164). Williams believes the future will be rescued not by a new man but by a new *woman*, as the poem explains, offering us a modern American woman in “Elsie”:

Unless it be that marriage
perhaps
with a dash of Indian blood

30

will throw up a girl so desolate
so hemmed round
with disease or murder

that she'll be rescued by an
agent— 35
reared by the state and

sent out at fifteen to work in
some hard-pressed
house in the suburbs—

some doctor's family, some Elsie— 40
voluptuous water
expressing with broken

brain the truth about us—
her great
ungainly hips and flopping breasts 45

addressed to cheap
jewelry
and rich young men with fine eyes (*Collected Poems* 217-18, ll. 28-48)

Elsie's origins, like Williams's, are mixed—though unlike Williams Elsie arrives on this planet with little chance of living a “normal” life. Elsie is treated as a second-class citizen due to her gender, her ethnic identities, and her mental disability. How can she affect a world that seeks to dismiss her, asks Williams's poem. The marriage of “gauds” and “slatterns,” “perhaps / with a dash of Indian blood,” produces “a girl so desolate / so hemmed round / with disease or murder” that she becomes a ward of the state, and loses her agency (ironically) to an “agent” of the authorities (ll. 29-36). The world is too much with her. Critically, Elsie is “sent out at fifteen to work in / some hard-pressed / house in the suburbs— / some doctor's family” (ll. 37-40); at this point Williams converges with the narrator of his poem, as Elsie was the poet's maid, in his very own “hard-pressed / house in the suburbs.” Williams's maneuver is honest in admitting that he represents the very society that found, labeled, and “reared” Elsie as some sort of community property, a woman observed who cuts a ridiculous, grotesque figure with her “ungainly hips and flopping breasts,” with a “broken / brain [telling] the truth about us—” (ll. 42-45). This “truth,” as always, is complicated.

Williams's poem opened in praise of a "pure" America made from the impure, outcast, rejected members of society. He believes the future America will be rebuilt upon the individual, dynamic character of "peasant traditions" rather than upon metropolitan or international values, as Williams remains skeptical of foreign influences. But in Elsie's case, as a woman even more "purely" an American original than his "mountain folk" or "slatterns," thanks to her "dash of Indian blood," Williams foresees another fate. Elsie carries a doubled status—her mannish size and build belies her "ungainly hips and flopping breasts," and her ethnic status is mixed—that makes her a motley figure of the fertile, ironic grotesque.

But despite this, Williams has trouble seeing in Elsie the mother of a new world. At times, Williams seems unsure whether or not to agree with society's characterization of Elsie. While the author brazenly imagines her grotesque figure and makes his own "grotesque blazon" to Elsie in this poem (see Bakhtin 427), Williams is ambiguous about the links to renewed life in her doubled, embodied character. Williams, in a poem praising difference, balks at Elsie's difference, and thus denies her the very agency he praises in the other "pure products of America" by disallowing her to represent herself. Williams is not alone in this offense; the figure of a pure/grotesque maid is actually a traditional trope, associated with class difference, racial shame, and sexual anxiety surrounding a character both inside and outside of a family (Stallybrass and White 150-61). But in Williams's poem, Elsie remains in a limbo of caricature, eternally mute.

Williams does not seem to know what to make of Elsie, so despite employing her as a maid in real life and as a critique of American society in his poem, she seems to have nothing to say to us. Her words are obscured or elided by *both* the community of normative society and the collocation of social outcasts. Williams alludes to this when he writes that in contrast to the "devil-may-care men who have taken / to railroading" (ll. 10-11), who are able to seek freedom and find their own agency (breaking free of a society that threatens individual freedom in the era after World War I), Elsie has no such option. While ostracizing Elsie, society simultaneously scooped her up and removed her voice; after a birth "hemmed round / with disease or murder" (ll. 32-33) she is "rescued" by society, only to be put to work at fifteen. All her life Elsie has been made to serve society's ends, while having no control over her fate. And Williams continues this in

spite of himself, by speaking on *behalf* of Elsie while ignoring what she might have had to say for herself. Instead of *asking*, Williams *speaks*: he insists that Elsie expresses “with broken / brain the truth about us—” (ll. 42-43). Consciously or not, Williams makes Elsie his oracle, an interpretive tool, but makes no attempt to invite her “broken / brain” to join any conversation. The doctor has already made his diagnosis and he allows this “patient” little freedom. Her body and mind make an interesting point about society—but its representation here gives her none of Bakhtin’s freedom or social power. In critiquing the state for ostracizing the independent figures of America, Williams, unfortunately, has fallen into his own trap. Even as Williams notes the “Indian blood” that roots Elsie firmly in the American soil, he banishes her to a nonspeaking role in his own mythos and he compromises the ethics of his poetic cycle in the process.

Brian Bremen writes of *Spring and All* that Williams has consistent problems with female figures in the poem sequence, even suggesting that when Williams writes of the imagination’s “fraternal embrace” that the poet means that *literally*, that Williams reaches out to men at the expense of women (Bremen 59-61). “To Elsie” complicates this reading, but certainly there is less of an embrace of Elsie than there might have been (though more interesting and ambiguous depictions of female agency do appear elsewhere in *Spring and All*). Regardless, Williams performs what has become a cardinal sin in contemporary disability studies: he speaks of and to a disabled figure without listening to what she has to say to him. Corker and French in “Reclaiming Discourse in Disability Studies” argue for the rights of individuals with disabilities to speak back to society, and thus reclaim the “physical capital” of their bodies within the social sphere (4), something Elsie cannot do. Importantly, we cannot guess how others perceive or experience pain, whether physically or emotionally (Corker and French 6), which also ought to limit our attempts speak *for* one another. This is especially apparent when society attempts to normalize the disabled (Corker and French 8), as in the case of Elsie, a young woman quite literally forced into society. Williams’s bias as a modern doctor shows at times, as he seems to try to “fix” a disability without regard for the individual. Elsie’s inability to speak marks the central crux of the poem (see Lowney 68, 70).

Carol Thomas writes in “Narrative Identity and the Disabled Self” that individuals with disabilities create identities based upon their subjective experience of social

pressures (47-48). Thomas notes that this is often the case for women with disabilities, in particular, who are already ostracized due to their sex (49). These individuals frequently find themselves forced to wade through “public narratives” or stories that society tells *about* them (49-50). These stories range from medical interpretations of disability to histrionic “personal tragedy” stories (Thomas 50)—both of which apply to Elsie’s case. Notably, *all* these interpretations originate within society’s frameworks of normalcy and deviancy. Outside forces, whether with good or ill intent, all fight to place Elsie into a category—fool, invalid, or freak—while ignoring her own voice. Ironically, Elsie has already joined society as a part of the labor force. She is not the drag on society that her fellow citizens might imagine—and Williams does credit her for this. Nevertheless, even in our time the economic and social inequities for working women—even more so for those with disabilities—have yet to be reconciled (Schur 253, 257-8).

Also working against Elsie, as far as society is concerned, is her social status. Adrienne Asch, in “Critical Race Theory, Feminism, and Disability,” writes that race and disability each allow for different sorts of communities to develop around their members (though both represent markers of social difference). Thus, while individuals sharing a common ethnicity, heritage, or culture may create communities with others of the same status within larger society, Asch writes that individuals with disabilities oftentimes find themselves without a natural community, as their impairments often differ greatly in type, degree, and visibility (23). Solidarity and the fight for social acceptance and rights is thus stymied and can be nearly impossible for many with severe disabilities.

Furthermore, adults with disabilities are not viewed as active agents but are seen as childish or passive—or are even explicitly denied rights while being treated as victims, invalids, or children (Asch 11). We see this in the character of Elsie, a woman who remains forever a “girl” to society, one with little chance to assert herself. Yet Williams knows this socially-enforced girlishness is ridiculous as he paradoxically ascribes to the “girl” a great, mature figure of “voluptuous water,” “her great / ungainly hips and flopping breasts / addressed to cheap / jewelry / and rich young men with fine eyes” (ll. 41, 44-48). Elsie, though disabled, remains a figure of at least latent sexuality, which makes her a target for oppression and abuse (Siebers 136-7), as the “rich young men with fine eyes” who take interest in her suggest. In a complex ethical move, Williams leaves

Elsie's status somewhat open-ended, refusing to elide Elsie's existence as a sexual being despite not fully portraying her as a mature, self-directing being. The myth that individuals with disabilities exist as childish, asexual beings remains present in society and describes the challenges involved in reconciling disability and sexuality (Siebers 138-39). Sex is inextricable from human ability and agency, Siebers writes (140), and William gestures toward this. Williams manages not to infantilize the maid by recognizing her sexuality, but ethical problems remain. Looming over William's era are questions of eugenics, which his grotesque, happily, always reject.

The end of "To Elsie" employs the eponymous maid only symbolically, leveraging her position to make a broader point:

as if the earth under our feet
 were 50
 an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners
 destined
 to hunger until we eat filth

while the imagination strains 55
 after deer
 going by fields of goldenrod in

the stifling heat of September
 somehow
 it seems to destroy us 60

It is only in isolate flecks that
 something
 is given off

No one
 to witness 65
 and adjust, no one to drive the car (*Collected Poems* 218-19, ll. 49-66)

Williams succumbs to the temptation to define what he sees: thus he makes Elsie out to be not a herald of the future but a reminder of a dark, symbolic past. Elsie's grotesque figure does not here represent the fertility of the earth, but its death, "as if the earth under our feet / were / an excrement of some sky / and we degraded prisoners / destined / to hunger until we eat filth / while the imagination strains / after deer" (ll. 49-56). Elsie

remains a trope, a symbol warning of a future cultural breakdown, rather than a moral free agent.

Garland-Thomson writes that this behavior, the “colonization” or acquisition of “private bodies,” is troubling (“The Beauty and the Freak” 191). Once disability is put on display, she explains, “These processes create a spectacle that renders the living body’s humanity and subjectivity invisible at the same time that it makes the exhibited body into a wholly visible cultural text” (192). In the case of his text, Williams uses Elsie largely as a symbol: she does nothing as surprising as the old woman or the girl on the balcony.

Garland-Thomson explains, in her discussion of social “enfreakment”:

The spectacle [of the grotesque or disabled figure] positions the viewers in the realm of the universal while it sentences the viewed to the world of the particular. Because spectators only look, do not touch, or interact, or reveal themselves to the spectacles, these are one-way encounters controlled to guarantee the privilege of anonymity for the viewer and to highlight the visibility of the viewed. (192)

Most important to our study of ethics in *Spring and All* is this problem of “one-way encounters” that protect a viewer (who need not justify him- or herself) and take away the rights to privacy and agency from the viewed. When “To Elsie” allows none of the two-way ethical dialogue found elsewhere in *Spring and All* and forces the viewer to participate in this observation, we have a problem. Diggory writes about the aggression localized in “To Elsie,” writing that it is violence without emotion or catharsis, where Elsie remains abused (50-51). Elsie is here to make a rhetorical point, not to be offered anything in the way of respect or community. What remains is the scientific, masculine gaze at the ultimate patient (Crawford 68), the female, disabled, ethnic other in the figure of Elsie. Williams may be using Elsie to counter society, to demonstrate the violence and aggression of the American society that beleaguers her “pure” character. But in the end he is still coercive; she is still his means to an end.

Williams’s poem ends in destruction; the frustrated narrator sees the end as a “stifling heat of September” that will “destroy us” in our quest for spring’s renewal (ll. 58, 60). In a sardonic, caustic answer to the narrator of “Flight to the City” and the hopeful naming of the stars as “pinpoints,” this narrator says those same pinpoints, are merely “isolate flecks” with “No one / to witness / and adjust, no one to drive the car” (ll.

61, 64-66). The earlier pragmatist-narrator knew the importance of shaping his world, of choosing to create by naming what he saw and imbuing an active force into the world by doing so. But Williams's latter narrator has no such hope. He laments an ending without realizing he has the chance at a new beginning, and his closing of our eyes, his choice not to "witness" this rebirth, is damning.

"The Wildflower"

Still, spring has sprung, and it will not end dourly. "To Elsie" left Williams trapped, but in the final poem of *Spring and All*, XXVII, "The Wildflower," Williams leaves us with an open-ended meditation on the possibility of springtime's renewal, through a figure not all that unlike Elsie:

Black eyed susan
rich orange
round the purple core

the white daisy
is not
enough

5

Crowds are white
as farmers
who live poorly

But you
are rich
in savagery—

10

Arab
Indian
dark woman (*Collected Poems* 236, ll. 1-15)

15

Despite his hangups with Elsie, Williams realizes that the cultural horizons of America belong not to the lilies or "white daisy" of traditional Anglo-American culture, values, or ethnicity but to the "Black eyed susan, / rich orange / round the purple core" (ll. 1-4). Williams—himself multi-ethnic, of both Anglo-Saxon and Latin descent (Lowney 26)—says that the traditionally "pure products of America," "the white daisy," is "not enough," an incomplete picture of the nation's hopes and future. Even if the masses are reluctant to change—signified by the "white" "crowds" "who live poorly" in the third stanza—the

outsiders, the misfits, the women, the mixed-race, the poor, the abandoned, the *Elsies*, really—will usher in the spring. The qualities that have been dismissed as grotesque, improper, and secondary are now *primary*, Williams says: “But you / are rich / in savagery— / Arab / Indian / dark woman” (ll. 10-15).

Fortunately, Williams is a good enough artist to know when to quit: this open ending is crucial in salvaging the ethics of *Spring and All*. Here the doctor returns to his roots as healer of the body and society: he uses the traditional healing properties of the Black-eyed Susan to supplement the white daisy. The scientific modern doctor has joined at last with the traditional folk healer, just as the white daisy has intermixed with the Black-eyed Susan. The mixture of pure products into an impure, bright, dark, ugly, beautiful new world is Williams’s final task in this last poem. He ends with the grotesque/beautiful other, the “dark woman.” This time she is, ironically, a bodily abstraction, not a physical person compressed into an image. Intriguingly, Williams simply leaves her be, refusing to evaluate her for us, simply departing from the poem now that he has introduced us to the mother of the *new* New World. Williams is through arguing. He mixes high and low, modern and ancient, pretty and grotesque, and leaves this inheritance to us. And though some element of exoticism remains, Williams’s intentions seem genuine. He promotes a “constructivist genealogy of the American spirit—incorporating traits from the Spanish, the French, the Caribs, the Abnaki, the Negro, and elsewhere—as opposed to a genealogy traceable along bloodlines” (Soto 76). He knows the ancestry of the new world will be legion, various, and vocal. And that is perhaps his most ethical move in the entire sequence. Importantly, he does not limit this vision to modernist primitivism, I argue, because his figures remain always in *this* world, the faces of *his* society, not the symbols of some atavistic Eden.

Adrienne Asch writes that our society ought not to try to remove all disabilities or differences among individuals but that instead we should strive to create a society where having a disability is functionally irrelevant (32). This is the point Williams in *Spring and All* genuinely seems to strive for, despite the occasional misstep. I disagree with Amelia Jones when she suggests Williams feared the body, especially the female one, and that he purposely obscures it with Dada poetry (31). Williams does not hide Elsie from us, nor any of the other fantastical women in *Spring and All*. And Williams often

risers above his occasional tendency toward short-sightedness: he knows that “the rose is obsolete” and that the Black-eyed Susan will replace it. He also knows an “authentic” American art must reform a new culture (Cappucci 71), to which he adds his indelible words. Ethics and aesthetics are inseparable in Williams’s life and work and they always intersect within the bodily (Diggory 3). Williams’s dual roles as doctor and poet flowed into one another. The fact that Williams chose to work among the poor residents of Rutherford—disregarding lucrative and prestigious posts elsewhere (Bremen 84)—shows a commitment to the “pure products of America” that had an even greater ethical impact among his neighbors than it did his poetry. A series of dialogues is built into *Spring and All*, whether between prose and poetry (Bremen 13), or within a dialogic exchange (as in Williams’s narrators in “The Agonized Spires” and “To an Old Jaundiced Woman”). These dialogues almost always seek to discover something from the other. Williams illustrates well Juan Gris’s concept of “conversation as design” in the implicit dialogues between the poems and philosophies of *Spring and All* (Diggory 108). Meaning as juxtaposition is readily apparent in the final poem of the collection and its open-ended, non-coercive status echoes the positive ethics of Williams’s poems.

However, if Williams presents grotesque exchanges among other figures, he still often hides *himself* behind his clinical appraisals. Williams sometimes awkwardly and humorlessly places himself in the role of observer or diagnostician, limiting the interaction between him, his characters, and his readers. Interestingly, Williams grew up with a heart condition, discovered in high school, and its limitations affected the course of his life, forcing him to give up his hopes of working in the outdoors in forestry or athletics and pushing him toward medicine (Wallace and Williams 132-33). If not for that, he would not have made it to the University of Pennsylvania and met Ezra Pound, who helped him modernize his poetry (134-5). Had Williams felt freer to make use of his own mixed social status—both in terms of ethnicity and ability—he might have pushed his poetic ethics in new directions. In contrast, what we sometimes encounter in *Spring and All* (in “To Elsie,” specifically) is a more ethnographic approach to the other (Schuster 118, 124), maintaining an unnecessary distance between the “you” and “I” that the imagination should connect. In other words, he perhaps should not have avoided treating *himself* in his works. In his *Autobiography* Williams says that writing poetry was

his therapy (xiv). He knew the power of the body to argue for social renewal and he places in his poetry “the body itself speaking” (*Interviews with William Carlos Williams* 97) as a means of finding truth. Had he allowed his own body, his own experience to speak alongside others, this effect might have been stronger.

Berger writes that the grotesque—the mixing of the bodily, the exaggerated, the ludicrous, the absurd, in the human form—has a childish, innocent joy to it, that can be as comic as it is frightening (26-27, 36). Williams is at his freest and best when he maintains this joy, as in the ebullient “Spring and All” and the playful “The Red Wheelbarrow.” It is both this irony and his eye for complex beauty that saves Williams’s work, and, in spite of some troubled moments, hope persists in the figure of Elsie, the wildflower: her perfect mixture of old and new, outsider and insider, makes her capable of bringing in the new world. Her grotesqueness is her beauty: the travesty of “To Elsie” is, as Bakhtin would say, imbued with life and renewal. Bakhtin writes that such figures are “far removed from cynical nihilism. The material bodily lower stratum is productive. It gives birth, thus assuring mankind’s immortality. All obsolete and vain illusions die in it, and the real future comes to life” (378). Whatever cynicism exists in Williams the characters he draws still manage to *work*. Even without access to Elsie’s mind, the power she holds makes Williams’s collection a force for cultural reassessment, if she may be the new American woman. Any coercive elements in Williams’s poems are put aside by his ability to mingle among such outsiders in his real life, something that keeps *Spring and All* far from elitist obsolescence. Williams is at home with difficult, sometimes indecipherable engagements with and interpretations of the world; the texts in which Williams deals most directly with ethics (his short story “The Use of Force,” for instance) are the most ambiguous in their moral pronouncements (Bell 149). This saves them, the fact that he invariably forces readers to decide for themselves how his words and images must intersect with reality.

It is only fair to let the man speak on his own behalf, in closing, as he writes in his *Autobiography* of the melding of his two vocations, healing and art: it is the strange uniqueness of the people who surrounded him that most “fascinated” Williams:

From the beginning that fascinated me even more than I myself knew. For no matter where I might find myself, every sort of individual that it is

possible to imagine in some phase of his development, from the highest to the lowest, at some time exhibited himself to me. I am sure I have seen them all. And all have contributed to my pie. Let the successful carry off their blue ribbons; I have known the unsuccessful, far better persons than their lucky brothers. One can laugh at them both, whatever costumes they adopt. And when one is able to reveal them to themselves, high or low, they are always grateful as they are surprised that one can so have revealed the inner secrets of another's private motives. To do this is what makes a writer worth heeding.... (*Autobiography* 358)

He continues, with the hint of a smile:

Forget writing, it's a trivial matter. But day in day out, when the inarticulate patient struggles to lay himself bare for you, or with nothing more than a boil on his back is so caught off balance that he reveals some secret twist of a whole community's... way of thought, a man is suddenly seized again with a desire to speak of the underground stream which for a moment has come up just under the surface. (*Autobiography* 359)

These “underground streams” are what drove Williams’s poetry, and he knew that only from these founts could come cultural and social renovation. His love for the “lowest,” the less “lucky,” and his willingness to enter their silent, secret communities saves Williams’s paradoxes from cruelty. When he tells us of the girl with one leg, the rural farmer, the old jaundiced woman, and Elsie—of the Black-eyed Susans of the world—he is nonetheless reflecting back to us a bit of “myself, naked” (*Autobiography* 357). Beauty from the dirt was Williams’s specialty, and he imbued it with his own virtue, despite never really stepping down from his role as society’s attendant physician, treating all others equally with his grotessthetics.

CHAPTER V
OBSERVATIONS AS CONVERSATIONS:
THE DUAL MARIANNE MOORE

Marianne Moore found herself at the center of her cultural epoch, a figure whose public persona often overshadowed her poetry as a central pillar of both the modernist and feminist literary movements. The American public largely knew Moore as a lover of baseball and boxing, though some within avant-garde literary circles used this celebrity as a reason to frown upon her (Joyce 9-10). Moore cut an ambiguous figure not just on the national stage but also in her art of the eternally-unassuming. She would not likely have heralded her poetry as an ethical experiment, a defense of feminism, or a direct attack on aging cultural and social institutions. She would, however, have admitted to her poetry's central reliance on irony, and its negotiation of the world through a game of give-and-take, a Habermasian dialectical engagement with the other. As Moore would explain later in life her overarching interest was, ironically, in marriage (Leavell "Frightening Disinterestedness" 73-74)—despite rejecting all suitors and never marrying (69). Thus in exploring several poems of *Observations* I find the center of her ironic force within the abstract and practical institution of marriage—the linking of one thing with another—through the study of selective poetic pairs I will identify.

Regardless of Moore's complicated fame and texts, William Carlos Williams was among many Americans who found Moore's poetry groundbreaking; Moore's work heavily influenced Williams's own poetry of female figures and voices (Kinnahan 3). Williams writes about Moore as friend and fellow poet within his opus, *Spring and All*, attempting to pin down Moore's craft: "Marianne Moore escapes ["crude symbolism" in poetry]. The incomprehensibility of her poems is witness to at what cost (she cleaves herself away) as it is also to the distance which the most are from a comprehension of the purpose of composition" (Williams 188). Yet despite this "incomprehensibility," the singular nature of Moore's poetry, Williams argues further:

... I believe in the main that Marianne Moore is of all American writers most constantly a poet... because the purpose of her work is invariably from the source from which poetry starts—that it is constantly from the purpose of poetry. And that it actually possesses this characteristic... to a

more distinguishable degree when it eschews verse rhythms than when it does not. It has the purpose of poetry written into it and therefore it is poetry. (Williams 230)

Whatever the strange shapes of Moore's poems, Williams sees in them what he values most in poetry, "'something' in the writing which moves me in a certain way" (230). Williams describes this enigmatic quality as follows: "Marianne's words remain separate, each unwilling to group with the others except as they move in the one direction. This is even an important—or amusing—character of Miss Moore's work. Her work puzzles me. It is not easy to quote convincingly" (231). Moore's lure is the odd beauty of her language, and its marriage to singularity.

The iconoclast Williams felt a kinship with Moore's unique poetic perspective. As a fellow artistic outsider, Moore found her place, appropriately, alongside Williams among the "Others," an avant-garde group headed by Alfred Kreymborg and located in New York's Greenwich Village in the 1910s. The group produced a little magazine by the same name, and this eclectic publication, *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse*, ran from 1915-1919, totaling 300 subscribers at its peak (Churchill 1, 7). Belying its size, *Others* was instrumental in shaping the careers of Williams, Stevens, H.D., Pound, Eliot, and, of course, Moore. *Others* was unique, under Kreymborg's "austere" editing it began an ongoing conversation within its pages (Churchill 12), eschewing the manifestos of its predecessors (e.g. Wyndham Lewis and Pound's *Blast*) while avoiding the heavy editorial stamp of its more popular contemporaries (such as Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*). The open spirit of Greenwich Village percolated into the magazine and it became a "house" of experimental social and artistic work couched not within the framework of aggressive broadsides but of an eternal, familiar conversation (Churchill 11, 17). The *Others* years established an ethical precept foundational to Moore's work, as I will argue, the belief that art's aim was not perfect consensus nor the elimination of difference (Seigfried 275-6), especially between male and female artists. The *Others* sought a place for the "immigrant and Jew" within their group, embracing these eternal outsiders (Miller "Tongues..." 456). Indeed, the *Others*—both group and journal—modeled an empathetic conversation between a group of individuals attempting to understand each other. The close connection of one to another frames the ethical conversation (as Habermas argued),

where an artist's goal is not to coerce another's approval of her position but simply to present the reader with a problem or complex and await a response. I argue that what stayed with Moore after her years with the *Others*, friendship with Williams, and her experience of America during the war is a sense of *marriage* to the other that will appear in the poetic pairs I examine here, a marriage that attempts to create a more perfect union from many disparate individuals.

Moore on Women (and Men)

As Kinnahan argues, Williams and Moore recognized and wrote about both popular culture and avant-garde environments that were largely masculinist (10). Laurie Teal suggests that the standard paradigm of western art automatically rejects a feminist idea of art, as it divides the woman from the artist, making these categories mutually exclusive (104). The female artist (the transgressor of the categorical division) must then find a means of proving that she is not of the body but of the abstracted mind that western art valorized (Teal 104). Cristanne Miller writes that the location of feminist modernism is central to understanding its figures. Moore occupied an awkward, liminal position among the inner ring of the American literary avant-garde while simultaneously feeling herself an outsider to it, with different goals and methods (Miller 17).

Thus in Moore, poetic conversations emerge from an ironic viewpoint of self-awareness. Moore, the spiritual descendent of Emily Dickinson, claims Dickinson's reasons for employing wit in poetry: as a way of expressing a life that seems invisible or impenetrable to the masculine gaze (Juhasz, Miller, and Smith 4-6). Women's humor opposes itself to Bergson's view of laughter as society's corrective of the individual, suggesting instead that the laughter of the minority works as a counter to society's coercive patriarchal gaze (11). Moore does this, though with less-obvious methods than contemporaries such as Mina Loy, in Loy's 1914 *Feminist Manifesto*. Moore's underhanded wit recalls the humor of the dispossessed, a "controlled and devastating irony" as opposed to a shouted plea for society's attention (Johnson 100). Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes that Moore did this so well that her language poetry or logopoeia, was adopted by Ezra Pound (DuPlessis 38). However the analytical lyrics that Pound and his proteges employed "erased the feminist critique" that existed within the form in Moore's

hands (DuPlessis 38-39). Logopoeia began as an attempt to shift poetry from focusing on female objects to critiquing gender roles and romantic tropes that buried female figures beneath a heap of assumptions about aggression, judgment, and sexuality (DuPlessis 38). Moore pens her lyrics obliquely, avoiding dogma, but her critique of the poetic tradition and masculinist lyrical assumptions remains integral to her ethics.

Still, Moore uses irony for more than feminist social critiques. Rado writes that feminism, especially for the complex, early feminist Moore, should not be limited to judging misogyny nor should it posit a monolithic feminine agency, but ought instead to embrace multiple threads of feminist aesthetics and politics (6, 11). Moore agreed: she wrote an understated wit into her poetry not because she *was* a woman, nor on *behalf* of women, nor even *against* men, but because her ironies (in contrast to satirical critiques) matched better with the ethic of exchange and conversation she wished to demonstrate. She could securely write of the self without “inflation” (Wolosky 586). Moore was both an unusual feminist and an unusual modernist in her open-ended style and ethos, a sharp contrast from the more direct, aggressive Pound (Lakritz 123). Often Moore comes across as almost ambivalent about her work’s reception, but this distancing is a tactic, an invitation to her readers, and it serves her poetry’s effects.

Furthermore, her methods worked—Moore was fundamental in advancing the position and estimation of New York avant-garde artists during the twenties and after (Joyce 10-11). In fact, her understated style cemented her modernist primacy. Betsy Erkkila writes that Moore became “a kind of moral gatekeeper at the gate of literary modernism,” who “not only faulted her fellow modernists for their ego, moral failings, and lack of a larger spiritual vision, she also vigorously sponsored the work of women writers who appeared to embody transforming, but nevertheless proper, notions of the feminine” (104). Moore was unique, neither radical nor conservative in art or politics, and “she thus epitomized the term ‘other’” (Churchill 135). And although politically complex, Moore never intends to remove politics from the aesthetic sphere; notably, she even critiqued Pound’s refusal to vote (Carson 315-6).

Moore forever writes in pairs, linking the worlds of the avant-garde and the popular, the masculine and the feminine, the ascetic and the hedonistic, and the humorous and the serious. Though she was happy among the exotic, feminist bohemianism of

Greenwich Village (Kinnahan 43-44), Moore never felt the need to live there, spending most of her life sharing a home with her mother in Brooklyn, and remaining unmarried (Joyce 24). Similarly, Moore shared the sensibility of the New Woman in marching for and advocating women's suffrage (Nelson 64, Miller *Cultures...* 59), yet shared nothing of the sensual hedonism the flapper girls epitomized the same year her *Observations* appeared (1924) (Stevenson 139-40). At the same time, even among male modernists—the majority of whom continued to support the foundations of a patriarchal society (Eysteinnsson 93)—Moore never lost the ability to promote feminist art and rights through her work (Zwagerman 8). Moore was well-educated, both formally (she graduated from Bryn Mawr in 1909) and aesthetically (among the avant-garde *Others*), but she enjoyed mass cultural spectacles like sports and general-interest magazines as much as high art and intimate conversation (Lakritz 123). Her poetry is not simple, yet it does not contain overly-elitist barriers, as evinced by her accessibility and ongoing cultural presence (Gregory “Stamps...” 126). Further, despite becoming one of the most influential poets and editors of her time, particularly among American women (Miller *Cultures...* 44), Moore chose to craft a poetry of quiet wit, euphemism and understatement (Johnson 94). Rather than create an American comedy of social aberration or violent reversals (Juhasz, Miller, and Smith 8-9), Moore makes her mark with litotes, an imported (British) brand of humor (Mikes 88, 112), adopting a calmness foreign to the avant-garde.

These dualisms are what made Moore a great poet and they are central to reading her works, which, I believe, must be read *paired*. When read in conversational pairings with one another, her central philosophy of two-ness reveals itself and her ethic of engaging the other in conversation becomes clear. Cristanne Miller puts it well, writing of Moore: “She challenges the reader to enter a poetic and lived realm where the boundaries distinguishing masculine and feminine, sexual and asexual, intellectual and embodied experience are replaced by continuums allowing dynamic interplay of sensuality, intelligence, and art” (*Cultures...* 111). As Wolosky puts it, Moore's is a “relational, multidomain poetics. Formally experimental and radically eclectic, Moore is distinctive for the heterogeneity of materials she introduces into her texts,... elite and popular, scientific and documentary, and also religious and ethical” (584).

Despite Moore's poetic complexity and its seeming aloofness from peer influences or overt social commentary, her poetry was heavily influenced by outside forces. The war delayed publication of her first book, *Poems*, until 1921, despite many of its poems first appearing in 1915-1916. By war's end, Eliot, Pound, and Yvor Winters were all offering editorial assistance in publishing Moore's first poetry collection, but Moore demurred, unsure about the public reception of the volume (Schulze 21-3). Though performing a cavalier public persona, Moore was concerned with the reception of her stylistic innovations. She was not wrong to expect a backlash: when *Poems* finally emerged it was met with criticism referencing a "hyper-artificiality" and intentional opaqueness in Moore's language (Schulze 25)—charges that hurt the isolated Moore. Despite her fellow Others' encouragement, Moore resisted publishing another volume as long as possible and rejected editing the little magazine *Broom* in 1923, finding herself at odds with the literary community she had hoped would have acknowledged her art (Miller *Cultures...* 41).

Thus the reading public had to wait until 1924 for Moore's pivotal volume *Observations* to appear. The delay was not in vain: poems that Moore had written over the previous decade found their way into *Observations*, but in different orders and pairings—new pairings that voice for Moore a more explicit ethic of conversation, emerging from the struggles she had faced as a modernist and a feminist poet. It took the earnest requests of Scofield Thayer, editor of *The Dial*, to print *Observations* from The Dial Press in 1924 (Schulze 29). The collection was subsequently tapped for *The Dial Award*—two years after Eliot's *The Waste Land* won—with its \$2,000 prize, which gained Moore the recognition that had eluded her the previous decade. Moore's belief that the dueling structures of patriarchy and public expectations weighing upon the woman artist were temporary and defeasible (Miller *Cultures...* 55) now seemed finally validated. Thus was born a collection that was much more than a unilateral endorsement of the New Woman, instead embracing a complex feminism well ahead of its time (Rado 13). In Moore's *Observations*, the observer no longer embodies the Enlightenment-educated, "rational" male gaze, but the gaze of an outsider, a woman-bard, using an understated wit neither to submit to patriarchy nor to demand recognition for the woman-as-artist, but to combine a world of *other* perspectives into one colorful conversation.

Churchill writes that Williams called Moore “One who enables a ‘fellow’ to see himself as Other...” (161). This holds true: Moore’s *Observations* are a lens wherein we see ourselves and our *other* counterparts.

And this lens was an ironic, distant one: the poet whose work was equally admired and criticized, whose life seemed an exercise in contradictions—with a foot in all worlds, and a home in none—did see the world as an outsider. Among the modernists she likely identifies the least with the voices and figures of her poetry. Women writers have often had to disguise their critiques of a patriarchal public sphere from which they were excluded, with their resulting art demonstrating a “teasing duplicity inculcated by the emulation of a dissimulating manner” (Swearingen 218-9). The direct route to social transformation has traditionally been inaccessible to the western female artist. Therefore, the poetry of the ironic, the humorous, and the understated takes on great importance. Until the woman-reader was acknowledged, masculinist literary viewpoints would dominate (Leitch 48). Freud saw jokes as a revolt against the forces controlling the individual in society, in lieu of other powers (125); certainly a sense of resistance toward power structures is central to irony, whether to the individual or for all society (Stringfellow 134, 145). Humor has thus been a primary literary tool of the oppressed figure to critique hegemony (Juhasz, Miller, and Smith 7, 25). Women’s humor in particular can make its point through its denial of cooperation, defeating the expectations of a (male) reader (Zwagerman 80). Mikes argues, “Under oppressive regimes, jokes replace the press, public debates, parliament—and even private discussion—but they are better than any of these” (116). Rachel Trousdale builds on this: “For Moore, the most important thing about humor is its multivalence: her use of humor encapsulates the way that the self and the other interpenetrate and enrich each other, showing that humanity’s flexibility, sympathy, and inventiveness are all linked to our ability to laugh” (121).

All of this is true of Moore’s poetry, of course, but as we know from the work of the war poets, there are more- or less- ethical ways to joke or write ironically. Simply employing irony to defy conventionality does not make Moore an ethical poet—just as being a feminist does not guarantee that she achieves her goals fairly. Yet Moore in her best poems resists unethical ironies—sarcasm and satirical attacks on cultural institutions—and prefers instead to engage the other with a cool, understated manner that encourages

her audience to engage with her. She does this by visually modeling conversations within her poems, pairing up lyrics in *Observations* that demonstrate a cross-poem conversation, where one poem engages its neighbor.

For a linguaphile like Moore, wit is more than a political act as it draws attention to the entire speech act and thus to the principle of exchange between speaker and listener (Zwagerman 4). Poetry for Moore can help mend society's ills with remedies that aid the oppressed without alienating the rest, and poetry is also an expression of her pragmatic attempts to find such remedies. Moore's aesthetic mirrors the values of pragmatism, embracing the heterogeneous, the various experiences of the individual and the multiple points of view of the many (Seigfried 7-8). If Moore finds that a poetics of understatement is the best way to communicate with her audience, then that is what she will use. Understatement—both masculine (in its modernist simplicity) and feminine (in its demurring)—gives power to Moore's poetry even as it classifies her art (Kineke 129-30). Thus she has no fear in employing a style and form built on what David Kadlec fondly terms "accident" and "wayward semantic leaps" (155-6). She pragmatically attempts to rearrange her poems from their original settings in order to craft a conversation. Moore's work only ever has the *appearance* of accident—an air of freshness and openness—and it is a poetry not given to ignoring political inequalities, nor attempting to replace old dogmatisms with new ones (Bazin 436, 451), but instead allows what already simmers beneath society's surface to be addressed.

Paired *Observations*

The model that emerges from Moore's stylistic search—the method that served both her desire to engender political change and her need to create a poetry of distance—is the union of opposites, the ironic coupling of poetic pairs within *Observations*. A non-aggressive, self-effacing irony was not as natural a choice for Moore's project as it was in Williams's. We often demand more overt aggression from feminist writers in dramatically countering masculinist hegemonies (see Mina Loy's "Feminist Manifesto"). But, as Zwagerman notes, humor—in particular, women's humor—is not a second-rate method of speech nor a rhetorical last resort but often the best way to make a point (31). Moore does not write ironically out of frustration but because she recognizes the power

of offering interpretive choice to the reader. She will not critique the coercive forces of society with equally caustic tactics. Irony is the most natural response to a reading public who often misunderstood or misjudged Moore and her work, since it works as a compromising tactic between opposing forces, joining warring viewpoints (Stringfellow 149-50). The war of male and female, artist and reformer, aesthete and ethicist, could be resolved, Moore believed, not through equal violence but through a sly ironic pairing of the one and the other. Jennifer Leader notes Moore's adoption of a "model of selfhood in which one is at all times vitally engaged with the other while simultaneously balanced by a Judeo-Christian ethic of self-emendation and restraint" (317).

This is the balance Moore strikes. I argue that Moore's pairing of specific poems in her 1924 collection, *Observations*, represents a deliberate aesthetic choice to represent a model of discourse ethics. In regard to Moore and other modernists, Yvor Winters deemed this a "double mood," existing in the alternation between types of feeling (Winters 65, 71). I wish to extend this idea to what Moore does as *editor* in her 1924 collection, as well as within its poems. In *Observations*, poems are lifted from their original settings (mostly little magazines) and rearranged, re-paired with poems from other moments, to make a *new* conversation, one that highlights the ethical tête-à-tête Moore carries on with her readers. On top of this, we will explore some of the relevant differences between these poems' original settings and their 1924 counterparts to see what other conversations (dialogues even *more* understated than those among the poems in *Observations*) may be unearthed. What we will find is that Moore has little fear of being proven "wrong" in her attitudes and styles, and is far more interested in meeting the mind of the other, whether within individual poems or within pairs. She wishes for us to find a better world through our participation in hers, not by following a script or screed she might have given us. As a woman who—despite her fame and literary brilliance—remained always an outsider, an other, Moore believed that the more voices we hear, the more dialogues we engage, the better.

Interestingly, Schweickart wonders if the very idea of a dialogic model of poetry is essentially female, and if its use (even without censure) is actually a feminist maneuver (86). Moore coined a word for this, "conversity," in her 1936 poem "The Pangolin," which Churchill defines as "harmony through adversity," the experience of conversation

with another (137). Before codifying it, Moore seems to have developed the concept in her earlier poetry, as this is precisely what the paired poems of *Observations* do. The dialectical relationship between writer and reader, intentions and interpretations, plays out throughout Moore's poetry (Juhasz, Miller, and Smith 13), even before she arranges her collections. The gap between statement and interpretation is part of the union of writer and reader found in Moore's ironies (Zwagerman 39-40). Cristanne Miller agrees, writing that as early as 1916 Moore was favoring a poetry "asserting the political and spiritual efficacy of conversational (or poetic) imagination and indirection over attack, through multiple formal techniques of indirection" (*Cultures...* 5). Moore does not believe turnabout was fair play but thinks that wordplay can produce a social about-face. Seigfried calls what Moore does "reclaiming the role of Socratic midwife" (101); Moore pragmatically helps birth a new rhetoric better-suited to addressing her peers, both producing the art and making it useful.

One such conversation occurs between Moore and her friend Williams. If we recall from the opening quotation from *Spring and All*, amidst his praise of Moore's poetry Williams called her work "incomprehensible," saying it "puzzles" him and is "not easy to quote convincingly" (Williams 188, 231). Williams assures us that he actually understands Moore quite clearly, in *mimicking* her understated ways within his own ironic critique. But what he says is true, on one level: Moore is not comprehensible, she cannot be easily cataloged and understood; her angle is tough to define as she tries to maintain distance from her work, to force the reader to consider for herself what Moore intends with her ironic couplings. Likewise, she is "not easy to quote convincingly" not because her work is silly, but because Moore's poetry is not an angry volley of feminism or modernism that we might have expected, but is instead a cool invitation to a realm beyond the clear-cut, beyond obvious instructions and coercive claims. As Williams implies, it is impossible to easily define Moore's poetry; her entire ethic is founded upon offering the reader two sides (or more) and leaving that reader to decide what exactly the pieces mean. She's a stoic, if nothing else, who would rather risk we misunderstand her than force us to see hers as the only correct point of view.

The First Marriage

Our first apparent pair is “A Fool, a Foul Thing, a Distressful Lunatic” and its follow-up, “To Military Progress,” which—when read as a marriage (placed together as they are in *Observations*)—speak to each other about one of the *oldest* human dualisms, that of the male/female. The first poem presents a vision of “feminine” humor in contrast to the “masculine” wit of its counterpart, but Moore is complex in this pairing: she does not espouse a clear hierarchy between the two species of ironies. Instead she employs both kinds of wit, inviting readers to see her as a fellow thinker and evaluate her methods, rather than positioning herself as a dogmatist. Moore’s project does not take aim at any particular belief or subjective experience, but instead argues against what she dubbed “the uncompanionable drawl // Of certitude” associated with traditional institutions (qtd. in Miller “Religion...” 260). As an experimenter rather than a teacher Moore groups the poems of *Observations* (despite their disparate origins) as a way of testing their uses; she wishes to be “companionable” to her readership, making her poets work for them.

As Schulze reminds us, Moore took her role as editor very seriously and spent her life revisiting, revising, and republishing her poems in different versions, with her “final” versions only made so by her death (Schulze 6-7). In Moore we see a poetry in flux, whether the changes occur in her poetic recombinations or within individual poems themselves; she embraced change and editorial self-criticism in ways few other moderns would, sometimes to a baffling extent, as in the case of the lyric “Poetry” (Shaw 115). This study will focus on Moore’s 1924 versions, but we will consider the changes made between their original settings and the “final” versions to see how Moore’s work is edited to create the ethical conversation she desires to have with her reading “companions.”

“A Fool, a Foul Thing, a Distressful Lunatic” is a unique place to start: it differs dramatically from its original form, called “Masks.” The original “Masks” appeared alongside two others by Moore (“Diogenes” and “Sun!”) in the opening issue of *Contemporary Verse* (January 1916), espousing:

“Loon”. . . .“goose”. . . .and “vulture”. . . .
Thus, from the kings of water and of air,
Men pluck three catchwords for their empty lips.
Mock them in turn, wise, dumb triumvirate!
You, gander, with stout heart tooled like your wings of steel, 5

What coward knows your soul?
 “Egyptian vultures, clean as cherubim,
 All ivory and jet,” sons of the burning sun,
 What creatures call you ‘foul’?
 And you, nature’s own child, 10
 You most precocious water bird,
 That shouts exultantly among lone lakes,
 You, foremost in the madman’s alphabet—
 Laugh in superb contempt at folly’s catalogue! (Schulze 186)

Eight years later when *Observations* appeared, the poem had morphed almost unrecognizably into 1924’s retitled “A Fool, a Foul Thing, a Distressful Lunatic”:

With webs of cool
 Chain mail and his stout heart, is not the gander
 Mocked, and ignorantly designated yet,
 To play the fool?
 “Egyptian vultures clean as cherubim, 5
 All ivory and jet,” are they most foul?
 And nature’s child,
 That most precocious water bird, the loon—why
 Is he foremost in the madman’s alphabet;
 Why is he styled 10
 In folly’s catalogue, distressful lunatic? (*Observations* 60)

The similarities are obscured, but some phrasing survives, including the “Egyptian vultures clean as cherubim / All ivory and jet,” the “mocking” treatment of the geese and loons, the “precocious water bird,” “nature’s child,” and the “madman’s alphabet.”

And the differences? Moore changed the poem’s major thrust during its eight-year gestation. The scene of the earlier “Masks” is less oblique: the speaker addresses the water bird/gander, itself, while suggesting that humans misinterpret the wisdom of the seemingly foolish, speechless “dumb triumvirate” of “[l]oon,” “goose,” and “vulture.” Moore’s speaker praises the *masks* of foolishness these birds wear, which cause “Men” to “pluck three catchwords for their empty lips” and “[m]ock them in turn” (“Masks” ll. 3-4). Men, Moore says, fill in the gaps they do not understand with their own words, judging the birds to be foolish due to the human inability to fathom the birds’ subtle qualities. But our initial assessments are incorrect, Moore’s speaker believes: the goose or gander has a “stout heart,” the vultures are not repulsive but “clean as cherubim / All ivory and jet,” and the loon is not crazed and ridiculous in its call but “precocious,” with “exultant” cries.

This apology for the fair fowl would be comic but for the speaker's language. What might have been a airy poem about seeing through nature's "masks" takes a darker turn in light of the "Men" in line three. Men might be a synonym for "people" but this seems unlikely, for the birds of this poem (whether goose or "gander") take on feminine figures—the "irrational" creatures of nature—existing in opposition to masculine empiricism. By gendering her language and images, Moore critiques the patriarchal forces that would find such elegant, wondrous birds "dumb" or "foul," due to their ignorance of other speech or thought. Moore sympathizes with the secret speech and hidden bravery and brilliance of these birds, identifying with the birds' experience of interacting with "men" who would think them silly. Here an element of anger creeps into the narrator's words, understandably. It hurts to be othered, and Moore recalls the frustration of finding her way as a woman artist.

It would be unfair to demand of this younger Moore (in her twenties when originally composing "Masks") that she describe the ostracism of the female in anything but harsh terms. This she does when addressing the birds of "Masks," satirizing the men who critique the birds (or women) that they do not understand, as Moore asks of the birds (and herself) "what coward knows your soul?" and "What creatures call you 'foul'?" (ll. 6, 9). Moore finishes the poem aggressively, satirizing her male counterparts by advising the birds thought mad by the onlooking men, "Laugh in superb contempt at folly's catalogue!" (l. 14), ending this unusual sonnet with a vituperative shout. Like the othered birds, patriarchal society makes her out to be a "lone" "loon," too, and Moore despises it in return.

But eight years changes someone. By the appearance of Moore's "A Fool, a Foul Thing, a Distressing Lunatic" the poet had further developed her sense of understatement, and had largely left behind satirical barbs in favor of a social critique of ambiguity over direct opposition. The fire behind the "Masks" has calmed, though the coals still smolder. The resetting of the poem reflects Moore's developing a different poetic persona, mimicking her new gander in "A Fool, a Foul Thing, a Distressing Lunatic." For Moore now, too, has "webs of cool / Chain mail and... [a] stout heart" (ll. 1-2), to withstand society's unjust assessments. "Webs of cool" is a perfect description of Moore's 1924 poetic ethos: rage will not persuade, she knows, but to engage and intrigue the reader

may. This version presents a more ambiguous complex than its forebear; we no longer have an obvious addressee (unlike the birds of the first poem) as Moore shifts from second- to third-person. Further, she asks her unknown listener to help fill in the details: this time Moore does *not* tell her audience (the birds) to return the mockery toward mankind, but instead asks others, drolly, for answers to her questions. *Why* is the intricate, secure, brilliant gander seen to “play the fool?” she murmurs (l. 4). Why are the striking, magnificent vultures seen as “most foul?” she wonders (l. 6). And as for the loon, “why / Is he foremost in the madman’s alphabet; / Why is he styled / In folly’s catalogue, distressful lunatic?” (ll. 8-11).

In asking questions of her society rather than directing contempt toward it, Moore selects a rhetoric of solicitation over one of domination and thus invites discourse even with her opponents. Where a satirical attack on men (blind to their biases) would likely fail to *change* minds, this unassuming string of questioning undermined her foes’ defenses. Rather than tell us how to best see the world, Moore sneaks into her reader’s space with a conversation about madness and reason, male and female—about what it means to be a loon (a lone “loonatic”), a goose (society’s fool), or a vulture (a “foul” fowl). “A Fool...” is actually a braver version of “Masks,” turning the aggressive force of the earlier form into a joke that still asks answers of its readers.

Interestingly, Schulze writes that Moore tried to print “Masks” for over a year before it was published by Samuel Duff McCoy, editor of the new *Contemporary Verse* (187). This may be an indirect testament to the different effects created by the two versions, with the aggression of “Masks” alienating mainstream editors. That “Masks” appealed to McCoy makes sense: the man was a journalist as well as an editor, later famously covering the Martin Tabert beating death in 1922, a seminal U.S. human-rights case (Miller “Murder” 101). Thus McCoy might have been attracted to the more iconoclastic “Masks,” seeking poems with an anti-establishment element to help launch his magazine. Schulze notes that McCoy performed at least some edits on the poems Moore submitted, adapting them to the new magazine’s image (187). Perhaps the latter “A Fool...” is a way of replacing these literary violences with ethical ambiguities.

Observations was Moore’s chance to rectify such editorial incursions on her art, and a reminder of the reason Moore resisted a second book’s publication for so long,

fearing not just the public’s misinterpretation but also the intrusion of overzealous editors. “To Military Progress”—which Moore places directly after “A Fool...” in *Observations*—seems to have had little such editorial interference. “To Military Progress” appeared first as “To the Soul of ‘Progress’” in April 1915’s *The Egoist* (Schulze 188). “To Military Progress,” in all its versions, was no stranger to poetic pairings; Moore first published it alongside “To A Man Working His Way through the Crowd,” her paean to theater critic Gordon Craig, and, in 1917, Alfred Kreyborg published it in *Others* as the penultimate poem in a thirteen-verse collection of Moore’s poetry (Schulze 189). The pairing of “A Fool...” and “To Military Progress” is unique to *Observations*, but it makes sense in light of Moore’s conversational project in the poems of *Observations*. It was in little magazines and in *Others*, in particular, that Moore honed her aesthetic, and her reliance on and support of her community of writers helped mutually promote their careers (Churchill 135). Churchill identifies in Moore an “interactive poetics” that developed out of the conversations in *Others* (136). Moore’s editorial control over her poems’ settings is crucial to shaping her poetic ethics.

The 1924 version of “To Military Progress” differs little from earlier versions:

You use your mind Like a millstone to grind Chaff. You polish it And with your warped wit Laugh	5
At your torso, Prostrate where the crow Falls On such faint hearts As its god imparts, Calls	10
And claps its wings Till the tumult brings More Black minute-men To revive again, War	15
At little cost.	

They cry for the lost
Head
And seek their prize
Till the evening sky's
Red. (*Observations* 61)

20

In fact, the only differences are the removal of spaces between lines three and four, that line two's "millstone" becomes one word, and that "God" becomes lowercase (and generic) in line eleven. The 1917 *Others* version suggests a slight shift in agency, with, "You've made your mind / A millstone," whereas the first and final versions of the poem say, "You use your mind / Like a millstone." The title may be the biggest change: both early versions employed scare-quotes in "To the Soul of 'Progress'" which smack of a sarcastic assessment of her culture, something "To Military Progress" makes more subtle. Even in these small, undramatic changes Moore's refining of her understated irony is evident. Eight years with a poem moves her sly ironies away from pure sarcasm.

But as soon as "To Military Progress" begins Moore seems to have left this understated ethos behind. The first word is a direct address to her intended audience, and it builds to a series of harsh accusations. The mind described in this poem is the polar opposite of the gander and loons from the prior poem: instead of wit hidden behind a veil of foolishness, Moore describes a "warped wit," bent and metallic, produced by a "mind" grinding away at "chaff" to produce some hard, glittering edge of humor (ll. 1-6). There is nothing of the sly litotes about this hyper-masculine humor: it is precisely the chiseled point it purports to be.

The reason Moore links these two poems becomes clearer in the second and third stanzas, with the return of bird imagery. Moore writes that the harsh masculine humorist will, "Laugh / At your torso, / Prostrate where the crow / Falls / On such faint hearts / As its god imparts, / Calls // And claps its wings" (ll. 6-13). Moore's unsettling use of enjambment sends us stumbling down alongside the figure in the poem, falling "prostrate" alongside the crow-like man. With lines of fits and starts readers have the unnerving experience of tumbling headlong from line to line. Like our last poem, Moore ties her missive to a bird's claw: in pairing these poems, Moore wants us to contrast the loon, gander, and vulture with the crow-like figure that the falling man embodies. The loon, goose, and vulture are united by strangeness, but the crow is perhaps the most

“mannish”: crows can make and use tools, and—more to Moore’s point—they are linked to warfare and death. And although vultures seem a natural animal to couple to death, the bird in fact rarely kills, instead gathering its livelihood from the dead. In contrast, crows will attack and even eat their own kind, making them the most manlike of all birds.

And that is precisely how Moore uses the bird in the poem, as an image of the war, the Great War, and the death of a man who has become a soldier—with a sense of humor “warped” and jaded by the war. What emerges from Moore’s midwar poem is a brutal humor where the mind is utterly, caustically detached from the body in a twisted Cartesian divide: she imagines a man’s head laughing at its own torso as it falls, in a masochistic acknowledgment of the body’s failure to support the mind. It is only the hyper-masculine brain that can “laugh” at its *own* body that fails, or that can muse coldly “On such faint hearts” as its own failing organ (ll. 6, 10). The crow is a different bird than the loon, goose, or vulture; while the latter three are community-centered birds, moving in groups and mating monogamously, the crow has no such fellowship and is a bird that fights to form a social hierarchy. When the crow “Calls [or caws] / And claps its wings” it does so not for the joy of sound but for a grim purpose. Crow laughter is forbidding, far removed from the ecstatic call of the loon. Thus when more “Black minute-men” (the crows) appear, we know there is no hope for anything resembling peaceful interaction; instead they can only “revive again, / War” (ll. 16-18). All of this takes place “At little cost,” writes Moore’s speaker, darkly; death is free, though its cost is immense. Like crows fighting for worthless, shiny metals to line their nests, men will “seek their prize / Till the evening sky’s / Red” Moore finishes (ll. 22-24).

Keith Nelson, in compiling the political effects of war defers to Mark Sullivan’s 1933 analysis of the aftermath of World War I, called “Submission to Autocracy” (Nelson 35-7). Sullivan writes that during the war and after, one’s allegiance to the government was measured by the total submission of the body to the war effort, symbolized by the drafting of male citizens (qtd. in Nelson 36). This ideology spread beyond adult males to American society as a whole, through the loss of the freedoms of speech and protest, and of the freedom to choose or avoid work. The great irony was the attempt to make the world safe for choice, for “democracy” (Nelson 37), which could only be gained through total governmental coercion. The total cooperation demanded of

the individual by the collective became entwined with discussions of Social Darwinism, and the push for fascistic control over individuals that dominated the thirties (Crunden 159, 196). Christopher Capozzola writes that wartime and postwar America, despite lacking a powerful federal government, still formed a society that forced submission upon its individuals. As Capozzola writes, this manifests eventually in the later wars' drafts, but we can see it begin in Moore's realm of speech and literature: "Wartime proponents of 'responsible speech' believed that rights were limited entities that were balanced by political obligations—a balance that had been readjusted by the war" (Capozzola 146). This general spirit of individual suppression in favor of a collective society went so far as to produce a "culture of obligation" the individual had toward society that led even *librarians* to burn books, fearing the dangers of independent reason (Capozzola 171). Moore was heavily influenced by her readings of Darwin and Dewey (Kadlec 163), interested in how the individual could remain independent in a society ostracizing all difference. Still, she believed that a nation had the ability and need to adapt in the face of challenges, like the creatures of her poems (Anderson 33).

Thus it makes sense that Moore wishes to satirize the destructiveness of the coercive collective, as depicted by the fallen crow-soldier. But does the use of aggressive, relatively-satirical language in this poem's ironies reflect a failure of Moore to maintain the "webs of cool" the previous poem invited? As we have established in other chapters, Such volleys are often rhetorically problematic, coercing a reader into taking the author's side on an issue, morally or otherwise. But Moore has left herself an out: she has intentionally paired this harsh, grittier rhetoric with the coy volley of questions from "A Fool, A Foul Thing, a Distressful Lunatic" and positioned these poems consecutively. She is merely offering a thesis and an antithesis; her first poem was built on seemingly-foolish, feminized birds—more questions than answers—whom "Men" did not understand. The second poem is not flighty but direct, dark, clear, and brutal, with fewer flowery descriptions and sharper colors and contrasts. Both poems have tone and content internally aligned.

Kindley writes of Moore's fascination with violence, opposition, and argument in these early poems, but notes that her interest in agonism diminished with time (692). This is demonstrated in the second poem's deliberate use of violent imagery, but it is only *half*

of the conversation. By linking a feminist and a masculine voice in these two poems, Moore offers two alternate perspectives, side-by-side. Her other, “male” persona, even speaks the last word (as we read it in 1924). Moore is confident in her reader’s ability to make something from this conversation, so she allows us two options. She knows the depraved cawing and clapping modeled by the manlike crows has less to offer the reader than the “webs of cool” she spins in “A Fool...” and she trusts we will agree. Seigfried puts it well, channeling Dewey (one of Moore’s ethical influences) on the other when writing, “Communication is educative because in formulating my experience for another, I must get outside it—seeing it as the Other would see it and connect it with the experiences of the Other—if I want to get it in a form she could sympathetically understand” (93). To help us “sympathetically understand,” Moore couches her words in the persona of another and offers us two voices juxtaposed, letting us sort them out. Moore demonstrates an ethic of tolerance and dialectic that bodes well for the rest of her *Observations*. These poems will live up to that title if they can make their rhetorics less-overt and more ethical. Amidst war and chaos Moore refuses to coerce others, no matter their response. Thus “Masks” turns into the less-dogmatic, less-aggressive, more-ambiguous “A Fool...” and pairs with its direct opposite, the hyper-masculine war poem “To Military Progress,” to ask questions of male and female, outsider and insider.

Art and Criticism Conjoined

The next useful pairing I find in *Observations* links Moore’s most famous poem, “Poetry,” and its thematic rejoinder, “Critics and Connoisseurs,” a marriage that shifts from studying women’s irony versus men’s to a consideration of the conversation between the poet and her audiences. The much-lauded “Poetry” is also the poem Moore most altered, famously shrinking it down to just a few words in the end. But in 1924 the poem had undergone little change in the five years since its creation. Ultimately this is Moore’s masterpiece of undermining and it is the piece William Carlos Williams used to signal the end of a poetic era marked by the demise of *Others* magazine, when he edited the July 1919 issue (Schulze 206). In that issue, Williams positioned Moore’s “Poetry” immediately after his editorial on *Others*’s fading usefulness, directly endorsing the poem’s skeptical treatment of poetry’s present position and utility (Churchill 143).

Yet Williams may have over-read the force in Moore's treatment of art, as the poem itself wends its way far from a clear statement on poetry's purposes. Instead Moore ironically picks poetry apart, wanting like her readers to discover what was inside. The 1924 edition of "Poetry" muses on the eponymous subject:

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that
there is in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise 5
if it must, these things are important not because a

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are
useful; when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
do not admire what 10
we cannot understand: the bat,
holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a
flea, the base-
ball fan, the statistician— 15
nor is it valid
to discriminate against "business documents and

school-books"; all these phenomena are important. One must make a
distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not
poetry,
nor till the poets among us can be 20
"literalists of
the imagination"—above
insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them, shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand, 25
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, you are interested in poetry. (*Observations* 72-3)

Moore's is perhaps the most detached defense of poetry in the English language. She begins playfully, agreeing with any and all who protest poetry's usefulness. Her offhand,

dry opening comment that “I too, dislike it” immediately disarms any hostile audiences, placing the speaker on the same level as the listener. She follows up by acknowledging poetry’s purported uselessness, calling it mere “fiddle,” a wry combination of art and lies. The poem seems to stray from a proper defense of poetry, migrating between precision and ambiguity in its language (Cecire 101). Yet this heightens its effect: Moore’s speaker says the best way to read poetry is with a “perfect contempt for it,” believing that the hostile reader who does so will, paradoxically, find in it “after all, a place for the genuine” (complicating the poem’s initial skepticism). The “genuine” then exists as the combination of the literal, empirical pieces of the world we experience and the abstract, universal ideas we link it to (Krishnan and Sanker 143-44).

On one level “Poetry” upsets hierarchies: the poem has a nonstandard form, though it is not deliberately obscure. Moore wants to rehabilitate poetry, shedding the stigmas of classism, obscurantism, and elitism. Modernist poets sometimes hid within an elitist company, surrounding themselves with a small circle of fellow artists and confining their efforts at aesthetics and social change to that inner ring. Yet Moore’s work was fostered by just such a cultural elite as that of the *Others*—the group whose demise this poem essentially marks. Kreymborg and his entourage were eternally “hospitable” to Moore when mainstream venues (including *Poetry* magazine) had little interest in her aesthetic fireworks (Churchill 146-7). But if the literary elite had been fundamental to her development as a poet, why would Moore sell it out now?

Moore challenges her own artistic elitism as well as that of her peers since she believes modern poetry should not erect barriers between poets and public. When Moore writes of the “Hands,” “eyes,” and “hair” that poetry mirrors back to humans she says poetry is made of these images “not because a / high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are / useful” (ll. 4-8). The pragmatic test of usefulness, for Moore, trumps the work of abstract criticism; without the raw stuff of poetry, she implies, there would be no need for criticism (Joyce 35-6). And within strange stanza shapes and eternal enjambment Moore illustrates precisely what she argues: it is not the set forms of traditional rhyme (hers is sporadic and chaotic) nor meter (deliberately stilted and variegated) that allocates poetry its social importance, but the interplay it demonstrates between speaker and listener. That poetry can represent within its play an estranged

version of reality by which to see ourselves is more valuable to Moore than its aesthetic arbitrariness, or than the rules of a Horace, Pope, or Pound. When poetry, or any other discipline, has "...become so derivative as to become unintelligible, / the same thing may be said for all of us, that we / do not admire what / we cannot understand" (ll. 8-11). Poetry has been at times a wall between insiders and outsiders, creating divisions between readers with its formal constraints and abstractions. Thus in her *ars poetica* Moore ironically *resists* any Latin, traditional forms, or artistic self-promotion—all to avoid promoting a hierarchy among readers.

Unlike some of her fellow modernists, Moore wishes her poetic forms to be an invitation, not a rejection; she wants poetry to be "useful" to the masses, not a toy for the elite. Importantly, she does not call individual artists out here, but the honesty of her critique is compelling, and so is her unique—but intelligible—poetic form, as Moore is unwilling to hide behind the barrier of the "aesthetic" and abandon a social ethos. Poetry must be "useful" to her would-be readers, a way to argue for some pragmatic social progress. Moore knows that "...we / do not admire what / we cannot understand" (ll. 9-11). There can be no knowledge of the other's experience if the initiated alone control the ciphers and codes of art. Moore intends her listeners to "understand" her work. Though ironic and understated, Moore is not obscure or "unintelligible" in order to push her audience away but to tease out their participation in her ideas.

After all, she tells us she does not *have* to write poetry to communicate: poetry is not the only valuable social activity. Whether we play the roles of the "immovable critic," the "[b]ase- / ball fan, the statistician—," or if we absorb the data in "business documents and / school-books" makes little real difference, Moore says, for "all these phenomena are important" (ll. 14-15, 17-18). Yet the pragmatic Moore finds poetry the most "useful" because it avoids the pitfalls of these other vocations. Statistics, criticism, and school-books are all meant to instruct, but offer little in the way of a conversation. Thus Moore's tool is poetry, her best way to engage with society. To Moore, perplexing others with "complexity" can be a good thing, opening the door to learning something new and keeping the ego at bay (Leavell "When Marianne Moore Buys Pictures" 267).

But some poetry works better than others. Unethical poetry is addressed in the penultimate stanza, where Moore abandons ambiguity for the moment: "One must make

a distinction / however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry” (ll. 18-19). To Moore, a half-poet uses poetry for just “half” of its purpose—only speaking and forgetting the other half, listening. Poetry is most useful as dialogue, where it can take part in social change that statistics or criticism cannot. Lakritz invokes Nietzsche’s idea of “subterranean gratifications” from *On the Genealogy of Morals* to describe Moore’s poetic aims; to him this is Moore’s measure of poetry’s usefulness, the ability to invoke such fulfillments in the reader (Lakritz 130). Moore does not hide her methods behind the literary establishment but chooses to take the role of the audience, testing poetry’s use-value and even calling it a minor art (Joyce 22, 34), to see how it will comport itself. Her ethical intentions allow Moore to shed both the biases of her fellow artists and the doubts of the reading public, thus offering a new perspective.

Thus freed from critical expectations Moore can lay out what poetry could and ought to be. She condemns “insolence and triviality,” preferring poets who are “literalists of the imagination,” who “...can present / for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” the ultimate end of poetry, to the playful Moore (ll. 20-24). Poetry distills reality as a way of playing out and solving social problems. But it is crucial to work out these problems alongside *others*, to be a “full” poet, not half a one, using form to invite a response, avoiding deliberate obscurancy and isolationism.

Interestingly, Moore’s quotation marks demonstrates these open-ended moments. She does not use them satirically but to shift authority and embrace the flattened hierarchy of reader and writer. The quotations around “literalists of / the imagination” in lines 21-22 signify a borrowed idea—despite it being her *own* phrase. Moore sacrifices “credit” to make a point about producing “full” poetry. By inserting this “quotation” Moore troubles poetic authority. Through this kind of understatement, a coy “citation,” Moore sacrifices artistic authority (all while making rhetorical claims for a conversational exchange) as a gesture of goodwill and invitation. She balances her authoritative claim to knowing what the best poetry is (i.e.: not “half” poetry) with this self-effacing gesture. Moore would rather risk her bardic status than be a “half-poet” merely talking to herself. She does not do this out of true modesty or doubt but because the pragmatic Moore knows it is a way toward motivation, action.

As mentioned, the first printing of “Poetry,” appearing in the July 1919 issue of *Others*, differed slightly from the 1924 version. The differences are a handful of additional phrases, including an elongated line fifteen where Moore had written after the examples of the “Base- / ball fan, the statistician” that “—case after case / could be cited did / one wish it” (Schulze 205, ll. 15-17). Also, “. . .In the meantime, if you demand on one hand, / the raw material of poetry” is broken in the middle by the additional piece “in defiance of their opinion” (Schulze 205, l. 26). Moore tempered the tone of her poem a bit in five years, removing the aggressiveness of “defiance” and tossing out the legalistic “case after case.” By 1924 she trusts the more subdued poem to speak for itself.

Moore’s faith in understatement is even greater by the reprinting of *Observations* in 1925, when “Poetry” appeared as follows, stripped down to only thirteen lines:

I too, dislike it:
 there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
 The bat, upside down; the elephant pushing,
 a tireless wolf under a tree,
 the base-ball fan, the statistician— 5
 “business documents and schoolbooks”—
 these phenomena are pleasing,
 but when they have been fashioned
 into that which is unknowable,
 we are not entertained. 10
 It may be said of all of us
 that we do not admire what we cannot under stand;
 enigmas are not poetry. (Schulze 207)

Jeffrey Peterson tabulates eleven different printings of “Poetry” (both new versions and reversions) published during (and after) Moore’s lifetime, and this single-stanza version is the fulcrum (237). Notably, one “quotation” remains. This referencing is finally lost in Moore’s final versions of the poem, a version of merely three lines. That final variant:

I, too, dislike it.
 Reading, it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
 it, after all, a place for the genuine. (Moore, *Complete Poems* 36)

While the quotations and familiarity of the original abandon aesthetic authority and avoid unilateral communication, surprisingly the later versions of “Poetry,” though considerably leaner, attempt the same effect. Elizabeth Gregory elaborates:

...[T]he interrogation of authority in “Poetry” developed across Moore’s revisions of it over the years. The poem was well known and well liked, in

all its subversive playfulness. But its argument created problems for its poet. For if it was “genuine” on first publication, once it became well known, by its own lights it lost some of its genuineness. For later publications, Moore revised the poem substantially and managed in so doing to disperse some of the familiarity. (*Quotation...* 158)

Further, Gregory explains the final, three-line “Poetry” in relation to its ancestors:

By relegating the well-known longer version to the endnotes, Moore again brings into question this and any poem’s claims to stability and authority. Even as she demotes the longer version, she re-creates it as a kind of guarantor, with an authority based in priority, that can lend some of its weight to the newer, shorter version to which she appends it. At the same time, she creates a sense of alienation for the reader, who does not know how to take a poem exiled to the notes, and this unfamiliarity allows for... the prerequisite genuineness. (*Quotation...* 158)

Moore subsumed aesthetic authority to the necessities of communication, even if it meant tearing apart her most iconic poem. Sacrificing artistic adulation for nonhierarchical communication is laudable. Lakritz elaborates on Moore’s process, saying that once “Poetry” became a canonical, familiar poem, easily connecting reader to poet, Moore felt the need to alter it (126). She did not want a reader to feel fully at ease in her work; she thought the communication of artist and audience must be challenging, not superficial (Lakritz 127-8). Moore’s pragmatic aesthetic was only interested in making poetry “useful” (Miller *Cultures...* 154). Thus if a poem had become less efficient in its task of embodying “full” poetry then it was due for an edit. As Elizabeth Joyce writes, Moore never permits form to become more important than the poem itself (22). If the form of the poem must change to serve her ethos, so be it. And while such self-editing may be seen as “vanity” or self-importance (Shaw 115), I prefer to think of it as Moore’s method of adapting to a changing society and remaining forever useful.

The thematic other half of this marriage—“Critics and Connoisseurs”—is actually located a few poems after “Poetry” in 1924’s *Observations*. Unlike “Poetry,” this poem has little history of alteration. But like its companion piece, “Critics...” originated in *Others* (July 1916) in another issue guest-edited by William Carlos Williams (Schulze 217), suggesting already a similar sensibility. “Critics” does have, however, a direct (yet, paradoxically, anachronistic) response to “Poetry,” displaying a reversed perspective. Where “Poetry” made a small thing of esoteric *poetry*, “Critics and Connoisseurs” makes

poetry from the small things of *life*. After seeing the speakers of “Poetry” now Moore reveals the listeners, the “Critics and Connoisseurs”:

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious
fastidiousness. Certain Ming
products, imperial floor coverings of coach
wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen something
that I like better—a 5
mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted animal
stand up,
similar determination to make a pup
eat his meat on the plate.

I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford
with flamingo colored, maple- 10
leaflike fleet. It reconnoitered like a battle
ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were staple
ingredients in its
disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was not proof
against its
proclivity to more fully appraise such bits 15
of food as the stream

bore counter to it; made away with what I gave it
to eat. I have seen this swan and
I have seen you; I have seen ambition without
understanding in a variety of forms. Happening to stand 20
by an ant hill, I have
seen a fastidious ant carrying a stick north, south, east, west,
till it turned on
itself, struck out from the flower bed into the lawn,
and returned to the point

from which it had started. Then abandoning the stick as 25
useless and overtaxing its
jaws with a particle of whitewash pill-like but
heavy, it again went through the same course of procedure. What is
there in being able
to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude of self
defense, 30
in proving that one has had the experience
of carrying a stick? (*Observations 77*)

“Critics and Connoisseurs” opens as the converse to “Poetry.” After “Poetry”
rejected artistic obscurantism Moore in “Critics” depicts a poetics sprouting from

“unconscious / fastidiousness” (ll. 1-2). She deflates aesthetic objects like “Ming / products” and “imperial floor coverings,” cheekily calling them “well enough in their way” (l. 4). She finds a better art in “a / mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted animal stand up” (ll. 5-6), a superior talent in making “a pup / eat his meat on the plate” (ll. 7-8). Moore seems to be undermining art’s purposes, as in “Poetry.” However this time she works in the opposite direction (from the side of the critical reader), allowing us to query the *effects* of poetry just as “Poetry” tested its *intents*.

Moore makes her interrogation of poetic assumptions more apparent in the second stanza: following the description of a “swan under the willows in Oxford” that “reconnoitered like a battle / ship” (ll. 9-12), Moore states that this creature’s “[d]isbelief and conscious fastidiousness were staple / ingredients in its / disinclination to move” (ll. 12-14). The swan, surprisingly, is not a symbol of nature: Moore rejects two centuries of poetics in dismissing the pathetic fallacy, positing that this “swan” is precisely what is *not* poetry. The swan in all its romantic glory tries *too* hard, Moore jokes—it protests too much to be genuine poetry. The swan is all “conscious fastidiousness,” sacrificing the imagination (in Williams’s sense) and the power of a readerly exchange for “a proclivity to more fully appraise such bits / of food as the stream // bore counter to it” (ll. 15-17).

The swan embodies the title’s “Critics and Connoisseurs” which, Moore argues, are figures with a similar pathology. Aesthetic critics and elitist aficionados—those with an eye for the “Ming / products” of stanza one and the “flamingo colored” swan of stanza two—would use poetry to dominate rather than to converse. Such critics and aesthetes resist ceding control over art, something Moore sees as essential to poetry’s social work, and a practice she demonstrated in “Poetry” and “A Fool...” The “conscious fastidiousness” of poets and critics is a thinly-veiled attempt to contain and define art. They choose to live like the swan, in isolation, aggressively attacking other aesthetics like a “battle / ship” (ll. 11-12) to avoid giving up their right to be right. Most damning is the “Disbelief” Moore finds in the swan-like writers and readers. Their choice to refuse alternate aesthetic communications represents the pragmatic failure of these “Critics and Connoisseurs” to produce the world they wish to inhabit. Their smug “hardihood” and “proclivity” to fuss over nothing, to “fully appraise such bits / of food” as they can find, is a sad tribute to their isolation. Theirs is a problematic masculinist sensibility (Ostriker

51), mistaking weakness for strength; they can never learn from or influence others as long as they swim only in the same waters and worry over pedantic concerns.

Yet in stanza three Moore softens her criticism: she refuses to assault her naysayers (the swans) with sarcasm. Instead she empathizes, writing in lines 18-19: “I have seen this swan and / I have seen you; I have seen ambition without / understanding in a variety of forms.” Tony Hoagland believes these lines show Moore’s tendencies to be “always assertive, but... not always aggressive” which he believes makes some poems “suffer” (13). I object to this since true aggression limits the agency of a reader; Moore’s check to her temper is a balance of reform-mindedness and fairness toward her critics. The poem is strengthened not by its anger but its tenderness, as Moore drops her usual undercurrent of humor with a hint of personal sadness. As a poet, Moore has more at stake in arguing for an interactive poetics than did her male colleagues; even her fellow *Others* at times would have privileged their own aesthetic circles over communication with the broader reading public. Thus line 20’s “variety of forms” is so prescient, as it argues *against* the modernist belief that art’s *form* was everything; Moore proved this point in tearing “Poetry” apart to fit the needs of communication. There is no perfect choice among poetry’s “variety of forms.” Instead one attitude only needs an attitude of openness to make useful poetry.

Linda Leavell argues that “Critics and Connoisseurs” is a crucial text, displaying “the first fully realized Moore stanza” with “not only a typological and syllabic pattern consisting of rhymed and unrhymed lines, but, most significantly, a syntax liberated from stanzaic form, which allows her to write longer poems and to write more straightforward, naturally fluid prose sentences” (*Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts* 72). Other artists’ forms had become a hindrance to Moore. The arbitrary nature of poetic form—the “conscious fastidiousness” of it—only limited her, so Moore rejects other forms in favor of her own prosy style, chosen from trial and error rather than for its ease or flash. She writes to convey words to the other, not to demonstrate technical prowess or experimental pomposity. Moore’s stanzas transform into swan’s wings not to show off but to remind readers of the modernist temptation to prize form over content.

To live in one’s own poetics is to be like the “fastidious ant” of lines 22-25 who carried “a stick north, south, east, west, till it turned on / itself, struck out from the flower

bed into the lawn, and returned to the point // from which it started.” Moore works to avoid the ant’s twin traps, representing narcissism and solipsism. She warns poets, critics, and readers that the ego easily turns self-important, self-sufficient. Some artists work as hard as the ant only to arrive back where they began: alone, despairing, and “abandoning the stick as useless and overtaxing” only to fruitlessly begin again “the same course of procedure” (ll. 25-26, 28). “Critics and Connoisseurs” walks hand-in-hand with “Poetry,” suggesting that poetry is not special because it is revered or prescribed or loved but because its strange accidents—its “unconscious” identification and reuse of the connective tissues of our world—are, ultimately, “useful.”

If in “Poetry” Moore laid down her poetic arms for gestures of communicative ethics, “Critics and Connoisseurs” asks her readers, critics, and fellow poets to do the same. She asks in the final stanza, “What is / there in being able / to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude of self defense, / in proving that one has had the experience / of carrying a stick?” (ll. 28-32). The swan’s self-defensive beauty is folly, just like the ant’s self-important quest. We are not to laud ourselves, Moore says, but to speak across the gaps between individuals, to only connect. *Form*—the swan—whether ancient or innovative, is not enough to justify poetic esoterica. Neither is the *content*—the ant’s stick—important unless the poem means something to another. If the stick never changes hands the work has failed no matter how far the ant wandered. Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* aptly defines this ethic of selflessness:

“Ethics” should be understood here to mean the negativizing of narcissism within a practice; in other words, a practice is ethical when it dissolves those narcissistic functions... to which the signifying process succumbs in its socio-symbolic realization. Practice,... positing and dissolving meaning and the unity of the subject, therefore encompasses the ethical. (233)

Moore’s poem illustrates this “practice” of eliminating the ego and focusing value away from the self, toward another. Poetry sets us free from our minds; instead of a Sisyphean angst over “bits / of food” or “carrying a stick,” the “unconscious fastidiousness”—the accident of meaning everyday life provides—can create useful poetry *for* us.

Moore wants her readers to see the critics as we would see the ant or swan, asking why we need “self defense” and why we, ant-like, repeat our mistakes. Moore ends with a question, not satirical but rhetorical, conveying the sadness of line 20’s empathetic, “I

have seen you.” Moore put herself firmly in the public eye as an American woman artist, deciding that her discourse ethics were more important than her desire to serve herself as an independent artist. Connecting with others meant wearing no armor, but she would rather undermine her vocation and make herself a critical target than remain stagnant, merely talking to herself. Moore risks failure and ridicule in order to grow as artist and human—breaking free from the trap of animalistic self-protectiveness and empty activity that many of her fellow modernists could not escape. In conversation with “Poetry,” “Critics and Connoisseurs” continually illustrates Moore’s term “conversity,” the ability to make progress through intellectual give-and-take (Churchill 137).

Arthur Danto writes that to successfully read we must first establish a relationship of trust with an author, and, furthermore, much of this is the *author’s* responsibility; thus if an author contradicts reality in some way, the reader is free to exit the conversation (174-75). Moore never forces us out of her discourse, always speaking the truth of her own experience. Elizabeth Bishop echoes these sentiments about her poetic godmother, saying, “Marianne Moore’s greatest influence on me was a thirst for accuracy” (Bishop and Monteiro 73). Likewise, Peter Robinson builds on Danto’s concept, writing that the idea of objective truth in poetry is an ethical issue, not merely an aesthetic one (105). Poets must in some way be true to the “facts” of experience in order to treat their readers ethically, beyond offering accurate descriptions and details from life (Robinson 96). This is what Moore believed: that the artist who would change society cannot be offensive *or* defensive; she must instead invite her reader to a conversation in no man’s land, giving readers the tools to critique critics and poets for ourselves. Moore knows that the truth of her experience is broader than that of the swan and the ant. But the only way to guarantee this is to put it alongside the experience of all others, and let us freely judge. To privilege her own poetic forms and meanings over others is to wrongly believe her experience is the truest. In Moore, aesthetics and ethics always remain under construction.

Conflicted Settings

My next marriage is “New York” and “People’s Surroundings,” and though the two are juxtaposed in *Observations* they at first seem only tangentially related. However, both deal with the problems of the American past and future, and both originally

appeared in *The Dial* within a six month period in 1921-1922. When taken as a conversation they reveal a question-and-answer relationship. “New York” asks a question—which social hierarchy will we use to judge past and present—and “People’s Surroundings” responds to this query, advocating for a nonhierarchical, inalienable union of eras, classes, and peoples in the space of contemporary America.

“New York” opens the conversation with its own dialectic of past and present:

the savage’s romance,
 accreted where we need the space for commerce—
 the centre of the wholesale fur trade,
 starred with tepees of ermine and peopled with foxes,
 the long guard-hairs waving two inches beyond the body of the pelt 5
 the ground dotted with deer-skins—white with white spots,
 “as satin needlework in a single color may carry a varied pattern,”
 and wilting eagles’ down compacted by the wind;
 and picardels of beaver skin; white ones alert with snow.
 It is a far cry from the “queen full of jewels” 10
 and the beau with the muff,
 from the gilt coach shaped like a perfume-bottle,
 to the conjunction of the Monongahela and the Allegheny,
 and the scholastic philosophy of the wilderness
 to combat which one must stand outside and laugh 15
 since to go in is to be lost.
 It is not the dime-novel exterior,
 Niagara Falls, the calico horses and the war canoe;
 it is not that “if the fur is not finer than such as one sees others wear,
 one would rather be without it”— 20
 that estimated in raw meat and berries, we could feed the universe;
 it is not the atmosphere of ingenuity,
 the otter, the beaver, the puma skins
 without shooting-irons or dogs;
 it is not the plunder, 25
 but “accessibility to experience.” (*Observations* 107)

The first four lines illustrate one of Moore’s more opaque openings. Then the poem proceeds even more obscurely into a strange sequence of nouns with no explicit claim or argument. Rieke notes the resistance to a single “formulation” this poem presents (161-2). But obscurity is a mask; there must still be something behind it. What is “the savage’s romance”? Moore tells us: it is what has “accreted” from time, an idea that has piled up, been constructed in particular locales, places where “we need[ed] the space for commerce —.” Moore writes a more accurate edition of New York state history than her society’s

version. She knows that the “romance” of the “savage” and its implied threat to white civilization was just that, a fictional construct, one that conveniently cropped up at moments in history when European ideologies and “commerce” sought expansion. Moore sees history as flexible; the events of the present and past are not monolithic but mutable, with actions and motivations dependent upon the dominant culture’s current needs.

Moore’s poem obliquely engages with the difficult questions of history, asking her readers to question what they value most in society. She presents one point of view, saying that the myth of the “savage” appears where “*we* [my emphasis]” would establish commerce; the “*we*” here is a collective European *we*, the *we* composing the American hegemony, the high point on its class hierarchy.

Much like the trench poets, Moore seems to be flinging the rhetoric of her society back in its face. There is a sarcastic tinge to Moore’s American “*we*,” but the poem does not embody a unilateral assailing of cultural and social imperialism, instead it shifts back and forth, sizing up the conflicts between agriculture and industry, civilization and wilderness, and past and present with equal irony. To Moore, all these dualities collide in the liminal space of New York. She outlines on the New York palimpsest a place that includes “tepees of ermine” amid a citizenry of “foxes,” later to be written over by the “satin needlework” of the present, commercial society (ll. 4, 7). The repetition of “white” is fundamental: though the European immigrants to what became New York may have whitewashed its history (making the natives and other immigrants into flat villains), they have not managed to overwrite the complex history. Moore sees a “ground dotted with deer-skins—white with white spots” (l. 6), a powerful image of cultural endurance. Though the landscape at first appears totally whitewashed, modernized by industry and commercialism, we can still find the other even in modernism’s midst: camouflaged spots remain, white *within* white. Moore explains the endurance of the other, placed within the quotation marks (of an advertisement, perhaps) of line seven: “as satin needlework in a single color may carry a varied pattern” (l. 7), so can the past survive the present. Though the majority culture may only see “a single color” (white culture), another voice, image, or experience remains, underneath and within. Like the “wilting eagles’ down compacted by the wind” (l. 8), the white-within-white—deftly illustrated in the “white ones alert with snow” (l. 9)—actually adds color to a monolithic shade.

Moore wants to raise questions rather than provide answers, to show the full pattern rather than the familiar side. Though she does not try to topple white cultural hegemony, she at least notes that there is more to society than European aesthetics and colonial histories. American instances of a (colorful) white-within-white, of historical others within the gaps of present culture, may be "...a far cry from the 'queen full of jewels' / and the beau with the muff, / from the gilt coach shaped like a perfume-bottle," says Moore (ll. 10-12). That is, of course the new culture will subvert classical standards and hierarchies: the "queen" of the New World will differ from the English "'queen full of jewels.'" American culture has more in common with the frontier, the "conjunction of the Monongahela and the Allegheny" rivers, and "the scholastic philosophy of the wilderness" (ll. 13-14), than with the Old World. Converging waterways mark the meeting of past and present, with Native American river names mixing with the modern canals of industry and production. From these two points of view and streams of thought arises Moore's solution: the "scholastic philosophy of the wilderness." The land of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman has produced a philosophy for the twentieth century as well, Moore believes; their "scholasticism" originating in nature, blending ancient and modern perspectives, is built upon dialectic. To find the real wilderness we must look outward and backward from modern New York (Carson 327). The present is not enough.

From the perspective of the wilderness (the locale of the other), a "'queen full of jewels'" has no power, the "muff" and "gilt coach" are silly, and Moore says one can only "stand outside and laugh / since to go in is to be lost" (l. 15). Laughter's significance re-emerges, for laughter offers us the distance from ourselves required to produce discourse. Without an outsider position, we cannot critique any society, especially our own. If we take "gilt coaches" to be arbiters of culture, if we cannot see spots within the pattern, our discourse ethics cannot gain a foothold as we will need nothing of the other. Laughter and its open invitation is the key to revealing our better selves. The poem's awkwardness reminds us to laugh at the absurdity of idealizing or mythologizing the "romance" of the past, of not seeing through the artificiality of "the dime-novel exterior, / Niagara Falls, the calico horses and the war canoe" (ll. 17-18). Moore's ability to ironize the mythic past, particularly America's past (Joyce 119), frees her to cast a cold eye on her own time, as well. Perspective depends on ironic distance.

Moore's long, negative sentence comprising the last ten lines of "New York" puts aside the obstacles to finding and encompassing all perspectives. Moore disavows nostalgic romance (ll. 17-18), aristocratic privilege (ll. 19-20), basic necessities (l. 21), instinct or "ingenuity" (ll. 22-24), and wealth or "plunder" (ll. 24-25). One thing remains: "accessibility to experience" (l. 26). The quotation marks again indicate a distanced perspective, following Moore's continued interest in sacrificing poetic authority for a readerly conversation. "Experience"—discovering one another's world—is what makes "New York" the site of possibility. Miller writes in *Cultures of Modernity* that both the actual and literary spaces of New York represented to Moore a world of opportunity—not just frustrated desires but vital "experience" (22). Experience takes precedence over evaluation, for Moore. Joyce writes that Moore's poem envisions the city "as a labyrinth composed of elements of its past that percolate into and mold the present" (119), intending to critique the present (Joyce 120). But I read Moore's poem as comparing, assembling, and testing a space without judgment. Moore critiques *all* unilateral perspectives equally, writing that "one must stand outside and laugh" at all narrow points of view (l. 15). Seigfried echoes Moore in arguing that "experience is reality" and that our personal experience of the universe, on a daily basis, creates our sense of it (150, 154). But experience is not complete unless we judge another's viewpoint as equal to our own. Zwagerman writes that humor marks "intimacy" rather than distance, and is a way of practically conversing with an audience, even a hostile one (199). Moore laughs with us, pointing to our failures and our triumphs equally; she does not ignore or whitewash a troubled American history, but brings all perspectives into a rare conversation.

"People's Surroundings," following "New York," continues the experimental project, but this time expanding our experience in the dimension of space rather than time. The poem's title deftly alludes to Moore's greater project by ceding its authoritative position and becoming a part of the poem's opening. The poem is a thread of experience unwound, moving backward from our immediate surroundings to the world beyond:

They answer one's questions:
 a deal table compact with the wall;
 in this dried bone of arrangement,
 one's "natural promptness" is compressed, not crowded out;
 one's style is not lost in such simplicity:

5

the palace furniture, so old fashioned, so old fashionable;
Sèvres china and the fireplace dogs—
bronze dromios with pointed ears, as obsolete as pugs;
one has one's preference in the matter of bad furniture
and this is not one's choice: 10

the vast indestructible necropolis
of composite Yawman-Erbe separable units;
the steel, the oak, the glass, the Poor Richard publications
containing the public secrets of efficiency
on "paper so thin that one thousand four hundred and twenty pages make
one inch," 15
exclaiming, so to speak, When you take my time, you take something I
had meant to use:

the highway hid by fir-trees in rhododendron twenty feet deep,
the peacocks, hand-forged gates, old Persian velvet—
roses outlined in pale black on an ivory ground—
the pierced iron shadows of the cedars, 20
Chinese carved glass, old Waterford,
lettered ladies; landscape gardening twisted into permanence
(*Observations* 108, ll. 1-22)

While "New York" began with the distant past and ended with immediate "experience," this companion poem reverses that trick, moving outward from what is near to what is far away, ending with a bird's-eye view seeking how "People's Surroundings" can "answer one's questions." This poem echoes "New York"'s theme of production, though the fur trade is replaced by furniture production. Falchetta calls this one of Moore's "catalogue poems," a collection of objects marking a personal calculus (125). These "surroundings" mean something to Moore, but by the final stanza they will extend far beyond the poet.

"New York"'s time traveling is exchanged for space traveling in "People's Surroundings" as Moore considers if objects will help us understand ourselves. These first four stanzas slowly zoom outward, encompassing more and more scenery. Line two's "deal table compact with the wall" is claustrophobically placed in our way in this tiny space. The table's cheap wooden construction is purely utilitarian. Efficiency, or "one's 'natural promptness,'" as line four dubs it, "is compressed, not crowded out." Moore's narrator then says, "one's style is not lost in such simplicity" (l. 5), a claim borne out in the next stanza. For furniture—whether the basic "deal table" and "dried

bone arrangement” of a tiny room, or “the palace furniture, so old fashioned, so old fashionable” of stanza two (l. 6)—is all *equally* “bad furniture” (l. 9), no matter what kind, although “this is not one’s choice” (l. 10).

Now these are odd claims, and apparently sardonic ones: why call all furniture “bad”? In moving the observing eye outward from a crowded, cheap room to a house full of palatial furniture, Moore suggests that the broader our perspective on “People’s Surroundings,” the better we will understand answers to “one’s questions.” Importantly, the colons that end the first five stanzas of the poem push us directly into each next scene, giving us a continuously-broadening point of view. Stanza three explains the furniture hierarchy, now that we have moved outward from the home to the workplace: the factory. Space expands as we take in a still-larger scene, a “vast indestructible necropolis / of composite Yawman-Erbe separable units” (ll. 11-12), filled with “Poor Richard publications / containing the public secrets of efficiency” (ll. 13-15). We have left the private sphere for the public, entering a factory signifying American productivity; the “Poor Richard” efficiency secrets bring the industrious ethics of early America to modern industry. Moore’s line 16, “When you take my time, you take something I had meant to use,” might have been straight out of Ben Franklin, and it suggests the primacy of productivity in the public sphere. This is a manmade factory plant where “oak” changes from a natural product into something “composite” and dead (hence the “necropolis”). Perhaps humans *are* what they *make*, Moore muses, as the “Yawman-Erbe” brand stamped upon dead oaks suggests. Nature under human influence bears our likeness; no matter the style, transformed natural objects begin to resemble their owners.

Stanza four takes one more step backward from factory to “the highway hid by fir-trees in rhododendron twenty feet deep” (l. 17), the landscapes that border the city. Glimpses of the larger world are present in the exotic figures of “peacocks,” “old Persian velvet,” “ivory,” “cedars,” and “Chinese carved glass” (ll. 18-21). Yet the factory is still powerful: images of nature still resemble their human masters. Thus the extravagant garden reminds us little of *nature*; it is not wild but an arranged display, with pieces from all corners of the world in a contrived, controlled microcosm. The only place to find peacocks, cedars, ivory, and firs together is in a human-imagined space of nature—a park or garden for “lettered ladies” (l. 21). Line 22 is crucial, envisioning “landscape

gardening twisted into permanence.” Whether by industry or aesthetics we try to preserve nature and its use-value artificially. Nature lives and dies, but human nature would preserve what it loves, our objects or ourselves. The result is nature “twisted into permanence”—a perfect definition of furniture. We make nature in our image, turning vitality to stonelike immortality, seeing if its artificiality will keep us forever young.

The next two stanzas step back even further, envisioning more expansive space:

straight lines over such great distances as one finds in Utah or in Texas
where people do not have to be told
that “a good brake is as important as a good motor,” 25
where by means of extra sense cells in the skin,
they can like trout, smell what is coming—
those cool sirs with the explicit sensory apparatus of common sense,
who know the exact distance between two points as the crow flies;
there is something attractive about a mind that moves in a straight line—
the municipal bat-roost of mosquito warfare, concrete statuary, 31
medicaments for “instant beauty” in the hands of all,
and that live wire, the American string quartette:

and Bluebeard’s tower above the coral reefs,
the magic mousetrap closing on all points of the compass, 35
capping like petrified surf, the furious azure of the bay
where there is no dust and life is like a lemon-leaf,
a green piece of tough translucent parchment,
where the crimson, the copper, and the Chinese vermilion of the
poincianas

set fire to the masonry and turquoise blues refute the clock; 40
this dungeon with odd notions of hospitality,
with its “chessmen carved out of moonstones,”
its mocking-birds, fringed lilies, and hibiscus,
its black butterflies with blue half circles on their wings,
tan goats with onyx ears, its lizards glittering and without thickness 45
like splashes of fire and silver on the pierced turquoise of the lattices
and the acacia-like lady shivering at the touch of a hand,
lost in a small collision of the orchids—
dyed quicksilver let fall
to disappear like an obedient chameleon in fifty shades of mauve and
amethyst: 50

here where the mind of this establishment has come to the conclusion
that it would be impossible to revolve about one’s self too much,
sophistication has like “an escalator,” “cut the nerve of progress.”
(*Observations* 109-10, ll. 23-53)

The highway obscured in stanza four launches us into stanza five, one of those “straight lines over such great distances as one finds in Utah or in Texas.” Highway and state boundaries form unnatural barriers and markers on the landscape, manmade, unlike the natural demarcations of rivers like the Allegheny of “New York.” Straight lines are like gardens: human *revisions* of nature. But our surroundings, arbitrary or not, still describe and contain us. The squared expanses of a “Utah” or broad, blocky “Texas” outline the people within. Moore describes these citizens as straightforward, solid people, “those cool sirs with the explicit sensory apparatus of common sense, / who know the exact distance between two points as the crow flies,” adding wryly that “there is something attractive about a mind that moves in a straight line—” (ll. 28-30). This irony does not ridicule those who moved westward; in fact, Moore’s speaker envies those who can live in straight lines, marking out rows to plant, courses of study, journeys to trek. Moore is not immune to the need to make sense out of insensible life, but she still sees some movements as artificial. Like the garden “twisted into permanence” these “straight lines” of rationality are arbitrary and unnatural. Even American *arts* are made of straight, solid lines: “concrete statuary” traps the human form, and “that live wire, the American string quartette,” makes straight lines out of musical abstractions (ll. 31, 33). Now assuming a perspective on an entire nation, Moore confirms her theory: the squares and lines we make of the earth tell us more about us than nature. Yet in spite of herself, Moore finds herself wishing, to whatever degree, she could live in such comprehensible cubes.

Stanza six backs up one last step to take in the whole earth, espying “Bluebeard’s Tower above the coral reefs” in the Virgin Islands. Moore calls the ocean “the magic mousetrap closing on all points of the compass” (ll. 34-35), marking our final remove away from the familiar, while simultaneously finding a connecting point for all the world’s borders. Interestingly, this tropical coast—off the island of St. Thomas, with Blackbeard’s (Moore mistakenly calls it “Bluebeard’s”) Castle looming over the harbor—had been purchased by the United States in 1917, five years before Moore’s poem first appeared. Thus despite being a wild space, isolated by the waters of the world, this landscape remains a demarcated place, a garden with politics written on its shores. Moore offers a mild critique of U.S. imperialism, cataloging the beauty of the natural flora and fauna of an island that ought to be an Eden free of human intervention. But it is not:

“Bluebeard’s tower above the coral reefs” stands a blunt reminder of the exploitation of nature in pursuit of wealth. Human hues color the “coral reefs”: “furious azure of the bay” (l. 36), “the crimson, the copper, and the Chinese vermilion of the poincianas” (l. 39), the “turquoise blues” (l. 40), the “chessmen carved out of moonstones” (l. 42), “tan goats with onyx ears” (l. 45), lizards “like splashes of fire and silver on the pierced turquoise of the lattices” (l. 46), and orchids like “dyed quicksilver” in shades of “mauve and amethyst” (ll. 49-50). We only see these natural things through human eyes, and their *value* is assessed accordingly: their brilliant colors can be understood only as rich textiles, and their shining surfaces seem to us the reflections of gems. Like the island itself—purchased (with the other U.S. Virgin Islands) for \$25 million—all its contents may be appraised at a definite manmade value. All nature becomes our “chessmen.”

Moore makes this process of humanizing nature most clear in her last three lines of the stanza: “here where the mind of this establishment has come to the conclusion / that it would be impossible to revolve about one’s self too much, / sophistication has like ‘an escalator,’ ‘cut the nerve of progress’” (ll. 51-53). Here she is harsher in criticizing the human (and the American) tendency to make oneself the forefront player in the world’s drama, suggesting sardonically that human intervention in the natural world should go *unchecked*. In a moment of sarcasm the frustrated Moore ironizes that we would never wish to “‘cut the nerve of progress,’” irritated as she is by human encroachment on nature. She believes that the more “sophistication” we take on, the further we will be from making any real “‘progress.’”

The final stanza of “People’s Surroundings” assesses all of these viewpoints:

In these non-committal, personal-impersonal expressions of appearance,
the eye knows what to skip; 55
the physiognomy of conduct must not reveal the skeleton;
“a setting must not have the air of being one,”
yet with x-raylike inquisitive intensity upon it, the surfaces go back;
the interfering fringes of expression are but a stain on what stands out,
there is neither up nor down to it; 60
we see the exterior and the fundamental structure—
captains of armies, cooks, carpenters,
cutlers, gamesters, surgeons and armourers,
lapidaries, silkmen, glovers, fiddlers and ballad-singers,
sextons of churches, dyers of black cloth, hostlers and chimney-sweeps,
queens, countesses, ladies, emperors, travellers and mariners, 66

dukes, princes and gentlemen
 in their respective places—
 camps, forges and battlefields,
 conventions, oratories and wardrobes, 70
 dens, deserts, railway stations, asylums and places where engines are
 made,
 shops, prisons, brickyards and altars of churches—
 in magnificent places clean and decent,
 castles, palaces, dining-halls, theatres and imperial audience-chambers.
 (*Observations* 110, ll. 53-74)

Moore acknowledges her process of broadening our perspectives, calling this study of settings an exercise in “personal-impersonal expressions of appearance,” where “the eye knows what to skip” and where our study of exterior relationships “must not reveal the skeleton.” Moore ironically posits that ““a setting must not have the air of being one,”” all the while knowing that “yet with x-raylike inquisitive intensity upon it, the surfaces go back” (ll. 57-58). People hide within their settings, masking desires within a cover of rationality marked by straight lines, trimmed hedges, squared furniture, and factory blueprints. “People’s Surroundings” “answer one’s questions” not because that is all settings *can* do, but because humans make sure they do; from the deal table of cheap wood to the flowers of the Caribbean we make certain that the human imprint is eternally visible, attempting to transcend the limitations of life and will. Moore sees through these exteriors, pointing out the “surroundings” our eyes try to “skip.”

But some hope remains: though humans stamp the world in their image, this narcissism is useful. Moore says, “there is neither up nor down to it; / we see the exterior and the fundamental structure—” (ll. 60-61). Within her wry assessment of our self-shaped surroundings Moore has found something “fundamental.” No matter where we look—bedroom, mansion, factory, garden, state, or paradise—human behavior is recognizable, similar. *All* tame our surroundings and redraw them in our likeness. Moore is correct that “there is neither up nor down to it,” there is no difference of thought or action, really, in social hierarchies; we are all alike, given the chance. Thus Moore’s ending—a list of occupations and their settings (all human constructions)—carries an egalitarian force. She does not rank settings or professions but places them alongside one another in a Whitmanian expression of equality. The list sets “captains of armies” beside “cooks” and “carpenters” (l. 62), and “imperial audience-chambers” are joined to public

“theatres” (l. 74). Ironically, Moore has found something common to humanity: the desire to control (and be reflected by) our settings. Her anti-hierarchical list answers the questions of “New York”: in the prior poem she made *time* past and time present equal. In this poem, she makes all human *spaces* similarly equivalent. Political hierarchies are flattened by humanity’s universal vanity.

The opening question of “People’s Surroundings” seems to be its own joke: our settings do not really “answer one’s questions” as much as they reveal our desire *not* to ask any of others but only to see ourselves projected upon our settings. Nevertheless, Moore makes something positive of this selfishness: if we all react the same way to the world—if we all fear difference and serve ourselves—then at least we have common ground in our mutual selfishness, Moore laughs. Though at moments her humor turns sarcastic when Moore demands our agreement through a direct defense of the natural, animal, and antihuman, she does not defeat her stronger ironies. By studying the American experiment—both in time and in space—Moore arrives at a makeshift camaraderie, putting our worst characteristics to good use. In the end she smiles and shrugs: if you cannot beat them, you might as well join them.

Marrying “Marriage”

Our final pairing is of the famous “Marriage” and “Silence,” poems that try once again to reconcile the complicated dueling ironies of men and women—society at its most basic and complex—and with reconciling these two divergent creatures. “Marriage” and its mate act as a summation of Moore’s explorations of duality in *Observations*, from the dichotomy of female and male ironies in “A Fool, A Foul Thing, A Distressful Lunatic” and “To Military Progress,” to the debate between author and audience in “Poetry” and “Critics and Connoisseurs,” to the divide between American time and space in “New York” and “People’s Surroundings.” All these differences mix together in “Marriage” to form a new compound, one that will finally, in “Silence,” begin to devise a better society in its reconciliation of self and other in the form of the masculine and feminine. And though it has been argued that “Silence” ends in isolation (White 505-6), I will argue to the contrary that it is a poem of hope in spite of its difficult circumstances.

But first is “Marriage.” Its famous opening sets up a discussion of the dualities of marriage from the perspective of Moore’s single figure—the “one” outside looking in:

This institution,
 perhaps one should say enterprise
 out of respect for which
 one says one need not change one’s mind
 about a thing one has believed in, 5
 requiring public promises
 of one’s intention
 to fulfill a private obligation:
 I wonder what Adam and Eve
 think of it by this time, 10
 this firegilt steel
 alive with goldenness;
 how bright it shows—
 “of circular traditions and impostures,
 committing many spoils,” 15
 requiring all one’s criminal ingenuity
 to avoid!
 Psychology which explains everything
 explains nothing
 and we are still in doubt. (*Observations* 115, ll. 1-20) 20

Both endearing and effective is this attempt to retrace human history to find a marriage purified from cultural connotations and complications. Moore begins at its genesis, attempting to estrange us from the economics or romance of marriage, evenly calling it an undertaking or “enterprise.” And since *one* is prior to *two* Moore begins by picturing marriage from the point of view of a sole, single-minded figure: “one says one need not change one’s mind / about a thing one has believed in” (ll. 4-5). Here is the great question of *Observations*: how does *one* listen to another, how does one change one’s mind and grow? Moore answers this question directly: we do so with “public promises / of one’s intention / to fulfill a private obligation” (ll. 6-8). In other words it is *marriage*—the total yoking of one to another—that allows for the fruitful exchange of ideas, the growth of the individual, and the meeting of two minds. Marriage entails a permanent state of mutual protection and respect given to another unconditionally, an ultimate Levinasian ethic. Thus, above tolerance, condescension, and self-interest, marriage is the laboratory where one can and *must* engage the other, without possibility of flight. Of course, human marriages do not always achieve this ideal, but they function on the same principle,

allowing us to overcome the gap between two individuals. A “private obligation” is sealed within the walls of “public promises.”

Moore interrogates this idea ironically, saying, “I wonder what Adam and Eve / think of it by this time,” laughing at marriage’s ““circular traditions and impostures,” “requiring all one’s criminal ingenuity / to avoid!” (ll.9-10, 14, 16-17). This may in fact be an aside to the author Bryher, Moore’s possible personal “Eve,” upon the occasion of Bryher’s marriage of convenience (McCabe 612). But Moore admits her limits, saying, “Psychology which explains everything / explains nothing / and we are still in doubt” (ll. 18-20). Moore is not mocking marriage as much as she is making fun of marriageable *individuals*: if we are the “ones” trying to avoid marriage (and its demands) or if we look to “psychology”—the study of the self and individualist logic—in place of understanding the other, we miss the point. Marriage’s dual “obligation” both entraps and expands us.

The poem relocates to Eden, continuing to dig beneath the “institution” to see what marriage is made of, what is meant to be:

Eve: beautiful woman—
I have seen her
when she was so handsome
she gave me a start,
able to write simultaneously 25
in three languages—
English, German and French
and talk in the meantime;
equally positive in demanding a commotion
and in stipulating quiet: 30
“I should like to be alone;”
to which the visitor replies,
“I should like to be alone;
why not be alone together?”
Below the incandescent stars 35
below the incandescent fruit,
the strange experience of beauty;
its existence is too much;
it tears one to pieces
and each fresh wave of consciousness 40
is poison. (*Observations* 115-16, ll. 21-41)

Here we shift from Moore’s persona to Adam’s musing upon “Eve: beautiful woman.” Adam is the atavistic first *self*, while Eve represents the first *other* (from his viewpoint),

arriving in Eden later. We are looking at the very first discourse. Yet Moore complicates matters with an anachronistic Adam calling Eve an adept linguist, handsome and brilliant, thoroughly modern. By making the first couple our contemporaries, Moore keeps her poem from devolving into nostalgia or abstraction. She begins in Genesis but reminds us she is speaking to the present. Thus her pure distillation of marriage reaches us across all times and conditions, as Adam and Eve vow: “‘I should like to be alone;’ / to which the visitor replies, / ‘I should like to be alone; / why not be alone together?’” (ll. 31-34).

This is the heart of ethical communication—not the loneliness of the self speaking to oneself, nor speech to another without listening—but a shared space, “alone,” the private protections of another within one’s words and presence. This is Moore at her most profound, suggesting that bringing the other into the circle of the self is both possible and necessary to communication. Further, it is essential to us, Moore argues, not just a gift we offer another. She writes that “the strange experience of beauty” in the world “is too much; / it tears *one* to pieces [my emphasis]” (ll. 36-39). The world is too much with (and for) *one*; we need the other’s perspective and experience to complete our image. If “each fresh wave of consciousness / is poison,” as Moore iterates (ll. 40-41), it is because this is *self*-consciousness. It takes two to recognize beauty in the world; it takes another to show the value of the individual. All else is narcissistic, solipsistic destruction. Stripped of its cultural baggage, Moore saw in marriage the pure connection of individuals.

But times change. We skip ahead to the first divorce, next, disunion in Eden:

constrained in speaking of the serpent— 55
 that shed snakeskin in the history of politeness
 not to be returned to again—
 that invaluable accident
 exonerating Adam.
 And he has beauty also; 60
 it’s distressing—the O thou
 to whom, from whom,
 without whom nothing—Adam;
 “something feline,
 something colubrine”—how true! 65
 a crouching mythological monster (*Observations* 116, ll. 55-66)

Dissent is the serpent that slinks into the garden, dividing man from woman, human from God. And what guise does divisiveness don? A “shed snakeskin in the history of

politeness” (l. 56). Deceptive “politeness,” or malevolent irony, denotes a vacuous relationship to another, a toleration that entails no real respect or care. The snake separating man and woman is a kind of broken communication, showing toleration’s lack of understanding and empathy. Interestingly, Moore thought of *herself* as a “serpent” within the mostly-male literary society in New York as she began to establish a female infrastructure within the city’s aesthetics (Miller, “Marianne Moore and the Women...” 340, 357). Her perspective on both men and women remains that of the outsider.

Moore builds upon the serpent’s image of bad faith and deception, ironically calling the snake’s entrance into Eden “that invaluable accident / exonerating Adam” (ll. 58-59). In other words, Satan’s serpentine arrival shifts the blame of the Fall from Adam to Eve—at least in Adam’s mind. Yet no matter who is blamed for paradise lost, Adam is as destroyed by the Fall as Eve; though “exonerated,” Adam shares the loss of Eden equally with his wife, and both lose the Garden’s perfect unity. Dissembling, blame-shifting, and hollow politeness end in division. The irony turns tragic: Moore recognizes Adam as “the O thou / to whom, from whom, / without whom nothing” (ll. 61-63). Though Adam may believe that Eve (“flesh of his flesh”) without *him* is nothing, Moore conflates this in the line, saying that without the *other*, Adam is a hollow *O*, zero, “nothing.” The lies repeated in Eden, the shifting of blame to his wife, leaves Adam alone, outside of communion for the first time, reducing him to *nothing*. And though many men blame their isolation on “‘something feline, / something colubrine’—how true! / a crouching mythological monster” in female form (ll. 64-66), they are wrong to do so. To make a monster of the other—to blame Eve for the Fall—is to fail to see male complicity in sexual division and social fragmentation. A sinister-seeming serpent, cat, or woman is only a “mythological” monster, made of masculine imaginations.

The problem of man’s (chosen) separation from woman returns later in “Marriage,” as Moore envisions a hypothetical man of her own society,

forgetting that there is in woman	
a quality of mind	85
which [as] an instinctive manifestation	
is unsafe,	
he goes on speaking	
in a formal, customary strain	
of “past states,” the present state,	90

seals, promises,
 the evil one suffered,
 the good one enjoys,
 hell, heaven,
 everything convenient 95
 to promote one's joy." [sic]
 There is in him a state of mind
 by force of which,
 perceiving what it was not
 intended that he should, 100
 "he experiences a solemn joy
 in seeing that he has become an idol." (*Observations* 117, ll. 84-102)

A patriarchal society constantly envisions a "quality of mind" in woman that is "unsafe" or threatening to male power. In seeing this quality as a threat, masculinist social forces refuse an exchange with the feminine other and instead an anxious man "goes on speaking / in a formal, customary strain / of 'past states,' the present state, / seals, promises, / the evil one suffered, / the good one enjoys, / hell, heaven, / [and] everything convenient / to promote one's joy" (ll. 88-96). Moore targets those who would defend male hegemony by ignoring the existence of the female. These are men whose polite conversations speak of every possible abstraction—past, present, laws, contracts, good and evil, heaven and hell, anything at all—in order to avoid hearing the truth of their collective abuse of the female other. Abstract theorizing is a shield against real, specific injustices committed against women of that high-minded "state." These conversations do not solicit the other but only spout what the male speaker already believes. By forever speaking broadly of humanity in the abstract, such men can ignore the inequities of actual individuals. Blindness is a "convenient" way "to promote one's joy" (ll. 95-96), at least, the childish happiness of the "one" who feels he owes others nothing. The result: "he experiences a solemn joy / in seeing that he has become an idol" (ll. 101-2). Selfishness at the cost of another is a Pyrrhic victory.

Yet despite a masculinist belief in self-sufficiency our prototypical Adam nevertheless finds himself again in a relationship:

he stumbles over marriage,
 "a very trivial object indeed"
 to have destroyed the attitude 125
 in which he stood—

the ease of the philosopher
unfathered by a woman. (*Observations* 118, ll. 123-28)

One of Moore's great understatements is line 123's image of a man tripped up by the accident of marriage, and his assurances of its "trivial" nature. Yet this "trivial" institution defeats the man's defenses, even for one "unfathered by woman" (i.e. even Adam, of no woman born, needed Eve). Moore mocks the idea that men are doing women a favor in marriage. The poet herself never married and rejected her share of suitors—including Scofield Thayer, Leavell notes ("Frightening Disinterestedness" 68-70). Men need marriage as much as women, says Moore. Both sexes require a total connection with another, and Moore finds it idiotic to argue otherwise.

Of course even once married a man may return to the protection of grandiose abstractions, finding distractions from love and communication continually. He may see love only as,

... a fine art, as an experiment, 155
a duty or as merely recreation.
One must not call him ruffian
nor friction a calamity—
the fight to be affectionate:
"no truth can be fully known 160
until it has been tried
by the tooth of disputation." (*Observations* 119, ll. 155-62)

One way to avoid engaging and caring for the other is to make love a distant, exotic thing, "a fine art," a scientific "experiment," a patriotic "duty" or "merely recreation" (ll. 155-56). Love and marriage is the summation of all these qualities, but none of these elements alone is sufficient for an ethical relationship. The key is the conjunction: had the man said "and" in line 156 he would have been correct, but the "or"—the option of one *or* the other rather than you *and* me—is the fatal flaw in his logic. Yet, Moore allows, "One must not call him ruffian / nor friction a calamity—" for "no truth can be fully known / until it has been tried / by the tooth of disputation" (ll. 157-8, 160-62). We cannot understand reality until we have seen it; yet we must still test our truths, let them be "tried" by pragmatic "disputation." This is no argument for the sake of argument but the test of Habermasian discourse, where a line of questioning seeks truth. Debate and dialogue will broaden ourselves if we become as willing to listen as we are to speak.

But we are not always so magnanimous toward the other, says Moore:

We occidentals are so unemotional,
we quarrel as we feed;
one's self is quite lost,
the irony preserved 185
in "the Ahasuerus tête à tête banquet"
with its "good monster, lead the way,"
with little laughter
and munificence of humor
in that quixotic atmosphere of frankness (*Observations* 120, ll. 182-90)

The frustrated poet revels in the ridiculous irony of human relationships: either we feel nothing or we feel too much ("we quarrel as we feed"). The jokes fall flat, "with little laughter" and with no "munificence of humor." Our jokes are passive-aggressive; rather than pointing out our flaws as a show of good faith, we pick at others. Paradoxically, humor is our "frankness," but the lonely "one's self is quite lost" (l. 184) in this poor jest. False humor, like small talk, is an abstraction, a game of self-protection; there is nothing of the ethical exchange in it, in contrast to a self-deprecating, understated wit.

Moore then proceeds to spend almost the next fifty lines of "Marriage" displaying the catty back-and-forth volleys of anger between men and women, illustrating her weariness of the polite aggression of the Adam-Eve war. Men may have started it, Moore says, observing "that men have power / and sometimes one is made to feel it" (ll. 196-7), as men say, "The fact of woman / is not "the sound of the flute / but every poison"" (ll. 201-3). But Eve, too, abandons the high road and attacks Adam with her own harsh rhetoric: "... "Men are monopolists / of stars, garters, buttons / and other shining baubles"— / unfit to be the guardians / of another person's happiness" (ll. 204-8). Bad relationships descend into power struggles; misogyny flares as the male fires back, "... you will find / that "a wife is a coffin," / that severe object / with the pleasing geometry / stipulating space and not people, / refusing to be buried / and uniquely disappointing" (*Observations* 121, ll. 214-20). He makes women into aesthetic objects with a "uniquely disappointing" reality. The woman retorts: "... 'This butterfly, / this waterfly, this nomad / that has "proposed / to settle on my hand for life."— / What can one do with it?" (ll. 224-28). She pokes a hole in the would-be lover's theories of women and love, showing them to be ridiculous. She finishes, "You know so many artists who are fools," to which

her offended companion spits back, "...[y]ou know so many fools / who are not artists," (ll.232-34). The scene is as uncomfortable as watching one's hosts fight at dinner. Their aesthetic discussions and borrowed platitudes, their attacks and defenses, mean more to them than their marriage. The quotations are unethical here, unlike Moore's in previous poems: the characters use others' words not as points for discussion or rethinking, but as ripostes, with Pound's quote "a wife is a coffin" (Lakritz 185) a perfect addition. The couple flings borrowed ideas at one other, listening only long enough to respond in anger. Moore previously used quotations to cede authority, yet her characters do the opposite, abusing words to exact revenge and heading for mutually-assured destruction.

Following the fight, Moore assesses the situation near the poem's end:

he loves himself so much,
 he can permit himself
 no rival in that love. 240
 She loves herself so much,
 she cannot see herself enough—
 a statuette of ivory on ivory,
 the logical last touch
 to an expansive splendor 245
 earned as wages for work done:
 one is not rich but poor
 when one can always seem so right.
 What can one do for them—
 these savages 250
 condemned to disaffect
 all those who are not visionaries
 alert to undertake the silly task
 of making people noble? (*Observations* 121-22, ll. 238-54)

Self-absorption is the seed of decadence and death, whether on the small-scale of a relationship or on the macro-level of society. Self-love is a potent poison, and Moore points out that all are guilty of this, whether male (the patriarchal society) or female (the repressed). Though Moore is no stranger to her era's oppressive sexism, she chooses to lay aside this (justifiable) grievance in service of a greater purpose: social healing. She is willing to blame her own sex as well as her male counterparts for being unwilling to love "herself so much / she cannot see herself enough—" (ll. 241-2). Male or female, we limit our vision with self-absorption. Our own hopes and hurts cannot supersede all others. To love and listen only to oneself is to become an immobile, useless "statuette" or a schizoid

“rival” for one’s own affections. We are wrong to sacrifice the needs of the many for the needs of the few, or the one. This is only “logical” as a “last touch” of decadence for a society running down. Moore notes wryly, “one is not rich but poor / when one can always seem so right / What can one do for them—” (ll. 247-9). As long as we stare only at ourselves, we despise the real “visionaries” (though we may not recognize them) who might have helped in “making people noble” (ll. 252, 254), salvaging society. Moore’s trademark understatement reappears referencing the “silly task” of “making people noble,” but she knows that this is the great lingering failure of the Romantic tradition, the perceived knowledge and love of the self at the cost of all others.

The long poem’s climax appears only a few lines later, as Moore offers a glimpse of hope for solving the problem of competing minds:

“Everything to do with love is mystery; 260
it is more than a day’s work
to investigate this science.”
One sees that it is rare—
that striking grasp of opposites
opposed each to the other, not to unity, (*Observations* 122, ll. 260-65)

Moore dips into mockery for a moment with this quotation. “Marriage” has so far shown exactly how we ruin love, how we paradoxically *make* it a “mystery” by refusing to acknowledge the Levinasian face the other always before us and the recognition that we are not the sole citizens of our universes. The only mystery is that love *ever* works out for anyone, that any Adam and Eve can successfully create this “rare” art and “science.” We look to borrowed words (the “orator” of line 258 and the other owners of the quotations that litter this poem) to explain a concept that should be basic. Moore refuses to let humans off easy: she says men and women, self and other, are “opposites,” “opposed to each other, [but] not to unity” (ll. 264-5). We are magnetic, Moore argues. Though we seem contrary and incompatible humans are still not opposed to “unity.” A union of opposites works if the two individuals can acknowledge the other and lessen self-love. Humans are made for “unity” with one another; we are not to remain independent aesthetes or statues. Realizing this central design for unity is, to Moore, crucial, and this paradox—the embrace of the stranger, replacing self with other—is the path toward a society better for *all* its people.

Moore ends her journey from Eden to the present by returning to her own American space, invoking the nineteenth-century orator Daniel Webster in the finale:

the statesmanship
of an archaic Daniel Webster
persists to their simplicity of temper
as the essence of the matter:

‘Liberty and union
now and forever;’ 290

the book on the writing-table;
the hand in the breast-pocket.” (*Observations* 123, ll. 286-93)

This final movement is purely Moore: Webster’s stirring oration on the union of opposites—the inseparable bonds of these United States—is ironically undermined and deflated by the final common images. This is not a denial of Webster’s high talk, but is merely the acknowledgment that something changes when speech moves from the Senate Floor to the living room or office. What becomes public—marriage, community, nation—ultimately rests upon the private, the things we read and share at home, at work, in town. The “integrity of one’s personal partnership” is fully entwined with the health of the whole society (Phillips 353). Webster is not wrong to speak to the macrocosmic level, Moore implies, but neither does she believe society will change if it leaves progress to the politicians. What matters more is the way we speak to each other, what *we* say and do on a daily basis, not the deliberately-overcomplicated language of the poem and its institution (Walker 210), but in words and images that hold personal meaning.

At last, it is up to us: Moore has presented her case that both men *and* women are at the root of society’s inequity and selfishness, and she argues that to alter this we must build from the ground up. But what “book” on the “writing-table” ought we to read (l. 292)? And what message in the “breast-pocket” are we to reach for (l. 293)? Moore plays coy once more: we must find that message ourselves, she implies, knowing she cannot *make* us be good or love those we would despise. We will not change because we are told to, she knows, and in handing responsibility to us in this last couplet she maintains her ethical grounding in the midst of an argument so personal and painful that few could have credibly done likewise. Later in life, when Moore called “Marriage” just “an anthology of words” she performs this same task over again (Joyce 10), subverting her prejudices,

desires, and abilities for the sake of her audience. Brinkman notes the poem's use of collage, both in its quotation and its magazine-like construction, something he argues is a way of making permanent ideas and figures from ephemeral ones (58). There is some charge in this great collage for each of us.

To conclude we will look briefly at "Marriage"'s paired poem, the shorter lyric "Silence" that follows it, the poem where Moore's understatement reaches its crescendo. Moore almost completely removes herself from the poem, making only one statement:

My father used to say,
"Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow's grave
nor the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self reliant like the cat— 5
that takes its prey to privacy,
the mouse's limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth—
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them. 10
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint."
Nor was he insincere in saying, "Make my house your inn'."
Inns are not residences. (*Observations* 124)

"Silence" is a poem of separation and withdrawal into the self, the clear converse of "Marriage"'s cry for the mystery of "liberty and union / now and forever." Union has vanished; instead the speaker's "father" sends his speech from beyond the grave to describe a masculinist society of isolated individuals. Though this is what the father "used to say," society still lives by these same words. Moore spends nearly the entire poem in the voice of the father, setting off his conversation with quotations.

Notably, Moore revealed in a much-later footnote to this poem that the persona is a "Miss A. M. Homans," thus shifting Moore's complaints about fathers to a further remove, allowing Moore more ironic space in which to work (Pollak 109). Thus we need not see this poem as Moore speaking to *her* father to see its import. The first claim this collective father makes favors social hierarchies and the "superior people" who are marked by their continence, self-sufficiency, and ability to silently withdraw without disrupting others. They are not tourists, nor sightseers—in fact, they hardly visit at all (ll. 2-4). These "superior" folk are the "self-reliant"—invoking Emerson's eponymous essay

(appropriate, considering the references to the New England literary establishment in lines 3-4) but in a new way. In contrast, Emerson had wanted a culture of individuals who would resist society's attempts to control them. The father of "Silence" would have a society of individuals who took no notice of and had no need for one another—a different sort of individuality. Like the "cat," such individuals need nothing from others, but they still lose something in their aggressive independence, Moore implies.

Multiple images in lines 7-12 highlight the preference for silence. The gruesome image of the mouse's tail hanging from the cat's closed mouth is the perfect picture of the eternal father's desires: the animal has found its own food and it has no need for words, shutting its full mouth. The father tolerates only those who "enjoy solitude, / and can be robbed of speech / by speech which has delighted them" (ll. 8-10). Certainly an audience should enjoy an orator's words. Yet rhetoric that silences its hearers—whether through violence or even sympathy—is unethical. Coercion is coercive even in a pleasant package. Likewise, the refusal to listen, directly or (as in this case) indirectly, is equally wrong. When people are "delighted" into silence, when a speech has "robbed" them of their ability to react, society has gone stagnant. "Silence" is precisely what the father's words do in Moore's poem. His claim that "'The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint'" (ll. 11-12) masks masculinist assumptions within a cover of wise, even-tempered discourse. To prize silence and restraint over speech and action is to manipulate and control society in favor of tradition, resisting change and corrective re-balancing. Unless one lives at the pinnacle of an intellectual or economic hierarchy, everyone has incentive to join a conversation with the other. But the "father"—representing history, male power, and the weight of culture—would rather kill such momentum before it begins. The father seeks the "restraint" of difference, the "silence" of the disenfranchised, and it represents an order that Moore must defy.

Moore's only personal statement occurs in the last two lines. Speaking of the father, she relates: "Nor was he insincere in saying, 'Make my house your inn'.? / Inns are not residences" (ll. 13-14). At first the line looks polite, even pleasant, until Moore's deadpan breaks in upon this supposed generosity and points out its flaw: a "house" may not necessarily be *her* home, just as an "inn" is not one's *own* "residence." This is precisely what Moore's society has always told her, whether within the circle of poets or

in society at large: make yourself at home—but not in *my* place. She remains an outside observer; even in the house of her father she had no home. She is an other, and she is “made to feel it,” even among family. Like an esteemed guest she is welcome to visit, but not to stay—to listen, but not to speak. The father’s personal betrayal pushes the speaker further than any abstract social force. The man’s symbolic betrayal teaches Moore more about human relationships and communicative ethics than any other experience. The extra set of quotation marks in line thirteen (which also appears in the *Dial* version from earlier that year) separates Moore even further from the words of her fathers.

Yet despite the temptations to act otherwise, Moore responds to familial rejection and the social stonewalling of her mind, body, and spirit not with anger, but also—most importantly—not with silence. She makes a clear statement, tinged with irony, placing the problem of misogyny and xenophobia into the hands of the audience. The poem is not arrogant, aloof, or opaque, but the very image of restraint (Meyer 264); yet within this restraint is an ironic note that demands our participation. “Inns are not residences,” she muses, and we are left to make what we will of this. Should we attack the “father” as a fool? Shall we reject Moore for responding only obliquely to misogyny? Moore leaves it to us, limiting herself in this strange sonnet to barely a line of commentary. The tone is more amused than sarcastic in this final line. She knows that silencing the other is the worst of society’s sins and that there are ways to engage the other sex ethically. We could choose to be “alone *together*” rather than barring one another from home. Yet she leaves the decision to us. Withholding judgment has more potential to change society for the better than would the incitement of censure and rage.

“Marriage” explored the history and extent of the human community, beginning with society as an abstract whole and then finding its way back into the home, to you and me. “Silence” is the opposite, tracing movement from the home out to the broader culture, spiraling outward from a failed family community—one just as oppressive as the larger society. Yet “Silence” suggests that the silenced may speak again; inequity can be neutralized if individuals do not lose themselves in the shadow of social norms, and if they also do not respond to society’s oppression with indiscriminate aggression.

Key to Moore’s last poem is that the father “used to” utter these controlling platitudes. His voice is shrouded, only shreds of quotations within quotations. In fact, he

was *quite* gone—the poet Moore never met her real father. And, anyway, Moore left his home, despite the voice that rings in her ears. The collective father she speaks of loses his grip on his daughters if they realize he lies dead in the past while they have their own present. Embracing even the hated other—going so far as to let the old voice of patriarchy speak from beyond the grave—gives Moore both the moral and rhetorical power to speak outside of the boundaries of a patriarchal society and calmly move forward toward a better “residence.” Moore bravely approaches this epiphany not through brute force but through ironies and conversations. She corresponded with Pound for many years, speaking through wit and a “‘jokey’ badgering” with one of the most intolerant artists of her age (Bar-Yaacov 514). Moore believed one could have such a conversation with *any* reader through ironic poetry, even with oppressive literary fathers.

Moore’s ironic poetic pairings in *Observations* offer insights into a poetic ethics that demanded more than simply the acknowledgment of one’s opponents, making use of the other side’s voice. Moore’s choice to speak in a voice embodying the justice she wished to experience adds to her brilliant poems’ significance. Hers is not a weak feminism because it is less-aggressive, we must realize. Whalan notes that American feminist social forces do not disappear in the 1920s but instead “moved from legislative to social and cultural terrain, often to the chagrin of older activists” (184). Moore thus becomes a standard-bearer of feminism, despite her understated ethos, in resuscitating and preserving conversations about experience and equality in her poetry.

William Watkin writes about the Levinasian ethics of engagement that we can find in Moore’s work. Watkin finds that such a strategy is founded upon “a profound belief in the value of conversation in defining human life and existence. It is in conversation that one is forced to meet with another, to approach them in language, to respond to them, and of course to wait for their response” (220). Moore uses her own brand of feminism to embrace a humanism beyond difference and in her poetry she embodies the dialogue that she hoped would bring about a fairer nation. She sums up all her poetic “marriages” in a later interview, saying, “I don’t like divorce, and marriage is difficult but marriage is our attempt to solve a problem and I can’t think of anything better” (qtd. in Leavell “‘Frightening Disinterestedness’” 73).

CHAPTER VI

PRAGMATIC ETHICS IN *HARMONIUM*: HOW TO TAKE A JOKE

I have saved Wallace Stevens's poetry for last because it is a natural endpoint for a discourse on ethical ironies, as Stevens launches us further into the postwar world of ethical poetry than the previous poets. Much of Stevens's early poetry, collected in the 1923 first edition of *Harmonium*, concerns itself with the comic clash of one mind with another. Yet Stevens is often read as a poet of the individual, an aesthetic elite; he is the dandy of modernism, the late romantic poet who channeled Yeats and the symbolists over realism and empiricism (see Munson 14-16; Ragg 5, 95; Wilde 46-50). Of course he was all of these things, but his early poems—many the products of the First World War—also reveal a poetic ethics beyond pure observations of beauty or meditations on the individual imagination. In *Harmonium* Stevens weaves a separate thread in between the manifestos of ego and individual artistic power, a line of poems built upon an ethic of rhetorical exchange that he shares with Moore and Williams. Thus, although the conversation of *Harmonium* may be read as a mind speaking of itself (as in "Sunday Morning" and "The Snow Man," for example) I will explore the *opposite* quality here, reading a sequence of poems in *Harmonium* that illustrate Stevens's voices of *response*.

Like his fellow artistic "*Others*" Stevens wants to produce a mode of speech and response within his aesthetic poetry (based on the deontological goal of treating other persons, other voices, as ends in themselves), and he does this by applying philosophical pragmatism to the question of poetic ethics. Pragmatism allows individuals the right to their own independent minds, to think and believe independently of social or political institutions. Pragmatism implies a method of treating another ethically, by tempering our capacity to pass judgment on another's experience.

While studying at Harvard, Stevens was greatly influenced by the pragmatist George Santayana, his sometime instructor and mentor, and the marks of Santayana are apparent in Stevens's poetry. Joel Porte calls Stevens "Santayana's truest disciple," describing the bond between the two intellects attempting to think beyond past and present institutions toward an innovative future (Santayana xxix-xxx). Santayana in his preface to *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* claims that a "universal moral function"

exists in poetry (3). Thus although Stevens's early poetry is often thought a poetry of the ethereal, the playful, the abstract, and the joke—as sound over substance—Santayana's words can be applied to Stevens's *Harmonium* project long before Stevens's later poems appear, whose more obvious social and ethical commentary are established (Rae 198-99). Surprisingly, Santayana critiques the kind of *fin de siècle* poetic esotericism that Stevens is often paired with, as the philosopher believed, "If the imagination merely alienates us from reality, without giving us either a model for its correction or a glimpse into its structure, it becomes the refuge for poetical selfishness. Such selfishness is barren, and the fancy, feeding only on itself, grows leaner every day" (17). Stevens's aestheticism is not merely "poetical selfishness"; I will focus on the variety of poems where Stevens broadens his sweep beyond the "refuge" of the intellect. Stevens's imagination will be of Santayana's preferred sort—the kind that is translucent to readers, laying itself bare in unmediated sounds and images in the attempt to meet other minds.

This openness is not unique to Stevens: aesthetic independence is the social ill to which William James applies the practical philosophy of pragmatism as a remedy. Though not as close to James as he was to Santayana, Stevens read James and may have heard some of his lectures at Harvard, and although the younger Stevens was more skeptical of the power of belief than James was, Stevens echoes James's pragmatic project within his poetry (Hassan 4). James opens his seminal *Pragmatism* with a discussion of the modern problem of philosophy—the same "poetical selfishness" Santayana envisions, writ large. James argues that our personal philosophies consist mostly of what appears to be true to us as individuals, based on our personal experiences (*Pragmatism* 1). But how then can we translate these tenuous beliefs into useful actions in the public sphere? James suggests a level of "insincerity" in public applications of philosophy as the result of our skepticism about the universality of our beliefs (3). Santayana, too, critiqued the atmosphere of debate as poisonous to social reexamination and progress (Anderson 583).

However the solution for escaping the lonely mind of the poet, aesthete, or egotist can be found, paradoxically, *within* our individual experiences. Building on C. S. Peirce's original conception of pragmatism as a means of judging actions according to how we envision them unfolding in the future, pragmatism to James is the way out of abstract

disputes, offering us a test of an action's value where we may "interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences" (*Pragmatism* 23-24). This method has two effects: firstly, it establishes the value of individual experience, freeing us from accepting dogmas and second-hand theories untested, and, secondly, pragmatism eliminates a great deal of philosophical abstractions that might get in the way of practical work toward the good society. Importantly, James argues that this theory is by no means new, claiming that Socrates and Aristotle put these pragmatic tests into practice long before he did (26). This open framework suggests we may extend the pragmatic method to Kantian ethics as well, allowing the test of an effectual *result* to offset any of the absurdities that arise in Kant's own strict vision of the Categorical Imperative (that is, in conducting ourselves always as we would wish all of society to act). Lekan writes that Kantian ethics can be easily modernized and made more flexible and useful while not defeating their ability to serve others (89-92). In pragmatism we find the ability to modify without destroying our theories of practical ethics. James writes that in doing this, "*Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest,*" as we shift from searching for past ontologies to studying how actions may unfold in the future (*Pragmatism* 27-28).

Stevens will make use of these tools as he vacillates between a search for ideals or "first things" and the experience of everyday existence. He shares with his fellow moderns Santayana's concept of "the religion of disillusion." Santayana explains, "The break-up of traditional systems and the disappearance of a recognized authority from the religious world have naturally led to many attempts at philosophic reconstruction" (141). The philosopher believed that the way to progress is to reevaluate the modern world, writing that life must be "consulted afresh" through pragmatic methods in order to establish a workable order (141). William James in "The Moral Philosopher" argues for a similar premise, writing that past or present authority is no guarantee (or even necessarily a consort) of truth; thus everyone's experience may claim some element of legitimacy and authority (Diggins 123, 126). Yet minds do not work best alone; Santayana describes the need for the individual mind to commingle with others as a means of establishing the new "religion" of the present age. Santayana calls this "synthesis" of ideas and beliefs a moral principle; he argues that without sharing experience with others, there is no improving modern society (143).

Santayana illustrates this claim in terms of poetry: “Great art and great creative achievements are rare in the world,” he admits, but “. . .the friction of many kindred minds allow [sic] the scattered sparks of inspiration to merge and to leap into flame” (143). A useful poetics can only be built upon the mixture of one with another. William James echoes these sentiments when critiquing philosophy’s traditional aim at the “unification” of wisdom, arguing that the West has always privileged “unity” at the expense of “variety” (*Pragmatism* 64-65). We have always preferred the familiar to the strange. But just as Santayana identifies the need for “synthesis” in artistic worldviews, James agrees that it is simpler and more useful to imagine the world as a pluralistic cord woven from many variegated strands than to try to force it all to fit into one line (72). James argues for a critique of common sense—our worn-out beliefs and assumptions—in order to shape a society that better serves its denizens (*Pragmatism* 96). Santayana likewise decried the “normal madness” of everyday life within conventional society (Anderson 585). The ethical poet must continually strive to see the world anew.

The Democratic Pragmatics of Stevens’s Ironies

Stevens took up this mantle, using both formal and topical critiques of social norms and poetic conventions to embrace plurality and let his readers become a part of building a new world. Interestingly, Stevens does this at an American moment when pragmatism was seen by progressives as a weak intellectual ““compromise,”” lacking the power to oppose outmoded social forces or produce its own improved system (Livingston 432-33). Yet Stevens was aware of these critiques—which largely occurred during wartime as debates between Dewey and Randolph Bourne—many of which appeared in the *New Republic*, a magazine Stevens followed closely (Livingston 433). Yet the poet continued to lean on his pragmatic fathers, James and Santayana, in producing an ethical social poetry. Stevens did not consider pragmatism a weak compromise, believing it to be an active force for reevaluation and action. James writes that pragmatism and its pluralistic approach to experience offers freedom from a “dogmatic rigoristic temper” that would confine the imagination and limit communication; James prefers to have the “free play of parts on one another, some real novelty or chance, however minute,” as a means of achieving the goals of freedom and truth (*Pragmatism* 80). Stevens will make

use of this “free play” in his poetry, inviting the reader to participate in his pragmatic humor while establishing an ethic of respect for the reading other. This sense of play is explained in James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*: when discussing how we may deal with others’ beliefs that seem alien to us, we must “play fair” or approach others with good faith, rather than prejudicing ourselves against things foreign to our experience (26). This does not mean accepting wholesale all others’ ideas and feelings, but it does demand that we respect before critiquing. James emphasizes that our strategies will change over time and that we must constantly seek to refine our methodologies (*Varieties*... 106). Pragmatism is not the religion of the complacent, nor an art of the hopeless, nor an empty compromise—as Stevens will demonstrate throughout his oeuvre (White 157). Patricia Rae points out that James and Stevens developed a greater optimism toward the possibility of metaphysical revelations of truth and reality even than generations of pragmatists to follow them (Rae 11); they believed in pragmatism’s power to broaden experience beyond the limitations of bourgeois modernity.

Levinasian ethics are applicable here: Jeffrey Dudiak explains that a Levinasian approach to discourse can create common ground between individuals that originates in their differences, paradoxically (57). We cannot exist outside of a connection with others, Levinas contends, and we remain inextricably linked to other minds (Dudiak 37). Yet these links, these dialogues are the very things that can create freedom for ourselves and others (23). Stevens will take these dialogues very seriously—even within the esoteric spaces of play his poems inhabit.

The broadening of Stevens’s poetic experience mimicked that of the United States. Poirier writes that James and his followers saw America as a unique social sphere capable of removing older edifices of truth and belief and thus it had the potential for new, more useful institutions (121). Thus it was no accident that pragmatism took hold in twentieth-century American philosophy and poetry, following Darwin’s and Mill’s century and its revolutions in industry, science, and morality. Joan Richardson writes in *A Natural History of Pragmatism* of the influence of Darwinian science upon James’s “experiments” in belief where James pragmatically attempts to progress forward “as if” humans have free will, “as if” there is a better ethic to uncover—since none of these assumptions can be taken for granted, anymore (119).

Yet James will even find space for the supernatural within the natural, just as Stevens attempts to find the *other* within the *self*. Poirier refers to this as a “hermeneutical leap of faith,” a means of dealing with a past that has outlived its usefulness, arguing that Stevens and James manage that leap with “an irreverence toward the past as past, the past as a series of monuments” yet with “an identification nonetheless with those in the past whose energies brought those monuments into existence” (Poirier 99). Poirier believes the pragmatic approach to social renewal “requires a determination to do the work by which those energies can be reconstituted and redirected” (99). This is correct: pragmatic thinkers were not abandoning the past but trying to recapture its lost energies—its inventiveness and rethinkings—that have been long-buried under the weight of unexamined “common sense” and bourgeois values. The commitment Stevens shows to meeting the other’s mind stems from this realization that he cannot write off either the known (past) or the unknown (present) but must test each individual element to see if it points him toward his goal. He cannot live within himself alone.

To this end, Lisi Schoenbach writes in *Pragmatic Modernism* of pragmatism’s break from traditional modernist isolationism and elitism. She writes, “Pragmatic modernism defines itself through a gradualist, mediating approach to social change and artistic innovation that was fundamentally different from the revolutionary ideology of the avant-garde” (3). It is a process that trades “purity” for a more practical social engagement (Schoenbach 4). And it does this, she argues, through the development of *habit*, something she admits sounds backward and antimodern (19-20). Aristotle, of course, made habits the *basis* of his ethical system, the key to developing moral character (Schoenbach 22). But even beyond virtue ethics, habit remains crucial: the pragmatists James and Dewey both recognized habit’s critical importance in people’s ability live ethically. James says in *Principles of Psychology* that the more thoughts and acts we can make habitual, the freer our minds become for new, higher ideas and actions (122). Furthermore, Dewey writes that habit is both necessary and risky: “Without habit there is only irritation and confused hesitation. With habit alone there is a machine-like repetition, a duplicating recurrence of old acts. [But in] ... conflicts of habit and [the] release of impulse there is conscious search” (*Human Nature and Conduct* 15). Dewey sees in habit the possibility for the masses to develop a better social ethic but also the

danger of unexamined complacency. He writes in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* that the “experienced shock of change is the necessary stimulus to the investigating and comparing which eventually produce knowledge” (131). James also points out the danger habit can cause in limiting individuals from mixing with other “classes” or of promoting social stagnation (*Principles of Psychology* 121).

So ought our pragmatic ethics be a matter of habit or not? Should pragmatism be conscious or unconscious? How can the artist invent or speak *habitually*? Habit is not, perhaps, the ideal result for poetic ethics, but it may be the most practicable way to approach society’s ethical overhaul. Stuart Rosenbaum depicts pragmatism’s goal: it is a human community of morality, an egalitarian, democratic, variegated society of ethical interconnections (8). This would be the ultimate endpoint of a pragmatic worldview, the development of a universal habit of virtue for all members of a society. But Rosenbaum suggests that virtuous habit-building cannot happen *en masse*, beginning only with the individual reflecting. Rosenbaum, building on Dewey’s *Ethics*, argues that a constantly self-reevaluating autonomy—mixed with links to an external community—is the method to social improvement (56, 67). But is this practical? How do we escape from eternal feedback loops of reflection to take action? This is the space opened up by American democracy, as Dewey envisioned it, where individual and social goals interrelate to produce a functional Union (Rosenbaum 70). And despite its shortcomings (as constant legislative “reevaluations” come to mind), America is a model of pragmatic functionality. Every four to eight years, its citizens reassess and try things a bit differently; a refusal to stagnate under one kind of leadership, ideology, or practice, is built directly into America’s Constitution. Thus we already exist in a society that trusts to the possibility of making new choices (at least theoretically). And we see this attitude in the best American poets, including Stevens. Lois Hughson identifies this linked self-other, new-old political relationship earlier, in terms of Stevens’s American poetry. She writes that Stevens, despite his strong interest in the aesthetics of the poetic act, “escapes a narrow self-absorbed estheticism, as Santayana does, by making that act a figure for human consciousness” (160). Stevens will find a breadth of connection with other consciousnesses even in the midst of his daydreams and fantastic visions. Despite his abstraction, Stevens “projects a strength, a range and depth of comprehension, and a

broad compassion and serenity unsurpassed in modernist poetry” (Hughson 160). He manages this by embracing an ideal that had founded his nation.

Despite this, Stevens’s ethical leanings are often glossed over, as well as his commitment to and compassion for the community beyond his door. Lekan writes that pragmatic morals arise only from the interactions with and responsibilities for one’s community; they force one to engage with society, not escape it (147). Yet Stevens is traditionally pegged as an elitist without social sympathies, and this assumption is not entirely false. Stevens flatly states in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” that “I do not think that the poet owes any more as a social obligation than he owes as a moral obligation, and if there is anything concerning poetry about which people agree it is that the role of the poet is not to be found in morals” (*Necessary Angel* 27-28), apparently writing off any “moral obligation” in the process.

Yet Stevens follows this statement with an immediate, crucial qualification: “Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality; that is to say, the imagination and society are inseparable” (*Necessary Angel* 28). When we look into the pragmatic ethics of Stevens’s poetry we find this is true, that “the imagination and society”—the self and the other—are, ultimately, “inseparable.” Stevens wishes to critique the old image of the poet as “moralist,” believing that role to be an outdated expectation, and an idea that limits poetry’s uses merely to explicitly pedagogical or dogmatic roles. He does not want his poetry to be so limited. Stevens knows his poetry is linked to ethics, “inseparably,” and he wants imagination to have the freedom to serve society fully. Stevens’s pragmatic ethos discards the role of poet-as-prophet as outdated and inadequate; readers, he believes, do not find poetic moralizing interesting, helpful, or authoritative in modernity. As modernism moves further from overt rhetoric in favor of abstractions, Stevens moves with it (Altieri 321-22). Yet that does not mean he abandons ethics; he sees his very *ambivalence* toward traditional belief and authority as an ethical act, a way of connecting with another who looks just as skeptically toward rigid, inherited institutions. Poetry will be the stuff of the mind *and* the stuff of life; the two are one.

Even as a modernist this was still a radical position to take toward poetry: until the mid-nineteenth century, literary criticism remained largely based upon didacticism, judging works by their ability to “instruct” as much as to entertain (Clausen 6). But

Stevens identified with the late-nineteenth century aesthetes Wilde, Yeats, and Symons, renouncing traditional moral authority in favor of a pragmatic reconstruction of aesthetics. Stevens viewed his society of conformity as one that might soon destroy poetry's usefulness and he sought to remedy this (Lakritz 20-21). He wished to find "a new language for experience" within his poetry (24). Angus Cleghorn explains Stevens's curative poetic attitude as one that "deconstructs the divisions made in the interests and habits of power, displaying language as it forces culture" (4). Stevens is intent on breaking down past hierarchies. His rhetoric, though couched in the figures of the personal, is one of radical equality and esteem toward other imaginations.

In William James's essay "The Will to Believe" the philosopher discusses a shift in the individual's stance from "moral solitude" to "moral dualism" occurring as we picture the presence of another mind in addition to our own (145-6). However this is not enough to make us care for the other, James writes, suggesting that humans require a sense of moral obligation to do so and arguing that we must make moral "claims on others" to necessitate their ethical consideration of *us* (*Will to Believe* 146-7). Yet where such claims exist—when someone asks something of me, even indirectly—we are charged with the duty to act on behalf of the other (Slater 77). We are not necessarily responsible for a world of unknown strangers but at least those in our society. Cheryl Misak writes about this concept in the pragmatic search for truth: people, she argues, must have their "moral blindness" removed in order to act morally towards each other, an act that often requires one to meet face to face with the other (as Levinas believed) (93). Seeing the estranged and unlikely as the familiar is an ethical necessity. Misak argues that this morality only arises from direct experience (94). "Moral deliberation," she writes, "displays a kind of epistemological democracy" that frees us from a search for esoteric ideals and makes reality *relevant* to our real interactions and beliefs (96-7).

Not only are pragmatic ethics democratic, but they are eminently adaptable. Michael Slater explains that James is right to distrust claims of dogmatic morality in anticipation of some tangible exchange (77). Instead, we construct an ethics as we interact with and experience others (Slater 81), freeing us from following a code of moral duties that can go out of date. For instance, Kant's Categorical Imperative is actually a *pragmatic* tool, forcing us to continually reassess what actions should be universalizable.

Such a method can meet the unique moral challenges of any age, even the *present*. Clausen writes that every age develops its own moral judgments, and these become more individual-based than ideal-driven over time (16). Thus the use of Jamesian ethics (which are fundamentally “fallibilistic and progressive”) works to offset “dogmatic ways of thinking about our religious and moral commitments” (Slater 12). On beliefs, Slater says, “James consistently argued that we should see them (like all our beliefs) as open to criticism, empirical testing, and revision” (12). This is what I ask of poets: are they able to make moral claims without holding fast to an antiquated code of ethics?

I would add to James’s (very Kantian) conception of the deontological claims we hold over one another by saying that *language* especially creates these sorts of moral obligations. I argue that when we speak we admit the existence of a listener, and we automatically enter a context of moral duty that necessitates listening to the other. We must continually work out what we owe to another whose presence and significance is proven by our very speech. In Stevens’s poetry this puzzling about the other appears as a “re-creative dialogic agency,” with the poet constructing a new reality and morality from the conversational link (Cleghorn 11). Stevens, I will demonstrate, develops an ethical poetry built simultaneously from his own imagination and from those of his readers.

The Ethics of the Joke

Stevens’s medium for poetic ethics is ironic play, like his contemporaries Moore and Williams. He will make use of nonsense poetry, direct jokes, comic tones—and, particularly, a pragmatic irony I identify—throughout the poems of *Harmonium* and beyond. Stevens’s poetry agrees with Freud’s assessment that “Words are a plastic material with which one can do all kinds of things,” built as they are on the use of double meanings rather than direct statements (37, 40). His coolness of tone does not negate the connection he seeks with his reader. And the plural world that irony constructs is a natural vehicle for the joint pragmatic ethical pursuit.

This is possible because, as Crystal writes, “language play seems to cut across regional, social and professional background, age, sex, ethnicity, personality, intelligence and culture.... It seems to meet a need” (93). Irony can maintain open-mindedness: Jonathan Miller explains that laughter is not the assertion of superiority, arguing that the

“value of humour may lie in the fact that it involves the rehearsal of alternative categories and classifications of the world in which we find ourselves” (11). Within the interchange of irony “we almost always encounter rehearsals, playings with and redesignings of the concepts by which we conduct ourselves during periods of seriousness” (Miller 11). Laughter keeps us flexible, helping us question the untested assumptions around us, keeping us an “above all socially cooperative species,” pragmatically reassessing the needs of the present and of the other (Miller 11-15). Laughter is a healthy check to the emotional harms that have infected us unawares (Nelson 183). Kozintsev writes that “Humor, unlike serious reflection, allows the self to look at itself from the outside and to negate itself in play” (29). Humor and irony are inextricably linked to the “discovery” of both self and other (Crystal 224). Kozintsev explains that humor is a kind of “rebellion” against oneself that emulates another’s position within an estranged context (28, 127).

Even when Stevens opens up his poems completely to comic ironies he identifies with and acknowledges the other, often in the space *between* those lines—as I will demonstrate. Nelson is right to identify this element of open-ended irony, its reflexivity, and the tangible invitation it offers its readers (150). Perhaps most importantly, this irony refuses its audience a passive stance, and demands their investment in the poetic project. We are always “offered more than one possible viewpoint” (Nelson 150), demanding our interpretive action. Misak says that in poetry, as in society, “ensuring that the multiplicity of voices is heard is a political matter” (101), and it can thus be a measure of the ethics of a poet. In the space of irony or “reflexive comedy,” readers have the chance to “re-examine their ideas about life, art, history, and the relationships between them” (Nelson 152). Yet for this to work the author must step aside, moving his presence away from the center of attention. As William James pointed out, authority is no guarantor of truth (Diggins 123), and poetic authority is something Stevens readily questions.

Most importantly we must acknowledge that there is a risk involved in the project of ethical ironizing: by leaving the answers to the mercy of readers’ interpretations, authors assume that another individual is actually capable of logical thinking, ethical reasoning, and a commitment to understanding another. Deliberation, Misak notes, only works if someone else shares our goals (30). Stevens, at his best, realizes this and is willing to risk misinterpretation and misdirection in order to ethically approach his

audience. He refuses to coerce his readers, but neither does he forget the real world for an ideal. Crystal aptly describes this ethic: within “unregulated and anarchic” language play,

Anything goes. We take risks—for it is always possible that a piece of word-play will fall flat, be misinterpreted, or go over the listener’s head. With language play, moreover, everyone is equal—in the sense that, once we have achieved adult levels of fluency in a language, we have acquired all the tools and expertise we need in order to play with it successfully. (9)

Crystal notes that though some wits are sharper than others, “ludic licence is available to everyone” (9). Open-ended, nonhierarchical irony is an egalitarian move.

Reading the Gaps

The best way to understand the conversation-invoking poems of *Harmonium* is from the perspective of readers’ responses to Stevens’s words and gaps. The gaps of meaning Stevens sows throughout his poems reap interesting replies from his readers. Jonathan Culler in his “Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading” argues, “Reading and interpretation may be carried out in solitude, but they are highly social activities” (53). Literature is not the communication of commands but the intersection of ideas; language remains beyond the control of any individual, a social activity that should be read as such (Culler 56). In Stevens’s works, we readers must *produce* the missing pieces. The result: we become “unable to imagine progress except as dialectical transumption” (Culler 47). Wolfgang Iser in his essay on “Interaction between Text and Reader” attends to the gaps I intend to highlight in Stevens’s works. Iser says these dialogic gaps are “what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections,” and that through these intentional spaces the reader is “drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said.... it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning” (Iser 110-11). Blank and negative spaces are practical sites demanding our active participation in the meaning of the text (Iser 112).

Fortunately, this is not all work. Denis Donoghue writes, “The pleasure of reading literature arises from the exercise of one’s imagination, a going out from one’s self toward other lives, other forms of life, past, present, and perhaps future. This denotes its relation to sympathy, fellowship, the spirituality and morality of being human” (73). Most importantly, Donoghue agrees that reading is “a social act,” adding, “[i]f we have

encountered a problem, the chances are that some other readers have come upon it, too” (81). We do not require a universal aesthetic to read something familiar in the other, nor need we know everything about our audiences in order to offer them something useful; we have much more in common than not.

I will continue to use “we” in this all-inclusive way to make a point: as Roger Sell writes, authors and readers are ultimately alike. Thus we can say “we” and mean it; we can think of ourselves as equals, “somebody else’s other” (18). Literature evolves out of this process as a pragmatic negotiation, attempting to make connections (Sell 63). Stevens embodies what Sell terms the “protean self and communicative personae” where both the sender and receiver of a literary message are simply roles; the communication process even requires us to alternate these roles (Sell 158). I am interested in the places where these practical, anti-hierarchical alternations show up in Stevens’s lyrics. Like Scholes, I wish to read poems in a “less exalted” light, as he believes that by revering the aesthetics of poetry we limit its usefulness for the everyday (55). Stevens’s poetry is practical despite its abstractions and its usefulness is found by participating in it—finding its gaps and inserting responses—rather than by making it a museum.

Despite the risks of reading and writing lyric ethics, the medium remains one of the better methods of discussing shared human intricacies. Deming writes that in poetry, these exchanges remain alive more than in other genres; poetics are always a way of pragmatically soliciting and testing beliefs (107). Stevens saw modernism’s task as the discovery of how best to do this, to create and adjust belief in an age that had outlived central authority, a search that shaped his poetry of the “unresolved” (Deming 110-11). Deming explains the process we undertake in reading these lyrics:

Poetry in its foregrounding of tropes and language as a process and in its insistence on meaning as interpretive negotiation of possible values is the scene of trying out ethics, beliefs, contingencies of a community. Authors are actors staging performances of ethics in the theater of the poem. That is why Stevens can say all poetry is experimental. (Deming 133)

The experiment of open-ended poetry allows a nonhierarchical, nonaggressive encounter between reader and writer that spawns interesting discourse in modernist ethics. In exploring *Harmonium* I will focus on the works that best exhibit a shared imagination and an exchange between individuals.

Laughing in *Harmonium*

“Nuances of a Theme by Williams”

Early in *Harmonium* Stevens’s lyric “Nuances of a Theme by Williams” positions itself as a direct response to another poem by William Carlos Williams, “El Hombre,” that was first published in the December 1916 edition of *Others*:

It’s a strange courage
you give me ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part! (Williams 76)

The title is striking: why call it “El Hombre” (“The Man”), instead of “La Estrella,” as it focuses on a star? Perhaps Williams suggests that the star only matters as far as it grants “courage” to the poem’s speaker through its brave (if futile, outshone by the sun) light. But Williams is interested not in man above nature but in man as observer. By focusing on the *abstracted* position of the eponymous “El Hombre” in regard to the star (as opposed to naming the man or making him significant), we see instead a concentration on the viewer, reader, and responder—precisely what Stevens seeks throughout *Harmonium*. Williams’s poem is not actually concerned with an “ancient star” but with the effects that star creates within its viewers; what interests the artist is feedback.

And that is also what interests Stevens in his 1918 poetic response, “Nuances of a Theme by Williams.” Stevens cites Williams’s poem before adding his own rejoinder:

I
Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

II
Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
you in its own light. 5
Be not chimera of morning,
Half-man, half-star.
Be not an intelligence,
Like a widow’s bird
Or an old horse. (*Harmonium* 15) 10

Stevens performs the same maneuver as Williams: his poem emphasizes response rather than originality or authorship. He does this by framing his poem as a *literal* response to

Williams, initiating a conversation and rejecting a poetic hierarchy; he may be a poet, but he makes no claims to authority, preferring dialogue to monologue. Belying this modesty is Stevens's title, though, when he claims to be able to add "nuances" to Williams's idea. But this pride is playful. Stevens was a friend and admirer of Williams; he would not have earnestly praised himself at Williams's expense. Instead, "Nuances" argues for the same thing as "El Hombre": Stevens intends to promote the primacy of reader over author. Even if Williams is author to this "theme," it remains the reader's task to "nuance" that theme, to test its truth and usefulness, to evaluate and adjust it to lived experience. Without the reader's additions, poetry lacks efficacy.

Stevens's poetic response is as a useful model of how to negotiate the lyrics of *Harmonium*. It actually works as a rejoinder to Williams: in contrast to the romantic optimism of Williams's poem, Stevens dampens the mood with a splash of modernist pessimism. To Williams, the star's Sisyphean existence (shining despite waning) inspires the one who watches it. But to Stevens, the star has no such power over the viewer, as he says that even if the vanishing star were to "shine alone," "nakedly," "like bronze," it could never actually represent the viewing human. Stevens writes that the star "reflects neither my face nor any inner part / of my being" and really "mirrors nothing" (l.3). Stevens resists the pathetic fallacy, rejecting the Romantic idea of the unity of nature and humanity, where one side merely echoes the truth of the other. The star "mirrors nothing" not because it is false or worthless but because humanity cannot be encompassed by a star. Each individual figure is *incapable* of adequately reflecting the other, and Stevens does not want to lose his individuality or humanity to the spotlight of a starry stranger.

Thus in his second stanza Stevens goes as far as to order the star's withdrawal: his words, "Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses / you in its own light," sound like an imagistic diatribe (ll. 4-5). But Stevens shares why he desires this separation: "Be not chimera of morning, / Half-man, half-star" (ll. 6-7), he writes. Stevens rejects the pathetic identification of the human with nature not out of spite or snobbery but because he believes it *costs* us something to make man synonymous with nature. Were we to blend with the universe around us, we would lose the qualities that makes us unique. To be mirrored within a stellar floodlight, to gain our feeling only from that which is lent us by an "ancient star," is to lose what illuminates humans *qua* human. The syntax of lines four

and five is arresting: we expect Stevens to tell the star not to drown *us* in its light, but the words actually seem almost for the star's benefit. For "humanity... suffused / you in its own light," Stevens says, brashly: the light of the viewer *outshines* that of the sender. Though perhaps overestimating humanity's brilliance, Stevens can be forgiven for wanting to keep human and nature, viewer and viewed, separate. Melding the image and feeling of one into the other merely limits both sides, Stevens believes; he wishes to maintain the differences that keep individuality alive. The poet wants it to *matter* when two minds meet. His goal is not a homogenous society, but one where differences may meet and negotiate—without abandoning the elements that make them worth meeting. To mix star and human is to diminish both.

A star must be a star, Stevens believes, not "a widow's bird," nor "an old horse" (ll. 9-10), and certainly not a human. It must be its own "intelligence." By extension, Stevens would argue against a reader fully trusting or emulating a writer—even himself. Difference is crucial to the pragmatic discussion Stevens is after. The audience of the poem must piece it out for him- or herself; there should be no diminishing the role of the reader in making meaning from the text. Stevens places this poem early in *Harmonium* to demonstrate how we ought to read his own poetry by slyly showing how *he* reads his friend's work. The openness Stevens demonstrates in engaging with other poets and poetry (without satire or condescension) is persuasive. It helps to validate the work of the reader in reconstructing art and society when Stevens places himself in a readerly position and practices precisely what he preaches. Next time he will expect us to evoke the "nuances" of his own "theme."

"Metaphors of a Magnifico"

The next poem of *Harmonium*, "Metaphors of a Magnifico," was first published in June, 1918 in *The Little Review*, shortly after "Nuances" (Edelstein 199). It adds a crucial piece to Stevens's argument about how to read *Harmonium*. While "Nuances" shines the spotlight upon readers as producers of knowledge (in addition to writers), "Metaphors of a Magnifico" adds a level of ironic self-doubt, the awareness of the ellipses between author and audience that is ethical space. "Metaphors of a Magnifico" makes these gaps apparent and begins to show us how to fill them in:

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
 Into a village,
 Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
 Into twenty villages,
 Or one man 5
 Crossing a single bridge into a village.

This is old song
 That will not declare itself . . .

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
 Into a village, 10
 Are
 Twenty men crossing a bridge
 Into a village.

That will not declare itself
 Yet is certain as meaning . . . 15

The boots of the men clump
 On the boards of the bridge.
 The first white wall of the village
 Rises through fruit-trees.
 Of what was it I was thinking? 20

So the meaning escapes.

The first white wall of the village . . .
 The fruit-trees. . . . (*Harmonium* 15-16)

Stevens opens the poem straightforwardly, identifying, “Twenty men crossing a bridge / Into a village” and apparently grounding the poem in a realistic world. But this apparent stability topples before the stanza finishes: that first, clear image suddenly divides into two as Stevens’s narrator suggests that the poem’s figures “Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges, / Into twenty villages, / Or one man / Crossing a single bridge into a village” (ll. 3-6). Confidence fails; the first lines are barely out before their certainty is in doubt. Line five’s “Or” sums up what Stevens sees as the problem of describing reality: if there are two or more possibilities (as in this either-or situation), we admit certainty. Though we began with an answer it only leads to more questions: are we observing one man or twenty—twenty bridges and villages, or just one? Even Stevens’s concrete images lack an unambiguous representation of reality.

So the poet muses, “This is old song / That will not declare itself . . .” (ll. 7-8). The narrator has begun to incorporate into his speech the very problem he senses: his words have become as ambiguous as his setting. By dropping the article or modifier in the phrase, “This is [---] old song,” we do not know if he is speaking of a *single* “old song” or *many* such ideas. The use of language here, purportedly to sort through the confusions of the scene, actually adds to the complications. Everything that seemed solid is proving otherwise. By line eight, the narrator admits only that the scene is unclear and “will not declare itself.” The stanza’s trailing ellipsis echoes the speaker’s uncertainty; he does not even know if his *thought* is complete. Stevens recognizes here the flaw and the strength of language: even though it cannot build a platonic, allegorical one-to-one correlation between idea and reality—since the “old song” of dialogue cannot say just *one* thing—it can now speak into existence a multitude of realities. The poetic line can no longer coerce us into seeing only one point of view; like the ellipses, language opens our eyes to infinite possibilities beyond denotations or dogmas.

Nevertheless, Stevens’s narrator must try once more to clarify his words, starting again with the “Twenty men crossing” routine in line nine (which is beginning to sound like a joke without a punchline). This time he simplifies things, dropping the “Or” that crept in last time and replacing it with more emphasis on the solid “Are” of line 11. The narrator reverts to the most basic equation possible: “Twenty men crossing a bridge, / Into a village, / Are / Twenty men crossing a bridge / Into a village” (ll. 9-13). Like Descartes, the speaker attempts to identify something solid from which to build a poem and a perspective. But the most definite thing he can describe is that, logically, $x = x$, (where $x =$ “Twenty men...”). Yet even at the level of the logical axiom—the last hope for unambiguous, concrete language—the speaker realizes that there remains uncertainty about the meaning of these signs. Are these “twenty men” flesh and blood or hypothetical humans? The speaker sighs, once again realizing that the scene, even simplified to its most basic possible equation, still “will not declare itself” as reality or symbol (l. 14). The scene “is certain as meaning . . .” *something*, the narrator hopes, but the ellipsis elide an answer. The meaning, we realize, equals x , but we cannot solve for that enigmatic variable. Our word problem has no solution, except to remind us that Stevens will not contain meanings by arbitrarily clarifying them for his audience.

Our bemused narrator ostensibly makes one last effort at divining solid language from these ambiguous gaps by again targeting specific details to clarify the scene's haziness. He adds the specific imagery and sounds of men's "boots" "on the boards of the bridge," and shows us "the first white wall of the village" to better describe an enigmatic locale amidst some "fruit-trees" (ll. 16-19). But these realistic details do not resolve the scene's uncertainty: having laid out these markers, memory and logic fail once again, and the speaker asks, absent-mindedly, "Of what was it I was thinking?" (l. 20). The pathetic persona releases his last bit of authority, as Stevens refuses easy explanations. The myth of certainty, of monolithic belief and the solidity of imagery shatters here. If the speaker cannot even be sure of his own mind, how can the listener? The playful Stevens shrugs his shoulders as it appears this poem's punchline is based on the impossibility of *arriving* at a payoff. Stevens laughs and says, "So the meaning escapes" (l. 21), which, crucially, forms a complete sentence, sporting a period rather than ellipses. Only of *this*—of meaning's multitudinous faces—Stevens is really sure.

But this poetic play is not irrelevant; Stevens's comedy does not forget the political tragedies of his age. "Metaphors" was written after the United States had entered World War I, and although Stevens himself did not serve in the war, he was no stranger to its effects. His younger sister, Katherine, worked as a volunteer with the Red Cross in France, but she would die of meningitis shortly after war's end in 1919 (Longenbach 50). The result for Stevens was a feeling of disintegration, prefigured by the fogginess of "Metaphors," where marching soldiers' "boots" entering a village's "white walls" either signifies the rescue or the destruction of civilization, the end of conflict or its beginning. But he cannot tell which it is, always, "the meaning escapes." Richardson writes in her biography of Stevens that at a time in the late 1910s when Stevens was successfully pursuing the American dream he could not escape the European war ("The Iconoclast in the Glass Shattering" 496-97), to which these subtle references in "Metaphors" attest. *Harmonium*'s poems are products of a "wartime anxiety" Stevens felt—as far from the front lines as he was—as he attempted to find a point of stability in an unsteady world (Longenbach 51). But Stevens's search for truth is an honest one, and his confusion throughout "Metaphors of a Magnifico" about what the men, the boots, and the walls all signify is as powerful a political statement as it is an oblique one. War is unclear: is it

freedom or enslavement? Does its wake of death lead to eventual healing or to further destruction? Stevens cannot say; honestly, he does not know.

The final ellipsis of “Metaphors of a Magnifico” makes a claim about the ambiguity of knowledge more broadly. If a poem of simple nouns and verbs cannot make itself comprehensible then how can anything be clear? More importantly, how can any communication succeed? Solid objects contain massive voids; forthright claims turn to riddles. This belief is fundamental to Stevens’s ethic and demonstrates his recognition that the exchange between writer and reader is never an easy one, though it be complex, dramatic, and, ideally, mutually-inventive. The ambiguity of the poem’s imagery nods to literary Cubism, with straightforward images split into different perspectives we are meant to see all at once (Buttel 164-5). Thus Stevens is in dialogue not only with readers but also with his fellow artists, and in this space he shows a willingness to sacrifice the fiction of authorial control for the reality of literature’s mutual innovation. Thus when “the meaning escapes” and “will not declare itself” (ll. 8, 14, 21), we must read this as a *hopeful* lack rather than a frightening one. Stevens believes we should not fool ourselves into believing in solid things; once we have seen the ambiguities of the world we may also see a great deal of possibilities open to us, too. In these gaps of meaning readers become as important as writers. To Stevens, poetry is more useful in opening voids and ellipses for his readers to fill in than it is in recreating an already-fractured reality—especially one shattered by war.

“Another Weeping Woman”

Yet this is not to say that Stevens’s speakers always demonstrate a fully open-ended ethic toward responses. The next poem of interest, “Another Weeping Woman,” contains a narrating voice tinged with aggression, even threatening to control its target:

Pour the unhappiness out
From your too bitter heart,
Which grieving will not sweeten.

Poison grows in this dark.
It is in the water of tears
Its black blooms rise.

5

The magnificent cause of being,
The imagination, the one reality
In this imagined world

Leaves you
With him for whom no phantasy moves,
And you are pierced by a death. (*Harmonium* 19)

10

After the last poem's dissection of words this one seems to forget linguistic difficulties entirely. At first the narrator sounds empathetic, attempting to comfort the titular "Woman." Yet this poem is actually an attempt to control the response of the eponymous audience, a coercive act that conflicts with the ethos of "Nuances" and "Metaphors." "Another Weeping Woman" demonstrates the dangers of a pragmatic outlook that lacks self-doubt and empathy. The first hint of this is a title that transmits a sardonic tone; why belittle his listener as just "another weeping woman"? The title strips the individual addressed of all individuality; she is nothing more than her sex, little more than her emotional state, and simply "another" irritant for Stevens's narrator.

The poem's speaker purports to offer help to its implied listener, giving its target "woman" a great deal of advice as he attempts to "free" her from what he sees as a needlessly tragic position. Williams James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* makes a helpful distinction for us when considering this pragmatist-as-harasser model. To use James's terminology, the contrasting figures in Stevens's poem—the speaking narrator and the weeping woman—represent a "healthy-minded," joyful soul, and a "sick soul," respectively. James explains his terms, saying that healthy-mindedness is a species of positivity, "an abstract way of conceiving things as good" (*Varieties* 86). Further, "Systematic healthy-mindedness, conceiving good as the essential and universal aspect of being, deliberately excludes evil from its field of vision" (86). For James, such practiced healthy-mindedness or optimism is a process that must be ongoing and pervasive—where one must constantly emphasize the positives of existence and push aside the negatives—to become a useful personal philosophy (*Varieties* 87). Such is the mindset of Stevens's positivist narrator.

Stevens's contrasting, pessimistic titular "woman" may also be found in the *Varieties*. In James's lecture on "The Sick Soul" he describes the philosophical pessimist as one who is not happy because he cannot simply dismiss the notion of evil and

irrationality in the world (*Varieties* 124). There are those who cannot see joy in life for the sorrows buried underneath; life becomes a series of meaningless accidents where every good thing is only “a lucky chance and [makes] no essential difference” to one’s bitter existence (*Varieties* 126). For this person, the advice of the healthy-minded person means little: “The pride of life and glory of the world will shrivel.... Old age has the last word” (*Varieties* 130). James believes, ultimately, that *both* of these personality types may easily succumb to a naturalistic despair if they do not gain some positive beliefs to offset the knowledge of life’s transience (*Varieties* 134-7). Thus it appears Stevens’s poetic persona is a positive-minded pragmatist, attempting to tell his listener that she need not be unhappy if she prefers not to be. With his talk of “poison” festering in her “dark” emotions, and of the “black blooms” that grow from “the water of tears” (ll. 4-6), the speaker clearly believes he must save this woman from herself. On the surface, there is some kindness here, but we have to wonder why he demands that her “grieving” end simply because it will not “sweeten” her “too bitter heart” (ll. 2-3). What right does he have to tell her to chin up? We begin to wonder why her sorrow so abuses the narrator. The “healthy-minded” pragmatist is perhaps *too* practical, not objecting to her tears in principle but simply because *he* believes them useless to curing a sick heart.

The poem shifts toward the abstract in the third stanza, as the speaker reveals romanticist leanings not present in the speakers of “Nuances” and “Metaphors.” This move is a hint that Stevens is not fully identifying himself with the speaker of “Another Weeping Woman.” Here the discordant persona gushes, painting a landscape where “The magnificent cause of being / The imagination” builds “the one reality / In this imagined world” (ll. 7-9). Now we can really suspect Stevens’s effusive orator, for he is at least partly wrong: another’s responses, alternate visions are at least as interesting to Stevens as is the infinity of the imagination.

Furthermore, the speaker cannot recognize his *own* emotional investments, the very thing he chastises the “woman” about. He critiques her weeping for drowning out happiness, all while not realizing that his own exuberance in the world cuts himself off from the melancholic experience to which *she* is privy. In other words, he decries her limited experience while missing his own parallel position. Thus though the narrator’s address to the weeping woman is logical, at least from his point of view, it is both

unsympathetic and myopic. What he cannot comprehend is that the same “imagination” that produces his rosy view of reality might also support the woman’s vision of the world. It is beyond his ken to believe that this woman may *desire* melancholy, that perhaps she *prefers* to remain apart from the narrator, “With him for whom no phantasy moves,” (ll. 10-11)—that is, with a lost lover—rather than to join with the speaker’s positivity (which to her would feel hollow). Stevens’s narrator does not realize that the woman *has* control over her feelings: she holds pragmatic power over the world she inhabits, just as much as he does. Imagination—the way one chooses to view the world—offers the choice of happiness or melancholy, and the weeping woman chooses the latter, imagining herself forever in communion with her lost lover. Yet her positivist friend, though believing in imagination’s power to change one’s perspective, simply cannot fathom why anyone would ever cease to feel happy. His perspective, though attractive, is somewhat shallow.

Thus the poem morphs into a piece of dramatic irony. By the end, readers can realize that the woman’s pragmatic control over her melancholy world is no less powerful than the optimistic narrator’s over his—but the frustrated speaker of the poem does not comprehend this. This poem has shifted from a critique of self-made sadness, and (seemingly) unnecessary tears to an examination of the kind of mind that could accuse someone of sorrowing *too* much. The title remains key: a rather generic title foregrounds the problem the poem reveals. It suggests the danger of classifying the other, of removing all traces of individuality from the ones we interact with. When the speaker dubs his target simply “Another Weeping Woman” he co-opts her individuality to make a point about positivity. He has eliminated her agency, suggesting that her ideas would add nothing to his. By making her little more than a stereotype—apparently just “another” in his long line of melancholy women—he has closed off any ethical interactions between the two of them. To reduce another human to merely a function, to a mere illustration, is to deny or abuse her personhood.

The poem thus morphs from a piece on positive psychology to a warning about coercion, calling for an ethic of treating the other as her own end rather than seeking *for* her the ends we would desire. “Another Weeping Woman” is a practical check to the unabashed optimism of pragmatism: Stevens believes in the pragmatic imagination’s power, but he does not intend for one’s imagination to pressure another’s into mimicry.

Stevens's poem suggests that to stop our ears and spew platitudes at another without recognizing the other's individuality and imagination costs *both* of us—thus the speaker of the poem remains frustrated, unable to “help” the woman out of what he sees as a “phantasy” of living “death.” Learning to get past ourselves is crucial to seeing the world as it is, not just as we would wish it to be. Ultimately, the narrator's sin is in addressing himself to his own, imagined *idea* of “another weeping woman,” rather than in speaking and listening to an actual, individual, other.

“Bantams in Pine-Woods”

However as our next poem of interest, “Bantams in Pine-Woods,” suggests, exiting our own imagined universe and envisioning another's may be easier said than done. The comical, nonsense-verse-inspired “Bantams” explores this problem further in a poem of dialogue and sound meant to be said aloud:

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

Damned universal cock, as if the sun
Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.

Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal. 5
Your world is you. I am my world.

You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!
Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines,

Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,
And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos. (*Harmonium* 60) 10

Ransom refers to this as one of Stevens's “beast fables” reflecting a much older genre of humor and parable (38, 42). But within the fable form Stevens's moral will be ambiguous as he directly (if ironically) undermines the voice and power of the poet.

The first and last couplets set the scene for an interchange between the forceful “inchling” and his antagonist—the “ten-foot poet” “Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan.” La Guardia explicates that the “ten-foot” Chieftain has encroached upon the inchling realm as one “who presumes reality to be the servant of his own creativity and projects himself as the voice of the [inchling] multitude” (La Guardia 45). But clearly the inchling

speaking in the poem (presumably one of a troop of bantam roosters, engaging the giant “cock” Chieftain) disagrees with this assessment of reality. The tiny narrator would seem a ridiculous figure if we did not happen to agree with his view of the world. Through this smallest of voices, Stevens presents his own views of reality, siding with the midget over the poet-giant in this battle of words, going so far as to directly argue against his own position and authority as the poet. Seeing past the chieftain’s imposing appearance, the bantam calls the big bird’s bluff and halts the chieftain by verbally cutting him down to size. How can the chieftain, as big as he is, really believe himself a “universal cock,” the end-all of the (rooster) universe, the vocal inchling demands. How can the chieftain imagine that his perspective accesses reality? The thought is absurd: he might as well ask the sun to be his valet or “blackamoor” to carry his “blazing tail” (ll. 3-4).

Though La Guardia identifies the “Chieftain” with the “ten-foot poet,” the opening announcement is actually a more ambiguous address; the first speaker (the inchling) might be introducing *himself* as “Chieftain,” rather than naming his counterpart as such. Paradoxically, this murkiness (the poem’s common theme) makes Stevens’s point clear: poet and audience have intertwined destinies. The power of one is wound up in the other, and neither has claim to compel or enthrall the other. The two must exist in dialogue, made equals despite differing roles and “size.” Thus, as the bantam intones, no matter how “Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!” or self-important the ten-foot poet is, he has no license over the bantam’s world of the mind. The inchling explains, “I am the personal. / Your world is you. I am my world” (ll. 5-6). This claim is a purely pragmatic one, one that takes the wind out from the poet’s puffed-up wings. He defeats the oppressor’s claim simply by thinking a contrary thought. The mind of the audience is free from the control of the authoritative poet, free enough to engage with it. Any claim to universal understanding or objectivity can be defeated by a single contrary opinion. The bantam’s philosophy is politically democratic, a perspective Stevens embraces even at the cost of authorial agency. Our inchling is right to contest the claim to universal truth in the figure of the “Chieftain”; if one never steps out of one’s own “world” to see someone else’s, he or she remains a blind fool, whether bantam or poet.

Stevens’s pragmatism is the solution to this clash of authority. Returning to James’s concept of the “healthy-minded soul,” the bantam has decided he is better off

acknowledging each entity's personal "world" in order to maintain his own autonomy—simply because this betters his experience. In a similar vein, James writes in the *Varieties* of a blind friend whose imagination conjured the image of a man in a gray suit slipping under the door into his room. The philosopher explains, "It seems to have been an abstract conception rather, with the feelings of reality and spatial outwardness directly attached to it—in other words, a fully objectified and exteriorized *idea*" (*Varieties* 65). In this case the blind man's independent imagination became a physical reality for him, making him react to the hallucination as if it were true. In contrast, Stevens's bantam manages to use this knowledge *skeptically*. In other words, since the inchling bantam sees that reality is little more than the aggregate of personal perspectives, he is able to reject anyone else's claims over him to knowing the "real" or "true," based on the mere *recognition* that different viewpoints exist. The brazen bantam tells the chief to get lost, counting on his pragmatic *idea* being powerful enough to deter the literal, hulking figure before him. By recognizing the power of independently-created images, the bantam can manipulate the "objective" world by recognizing and puncturing his enemy's imagination. Pragmatic poetry can do this, too: while engaging with reality it can always subvert external authority—even its *own*, paradoxically.

Stevens has built one more level into this poetic realm, setting his readers back far enough from the bantams in the woods to be able to view the birds with ironic distance—just as they see the "chieftain." This distanced perspective is crafted by the nonsensical words framing the pine-woods exchange. Stevens, like the titular bantam, has his own perspective on this world, and his perspective literally encapsulates this whole poetic universe. The mention of a "poet" in line seven alerts us to Stevens's project and his own presence in the poem, reminding us that this beast fable is nothing more than another creature's—Stevens's—imagination or fantasy. This is further demonstrated by the nonsensical wordplay of the first two lines, with invented words ("hoos") and eccentric sounds ("...Azcan in caftan / Of tan...") emphasizing the realm of Stevens's imagination, creating a poetic space allowing us to play along with these comical figures.

Stevens presents a vignette about self-important roosters where a mind may make its own universe and, by understanding this power, can gain power over the *actual* universe (limiting the power of the poet or prophet). But in a sense this whole concept is

rickety: the poem's "truth value" really hinges upon whether or not we "buy" the poem. If we dismiss the poem as nothing but a comic scene, we may remain unconvinced of the subjective mind's power over the objective world. But if we accept this premise, if we understand the poem's ability to create something real—something that has an *effect* on us—then it does succeed, practically, in making itself true. The poem thus offers an invitation: if we accept that the personal world can give us power over the empirical realm—and freedom from the authority of others—then the poem becomes true and, as James would argue, we gain *real* control over our circumstances like the healthy-minded pragmatic soul (*Varieties* 88). However, if we cannot get past reading the poem as pure fable, then we may not think anything more of it. Stevens allows us to make our own decisions—to be pragmatists, skeptics, testing the experience in "Bantams"—according to what suits us. In writing this poem Stevens has achieved a literal power over words, even as he cedes it, but what we will do with *our* words is left to us.

"The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws"

The following pair of poems, "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," and "Gubbinal," demonstrate the warning from "Bantams" that to accept the lure of authority—to trust one's own vision and position—is to confine oneself to a limited vision. "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" displays the figure of the bird-as-aesthete who loses his link to both the beauty of reality and to any other creature, due to his self-obsession:

Above the forest of the parakeets,
A parakeet of parakeets prevails,
A pip of life amid a mort of tails.

(The rudiments of tropics are around,
Aloe of ivory, pear of rusty rind.)
His lids are white because his eyes are blind.

5

He is not paradise of parakeets,
Of his gold ether, golden alguazil,
Except because he broods there and is still.

Panache upon panache, his tails deploy
Upward and outward, in green-vented forms,
His tip a drop of water full of storms.

10

But though the turbulent tinges undulate
As his pure intellect applies its laws,
He moves not on his coppery, keen claws.

15

He munches a dry shell while he exerts
His will, yet never ceases, perfect cock,
To flare, in the sun-pallor of his rock. (*Harmonium* 65)

At first glance there is little unusual material, especially after the absurd sounds and images of “Bantams.” For a Stevens poem it reads quite sensibly: the standard use of end-rhymes in each tercet suggests an unusual degree of formalism for the often-playful poet. But a closer look complicates matters: what appears to be a directly descriptive lyric morphs into a poem divided. It proposes a binary system of inward and outward knowledge and examines the sharp division between these two varieties.

One of the strongest signals of the poem’s binary nature is the auditory doubling of end-rhyme occurring in every stanza. By the poem’s first appearance in 1921, Stevens was not a proponent of writing rhymed poetry for its own sake which suggests that the rhyme in “The Bird” is integral to its effects. Further, the poet does not leave it up to rhyme alone to produce a sense of echoes in his poem: Stevens pours this doubling trope into much of the poem’s sounds and images. He infuses echoes into nearly every line of the poem, beginning with the opening description: “Above the forest of the parakeets, / A parakeet of parakeets prevails” (ll. 1-2). The alliteration alone creates an echoing effect, but Stevens goes further, actually duplicating the major image—the “parakeet”—again and again, with the repeated sounds (and plurals) creating a multitude (the “mort”) of “tails” (l. 3). This multiplication continues in the second stanza where the consonance on the letter “r” recreates a repetition of sounds in “rudiments,” “around,” “ivory,” “pear,” and “rusty rind” (ll. 4-5). This stanza further produces doubling effects by invoking binary objects: when speaking of the bird, the poet describes its blind “eyes” and their white “lids” —objects with inherent doppelgangers (l. 6). The eyes work as symbols of duality, offering a double perspective on all they survey. This sense is extended further by the depiction of a “pear” in line five, cleverly hinting at the omnipresent *pairs* of images throughout these lines.

Stanza three moves through more familiar pairings, beginning with the alliteration of the first line’s “paradise of parakeets” and the doubled image of “gold ether, golden

alguazil” (ll. 7-8). “Paradise” and “parakeet” both begin with the *pair* sound, naturally, and there is another significant homophone in line eight: the “ether” smacks of *either*, again suggesting that this poem is primarily concerned with displaying dueling meanings (an “either”-or situation). The fourth stanza does not innovate much, largely repeating the sense of doubling from the previous lines. This is done through literal repetition in line ten’s “Panache upon panache,” and added to this, is the double-meaning of “panache,” describing both a bird’s *literal* plumage and its *attitude* in displaying it. Further, the stanza is awash in plurals, with “tails,” “forms,” and “storms” all present (ll. 10-12). In a poem concerned with a single parakeet this is an awful lot of duplication.

Yet the final two stanzas mark a turn. The omnipresent sense of duality remains, at least in the fifth stanza, as we end up with one more volley of plurals: “tinges,” “laws,” and “claws” (ll. 13-15). But these doubles are offset by a new focus on the parakeet’s “pure intellect,” a unique symbol of independence and selfhood. Similarly in the sixth stanza we see the bird described for the first time as employing “His will,” suggesting an increased level of independent agency for our bird-among-the-birds (l. 17). The alliance of “intellect” and “will” is fraught with significance: these traits are actually the two tools of the artist. The “intellect” that “applies its laws” creates art’s frame or form, while the subconscious, Schopenhauerian “will” provides the impetus and beauty that fills in the details. With the focus on the single figure as artist with “*his* pure intellect.... *His* will [my emphases],” Stevens moves away from the sense of plurality and doubling permeating the rest of the poem. This final depiction of an independent, self-sufficient artist figure (even in the absurd portrait of the artist-as-tropical-bird munching “a dry shell”) appears to close the poem by positing the image of the solitary, untutored genius—the Romantic artist—as the source of sublime beauty and interest. Stefan Holander goes as far as to see this solitary bird exhibiting a “disdain for humanity and [other creatures’] reason” (143). This parakeet solipsistically rejects the idea of art as multiplicity, all while absurdly finding himself surrounded by it.

Stevens’s vision of what art is meant to do defies the parakeet’s self-absorption. Why would a poem employing ambiguity, plurality, and duplication as its central tropes abruptly resolve into a single, misanthropic viewpoint? Importantly, the final image of Stevens’s poem is that of the parakeet’s last “flare” of brilliant color. A bird’s continuous

flare—reminiscent of the artist’s creative “flair”—cannot exist without an observer. Art necessitates a second figure, a dialogue: if no narrator observes the parakeet, then the parakeet has no power to create any imagery. Likewise, if no reader explicates a poem, the poet is silenced. The individual artist is impotent without an audience.

Just as we would be foolish to see the bird as the arbiter of beauty and sublimity (despite its own beliefs), so Stevens says the work of the artist must be shaped out of dialogue, emphasizing the two sides to communication—rather than from single points of view. Modernist art necessitated collaboration and conversation and could not afford to be exclusive, in spite of its blustering. Stevens knew this, as he benefited immensely from the circle of artists around him, from his days with the Others forward (Buttel 100). A poet would be as absurd as the bird to think himself the only source of beauty in a forest of parakeets. The bird is foolish not to see the dual, binary nature of his art, despite the multitude of birds proving the opposite. The viewer or reader of art is the one who makes it useful, Stevens believes, and for the artist to refuse to experience another’s art or perspective is to remain ignorant and unethical—not merely toward others, but toward oneself. The “perfect cock” is not perfectly lucid but the perfect fool.

“Gubbinal”

Without the warning that “The Bird” provides we might read one of its following poems, “Gubbinal,” differently. “Gubbinal” represents a high-water mark of irony—an irony verging on sarcasm—but an irony that Stevens has prepared us to read. In the birds of “Bantams in Pine-Woods” and “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws,” Stevens gave us the tools for envisioning pragmatic, nonauthoritarian experience. Now he asks us to apply them to our own *human* experience in “Gubbinal”:

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

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

5

That tuft of jungle feathers,
That animal eye,
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire,
That seed,
Have it your way.

10

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad. (*Harmonium* 69)

As with the deliberately-awkward title “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws,” the strangeness of the word “Gubbinal” draws our immediate attention to what might otherwise seem an unassuming work. Actually, this is just what Stevens’s coined term “Gubbinal” means: it is the adjective form of “gubbins,” denoting a nonspecific, fragmented bit of gadgetry or rubbish. As we have seen throughout *Harmonium*, the poet favors the real effects (visual or auditory) of his text—in this case the reader’s peculiar feelings that the title engenders—over the abstracted, metaphysical effects (including the denotative meaning of the title). In other words, the sudden coining of a word emphasizes its emotive, connotative power, divorced from a familiar, literal meaning.

Yet there is another sense to the title: Nicholson notes that “gubbin” has another meaning, denoting a dullard. In this poem the gubbin is the invisible “you” with whom the narrator converses, one who believes “the world is ugly” despite evidence to the contrary (Nicholson 23). With contrasting voices in the poem (although mediated by one narrator), Stevens has created an unusual dialectic. In the second line the second figure is realized, marked by the second-person “you”—an offstage figure with whom the narrator contends—and their exchange is the poem’s argument. The first voice sounds content to maintain its own view of the positive aesthetics of the world, while the contradicting second voice holds tightly to the belief that “The world is ugly, / And the people are sad,” despite the narrator’s evidence to the contrary (“Gubbinal” ll. 4-5, 12-13). Neither one’s opinion has changed by the final lines, and thus the argument seems futile. Longenbach illustrates the plight of the unimaginative second person of the poem, one who can believe in nothing but a sad world, as Longenbach writes, “a diminished aesthetic becomes a prison” (43). Longenbach is right in this assessment, but there is an important element to this “prison” he neglects: this trapped position is certainly a real one, and it is essentially a prison of his own making, just as the sense of beauty the first speaker experiences is *his* personal, constructed view of the world.

A pragmatic analysis of “Gubbinal” can be framed, once more, by James’s *Varieties*. The contrast of the joyful figure with the pessimist is reminiscent of James’s lectures on “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness” and “The Sick Soul,” as applied to “Another Weeping Woman.” Yet Stevens in “Gubbinal” changes his persona’s tone. “Another Weeping Woman” describes an indignant speaker, desiring that the titular “Woman” abandon her mourning and choose to be happy and well, believing that his positive pragmatism can save her from her sorrow. But the speaker of “Gubbinal” is of a different sort, happy enough to lean back and let the negative naysayer believe that “The world is ugly, / And the people are sad,” if it will satisfy the foolish second speaker.

Knowing James’s view of belief as efficacious for providing meaning and happiness in life, “Gubbinal” makes sense ending this way. The “healthy-minded” optimist in “Gubbinal” is satisfied to pick out the beautiful sights of the world as a cause for celebration: he admires the “strange flower, the sun,” a “tuft of jungle feathers,” and even a particular “seed” promising future growth and beauty (“Gubbinal” ll. 6, 10). Yet even before the upbeat, celebratory stanzas finish, the apparently-positive narrator acquiesces to the unseen companion’s pessimism, responding, “Have it your way. / The world is ugly, / And the people are sad” (ll. 3-5, 11-13). This illustrates James’s point: Stevens has created a human world *sans* belief. Thus the optimist and the pessimist will *both* eventually fall into a naturalistic sense of despair, no matter how much they try to avoid it. As long as there is unexplained evil in the world, nothing beautiful can push it from people’s minds. Even the attempt to make a “beautiful” poem ends in failure; in the modern world, romantic healthy-mindedness has given way to a naturalistic pessimism. This was Arnold’s “eternal note of sadness” upon Dover Beach. The “strange flower” of the sun is overshadowed by the inconsolable sadness of humankind.

Yet we readers are not forced to wallow in despair alongside the poem’s narrating personae. We do not have a psychology or philosophy identical to these figures; we are free to deny (with William James) that everything must end in sadness. Just as the first, pre-disillusioned narrator of “Gubbinal” enjoyed the beautiful imagery of the world, we may envision a universe built from providential “Design” if it improves our lives, as James argues (*Pragmatism* 58). Likewise, James posits that we may choose to *believe* in a sense of free-will if this will to believe helps us *act* to make the future an improvement

upon the past (*Pragmatism* 60-1). Ironically, Stevens has built a sense of hope into his poem *negatively*. Instead of writing us a parable where the healthy-minded creature teaches his fellow to chin up and enjoy the universe, Stevens has left them both in despair and offered to his *readers* the opportunity to choose our own ending to this scene. We read about these naysayers and speculate that the fools ought to look once more at the “jungle feathers” and “animal eye” that argue for beauty, order, and significance in the universe. We may even believe the poem a positive one, with the title word “Gubbinal” heralding a joyous, nonsense world of play. It is as though Stevens has fooled us into taking a positive, pragmatic approach to his poetic universe, a bit of reverse psychology. And if it *works* for us, if it strikes us as useful, then the poem becomes, in James’s terms, absolutely true. For Stevens, belief is a truth we can control.

Ihab Hassan writes that in Stevens’s work the term “imagination” is something of a departure from James’s conception of it. Hassan writes that in Stevens there is almost no difference between “imagination” and “belief,” but James hardly mentions the imagination at all, focusing largely on faith and belief (5). Stevens’s essay, “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” offers us insights into his understanding of the human power of imagination:

...[T]he best definition of true imagination is that it is the sum of our faculties.... What light requires a day to do... the imagination does in the twinkling of an eye. It colors, increases, brings to a beginning and end, invents languages, crushes men and, for that matter, gods in its hands, it says to women more than it is possible to say, it rescues all of us from what we have called absolute fact.... (*Necessary Angel* 61-62)

What was true in “Another Weeping Woman” is truer in “Gubbinal”: from the speaker’s perspective there is power in the imagination—power enough to transform sorrow into happiness. Stevens preaches to us the religion of the healthy-minded soul. The capacity to imagine reality as one might see it gives a person a great deal of power, Stevens and James agree. Coupled to this, the imagination offers a kind of pragmatic morality, an ethical imperative to those who understand this power. Put another way: if we are *able* to be happy then perhaps we *ought* to be. Yet Stevens never confuses power and agency with necessity or duty. He is no coercive poet, despite that there remains a definite experience Stevens wishes us to find in “Gubbinal.” The work is still ours to do.

Case in point, “Gubbinal” is fundamentally a poem of layers. Within these layers is a poem about the *experience* of rereading, of looking *again*. A casual glance at “Gubbinal” displays a narrator proclaiming straight-faced, “The world is ugly, / And the people are sad.” But a second read-through dispels this conclusion: what appeared to be a statement of fact now looks like an absurd *non sequitur*. How could someone proclaim to identify the beauty of “That strange flower, the sun,” and a “tuft of jungle feathers, / That animal eye” (ll. 1, 6-7)—only to negate these visions with the proclamation that all things are “ugly” and “sad”? One solution to this paradox is the use of sarcasm: perhaps the narrator of “Gubbinal” is mocking the viewpoint of his companion. Look at the flowers, the sun, the eye, the seeds, the flames—all the brilliant shards of the world—the narrator says. But when his fellow chooses to still see the universe as little more than grief and shade, the first speaker apparently loses his temper: *of course*, he sarcastically mocks, in this world of brightness and beauty everything *must* be ugly and dark. The lines sound disingenuous. How then can this poem be representative of an open ironic ambivalence?

Stevens refuses to leave things at this. To fully experience—to live out—this poem, we must *continue* to read it. And this essential rereading mollifies the sting of any apparent sarcasm. As it turns out, what might have been sarcasm might *not* be, after all. the speaker’s tone in this poem remains ambiguous; the apparent lack of discernible emotion (all lines are short, simple statements, end-stopped, straightforward) belies an obvious belittling of one from another. Based on tone alone, the speaker may be sarcastic—or he might not, but we cannot, assume he has ill intentions. It is not impossible that the speaker of the poem actually *agrees* with his companion, suggesting that both of them have experienced enough pain in the world—both apparently are Jamesian “sick souls”—that they can *both* look at beauty in the world yet still believe in no remedy for their sorrows. Perhaps the realization that the “sun” is only shining on some days—that the animal’s glorious “eye” will eventually close in death, that “feathers” will fall and decay, that “fire” burns out, that “seed” can wither in the ground—perhaps all these powerful negations force these two figures to sorrow. The knowledge of beauty and brilliance as temporary might be enough to wreck these two simple souls.

“Gubbinal” is Stevens’s masterwork of subtlety. A first read-through elicits an instinctively negative response toward the disgruntled narrator, and a second look can be

nearly as coercive, almost forcing our disagreement with the speaker's position. But Stevens would have us experience this short conversation *over* again, and the result may be the realization that there is nothing straightforward at all. There is no plain speech here (beauty does *not* equal ugliness, we know), but neither is there simple sarcasm or reversals. We exist in an ambiguous ironic state as we walk through "Gubbinal": we cannot determine exactly where its two figures stand. Does the speaker agree with or mock his compatriot? And how do we reconcile their observations with our own experience of reality? I argue that this poem is not completely resolvable: Stevens has fooled us into playing an unwinnable game. To read and experience over again this poem, we begin to see all possible sides of this story and we are left with little instruction. Stevens does not allow the aggressive positivist, the healthy-minded soul of "Another Weeping Woman," to coerce us into agreeing that the depressed person is a fool. Nor does the oblivious, indifferent parakeet of "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" become our model, as we must still participate in this strange conversation. Instead Stevens makes us observers—students of experience—who must make up our own minds about the limits and uses of faith and imagination in a world that is *always* impossible to puzzle out, one that is beautiful and joyous and ugly and sad.

Further, Stevens is at the mercy of his audience, trusting them to give this poem the readings required to make any sense of it. However, the risk pays off, I believe, in a poem that perfectly encapsulates the discourse ethics I pursue. Stevens removes our ability to judge speakers and listeners in this poem as right or wrong; ultimately, we end up unsure of where they and he are standing. Stevens gives us few hints but allows us to experience the difficulty of living the examined life within this poem, modeling that process within "Gubbinal" and in *Harmonium*, more broadly.

What Stevens hits upon in the creation of *Harmonium* is his own brand of nondogmatic education in imagination, ethics, and correspondence. John Dewey called education the "continuing reconstruction of experience" ("My Pedagogic Creed" 88), and it is easy to find this concept in Stevens's project. Poetic experience acts as preparation for life's praxis, not because we memorize the right answers, but because we experience the right *dilemmas*. Experience is meant to teach us the questions, not the answers. Without conversations, without literature—without an alternative space to experience

another's point of view—we could only see the world through our own eyes, as Stevens and James believed. In her study *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* Martha Nussbaum alludes to this crucial social value found in an experiential, humanist education—the kind Stevens, James, and Dewey all advocate. There have always been competing educational goals in America, Nussbaum argues, between those who would educate and produce citizens purely for better economic production and those who value the experiential education of the humanities for its own sake (23-24). Understanding another person's perspective, feeling empathy and care for the other, is supported by the study of poetry and art that consists of alternative, complex perspectives (Nussbaum 109-10). Despite his abstractions, Stevens believed the psyche should not encompass the entirety of someone's world, to the exclusion of all others. Otherwise we find ourselves lost in a wasteland of our minds—what Eliot envisioned as a self-made prison where, “We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison” (ll. 413-4). Thinking, reading, and experiencing should open prison doors, not lock them.

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

“Gubbinal” triggers an unwinding in the poems of *Harmonium*; from this point forward many poems become more and more indirect and ambivalent. The ambiguities of “Gubbinal” have multiplied by the time we reach “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Stevens has been willing to make abstractions out of beliefs and attitudes, as well as conflating speakers and listeners, but in “Thirteen Ways” Stevens will go as far as to blend the edges of the human and animal, merging their images. Stevens's poem is the climax of *Harmonium*'s poetic project—a touchstone referencing and framing his new poetry, joining human with human, human with nature, and, ultimately, one with another. “Thirteen Ways” is an abandonment of idealized images and poetry in favor of the solid things of reality, though transmitted through the lyric lens.

To begin, the first four stanzas should be read as a unit:

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the black bird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree 5
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one. 10
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one. (*Harmonium* 74-75, ll. 1-12)

Beneath the “I” marking stanza one is another “eye”—not the eye of the omniscient poet, but of the “black bird,” an eye that encompasses much of the real but has no concept of the ideal. Thus Stevens signals that he is through with poetic idealizations and any remaining bardic authority, weary of false visions of completion and finality. Instead he offers his poetic power to a blackbird, trusting that the bird’s eye will be a better observer of experience than his own. The poet is weary of poetical and political wrangling. Replacing his worn-out gaze is the the agile, thorough, skeptical eye of the American blackbird our new guide. Its scope sees nothing of the European sublime in the “snowy mountains” like Shelley’s alps or Keats’s “autumn winds” (ll. 1, 7). The bird’s eye simply takes in all things and moves on, typifying Yeats’s later description of the “cold eye,” even mimicking Stevens’s own “Snow Man,” amidst these “twenty snowy mountains.” Though the world is frozen solid, life remains within the roving eye of the observer of experience.

Stanza two proceeds aphoristically, suggesting imagism. The “I” beginning line four is deceptive, like the “I[.]” prefacing the first stanza. The poet reminds us that he has abandoned his own I/eye in favor of the perspective of this uncanny other. The simile of this stanza, “I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds” (ll. 4-6), draws attention to itself and sounds a touch ridiculous in this flat, uninflected tone. We are meant to feel an element of absurdity in this statement; after all, how can we literally identify ourselves with another, especially another species? But Stevens knows his trade; his *humor* of juxtaposition, implicit in these absurdities, is key to understanding

the other. The link, after all, is laughter shared, the act of imagining the self as another and the experience of mutuality that this contradiction creates. We cannot with any seriousness believe we *are* another, but Stevens suggests that our connection is solidified even within the *joke* of suggesting that you and I might be the same thing. While we cannot occupy the same bodies, the same perspectives, we may still occupy the same comic-space: we can share the joke. We may both feel the absurdity of a claim that you might be me or vice versa, but that *mutual* absurdity is one thing that, paradoxically, unites us. Thus the simile, the self-conscious mind that is “like” another (whether human, bird, or even the tree in line five!), is the key. We may be “alike” though we cannot be “the same”; equality may arise from difference after all—as long as difference is *mutual*.

To clarify this we may consider the concept as illustrated in stanza three: the blackbird’s movements in the wind are deemed “a small part of the pantomime” (l. 8). The blackbird is not the entire drama, since, as Shakespeare knew, the world is the stage, and all are its players. The blackbird is not an unimportant piece of this play, and neither are any of us. Critically, there is no simile in stanza three (unlike stanza two): the blackbirds do not appear *like* actors for they *are* actors, mummies. The whole world, to Stevens, is a pantomime: our reality is constructed from mimicking, adapting, reflecting and distorting what we experience. Here Stevens has to smile at his life-sized comedy, for the empirical world has turned (literally) figurative. At least on one point we must all agree with Stevens in understanding that we, like the birds and the trees, are players in a scene; since birth we have mimicked others and the larger world as best we can. This agreement and the mutual, cooperative existence that ought to follow from it, is a basic, yet solid, connection to share with others.

Stevens has managed an absurd sort of philosophical proof that in poetry—in the lines that mimic reality—and in the “real” movements we make when we pantomime life, we can manage to find a solid connection to others. The crux is the pantomime: we act *like* another as another *acts* like us, and that shared repetition and dissembling becomes a makeshift ethical communion. We cannot *be* one another, but to *act* alive, to act human, is to engage in the same activity as everyone else, and that may suffice to start. The pantomime sloughs off individuality and self-importance for an ironic self-deprecation, and this is no meaningless act. Dudiak argues for a commonality that begins in

difference, something Williams and Stevens both believe (57). This recognition of difference and copying, mutual pantomiming, is at least a starting point for Stevens, a place to build upon. He does not finish the job for us but the poet will help us begin it.

And having reached this beginning point of commonality, Stevens is able to make the significant political claim in stanza IV that “A man and a woman / Are one,” and the even more extreme claim that “A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one” (ll. 9-13). Stevens argues for a radical equality here between humans and among all living things. There are no essential differences, the poem argues—certainly nothing significant in gender, class, age, or other differences—since all beings *act* at life in the same, shared patterning and pantomiming. Hannah Arendt writes that “I am only with my own self or the self of another when I am thinking, whereas I am in the company of the many when I start to act” (180). This is precisely what Stevens identifies in *Harmonium*: the activity, the verbs, are the link between self and other, one and many. If Moore can argue for man and woman to be “alone together” in “Marriage,” Stevens takes this a step further, saying they can be *alike* together. Once-essential differences can be dissolved. Stevens suggests that embracing shared *activity* rather than *identity* frees us to embrace the other. Thus differences of kind (nouns) ought to mean less than differences of actions (verbs). And we all *act* to exist, combining *mimicry* with *originality*, to embrace and to laugh, Stevens implies. The blackbird’s eye represents a shared vision within the *action* of seeing.

The next three stanzas further this foundation:

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes, 15
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird 20
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
 Why do you imagine golden birds?
 Do you not see how the blackbird
 Walks around the feet
 Of the women about you? (*Harmonium* 75, ll. 13-29)

25

Stevens's hierarchy of activity and invention over essentialism and abstraction continues into this middle section. The point Stevens's poetry seems to debate is as old as western civilization. It is Plato's and Aristotle's question: should we favor the ideal or the real? Stevens admits, "I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes" (ll. 13-15). Put less eloquently, ought we to trust the real thing, the direct, palpable change in tone that "inflections" denote? Or are we better off searching for an idealized, distant alternative that "innuendoes" suggest? To Stevens, this is the problem of art: is an art of the direct or indirect better suited to doing poetry's social work? We are forced to choose between the blackbird's active *cause*, the "whistling," or the *effect* it produces, the silent moment "just after" the sound (ll. 16-17).

Following the claim that "A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one," Stevens sets out to prove it in these middle stanzas. Stanza VI barrages us with active verbs: "filled," "crossed," "traced," (ll. 18, 21, 23). The blackbird and his icy domain are shaped not from concrete descriptions (nouns or adjectives would prove the bird's essential *difference* from the person observing it) but from movements, from actions—verbs that *any* creature could perform. The goal is unification and the removal of barriers between self and other, with shared verbs offering a way to reconcile very different nouns. The "barbaric" artistry of "icicles" on the glass, of the blackbird's moving "shadow," are Stevens's conception of true art, more in line with Aristotelian empiricism than Platonic idealism. Critically, the end of stanza VI fixates upon "An indecipherable cause" to all this activity and shared motions (l. 24). This is key to Stevens's ethos: the *cause* remains unknown, unknowable, and ultimately unnecessary to the *effect* of empathizing and identifying with the other. Causes are barriers, and effects are possibilities for reunion. Abandon all hope at deciphering the other—or even the self, Stevens suggests to those who would enter his poem-world. Instead, embrace the effects, follow the verbs toward a pragmatic solution to the insoluble. He insists we do not need

to know the problem (the difference, the reasons for injustice) to find a solution—a revolutionary statement of pragmatic ethics and faith.

Stanza VII recapitulates this theme: Stevens tells his fellows, the “thin men of Haddam [Connecticut]” to abandon the hypothetical, unreal, platonic, “imagine[d] golden birds” (ll. 25-26). Instead of chasing unreal ideals, they might instead experience the real thing, a connection to the bird who “Walks around the feet / Of the women about you” (ll. 27-29). Silent statues of golden birds (whose idealized aestheticism Yeats would make famous in the later “Sailing to Byzantium”) offer us nothing, Stevens believes. It is the living, moving blackbirds of reality that ought to define our fictions. The people of Haddam, or, more broadly, the human race (those born of *Adam*) need not be alchemists turning lead-colored birds to gold: they must only act, only “see,” the reality nearby. Stevens’s “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” cried, “let be be finale of seem,” and the same call echoes throughout “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Existence, action, the present, the visible is the pinnacle, and these pieces break down the barriers between you and me. The end of art and poetry is unity in *motion*, not identification by division.

The third quadrant of “Thirteen Ways” develops this theory of reunification through motion, abandoning poetic tradition on the way toward something new:

VIII

I know noble accents 30
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight, 35
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony 40
Would cry out sharply. (*Harmonium* 75-76, ll. 30-41)

Gone are Homer’s Troy, Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey, Keats’s urn, and Aedh’s Cloths of Heaven. In place of their “noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms” is the

present action of *today*. Hierarchies are destabilized, the sublime is thrown out. In place of judgment is shared experience and interdependence: “I know, too, / That the blackbird is involved / In what I know” (ll. 32-34). Like Moore and Williams, Stevens realizes the need to cede his authority as bard or prophet. The “noble accents” and “inescapable rhythms” of poetry draws Stevens’s ear. But to listen to romantic poetry’s siren song is to believe that one can save oneself. Stevens sees through this: he defies the poet’s authority, advocating instead for a radical equality, not just of man with man or man with woman, but of the absurdist marriage of man and blackbird. Stevens’s sense of poetic equality demands that he acknowledge that the birds themselves write their own poetry, and help write Stevens’s poetry as well.

Our new model is an old model: not the line of progress but the circle of repetition. In stanza IX Stevens explains the eye watching the bird fly “out of sight,” which marks the “edge / Of one of many circles” (ll. 35-37). The allusion is to Emerson’s essay “Circles,” which aptly illustrates Stevens’s new ethic. Emerson’s essay opens with a line that seems a direct ancestor of Stevens’s poetry: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end” (123). Like Emerson’s circles, Stevens’s poem pushes us to leave linear progress behind in exchange for loops of time and action, from eternity to eternity. Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways,” a poem of circles, began with one “I,” a bird’s “eye” (l. 3), before proceeding outward into “one of many circles” by line 37. Stevens’s poem attacks essentialism and embraces difference under the aegis of shared action, shared laughter, and shared conversations. Emerson identified this method earlier in his essay that, “Conversation is a game of circles. In conversation we pluck up the *termini* which bound the common of silence on every side” (Emerson 127). This is precisely what we ought to read in Stevens’s whole poem, and in *Harmonium* at large: a conversation of circles, where linear, unilateral transmissions fade in favor of shared experience and knowledge. The thirteen stanzas of “Thirteen Ways” are meant to be read in circles, not as a straight line toward a solution. Like Emerson, we move forward by abandoning old ends, old “*termini*,” for an ever-widening discourse.

Stanza X depicts this conversation both visually and aurally. The “sight of blackbirds / Flying in a green light” contrasts light with dark, and the “bawds of

euphony” “cry out sharply,” mixing pleasant and strident sounds. These contrasts are crucial to Stevens’s and Emerson’s points, as without difference there is no conversation, and vice versa. Light and dark, “euphony” and sharp “cry,” all have a place in the circles of conversation Stevens would create: gone are all hierarchies.

The last piece of the puzzle is one final sequence of altered perspectives:

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds. 45

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon. 50
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs. (*Harmonium* 76, ll. 42-54)

The poem is summed up in these final three stanzas. “He” who rides “In a glass coach” is the new poet, a figure Stevens and his readers can envision in the distance. This nameless watcher is an observer of the world (peering through the windows of a “glass coach”), not a director of it. Notably, he “rode,” through Connecticut, rather than “driving” upon it. The distinction is subtle but not unimportant: he has sloughed off hierarchies and agency; his observations appear through the perspective of the neutral camera lens, rather than from the viewpoint of a poet, prophet, or king. The observer even loses himself as his identity becomes comically confused with the creatures he observes when Stevens mistakes “The shadow of his equipage / For blackbirds” (ll. 46-47). The result of engaging the other is identification with it—dramatized here so memorably. The instinctual “fear” at this sudden confusion is a sign of the difficulty of such identification. But it is not a permanent fear, nor a debilitating one: observation is still the first step toward relating to another, as Moore taught us. Stevens’s poem is slowly drawing back

from the unnamed, unidentified figure of stanza XI to finally encompass a landscape with no humans in stanza XII. The observer loses himself in the observed.

By the final stanza, we can even leave logic and its hierarchies behind. “It was evening all afternoon,” Stevens paradoxically intones; “It was snowing / And it was going to snow,” (ll. 50-52). The effect is zen-like: we dwell here in the impersonal, bound only by verbs and action—*experience*. All this leads to a withdrawal from the self, and even from the human, moving further and further from the known to the unknown, toward nature undisturbed, untamed, uninterpreted. The poem’s ironies, the nonsensical statements that seem to contradict each other (snow and not snow; evening during the afternoon) compose our new experience of reality. We have found unity in contradiction, just as we have found links to other creatures through verbs, leaving the conflict of differences behind. Thus the poem’s final phrase is apt in its neutrality: “The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs” (ll. 53-54). Our focus has left the realm of the selfish, individual, human, emphasizing instead simply a bird in a tree. There is no judgment, no dogma, no implied direction. Abstractions and ideals are abandoned; the pragmatic search for community has settled upon this final, still image. The ethics of self-abandonment is completed. Our interest and union with the utter other is absolute, as we find ourselves inexplicably *implied* by this image, tucked beneath this blackbird’s wings. Dewey suggested that “the image is the great instrument of instruction” (“My Pedagogic Creed” 89), and nowhere is that more apparent in *Harmonium* than at this close. The entire universe is contained within the blackbird, in all its intricacies and complexities.

“To the Roaring Wind”

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is the climax of the plot of self-deprecation and -withdrawal begun in “Bantams in Pine-Woods,” “The Bird with Coppery, Keen Claws,” and “Gubbinal.” Yet the final poem in both versions of *Harmonium* is a brief image, “To the Roaring Wind,” and it makes a fitting coda to Stevens’s arguments for finding harmony with another. We are invited in, once more:

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocalissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it. (*Harmonium* 77)

Eleanor Cook notes the unusual placement of a poem which seeks inspiration from the wind as its muse: why would Stevens's invocation arrive at the *end* (86)? Furthermore, what primary speaker or "Vocalissimus" would Stevens have invoked? By now, we know this great speaker is *anyone*—any *other*. To find one's voice is to borrow another's. The "syllable" we seek is heard only if others "Speak it." Alone we cannot shape the language of ethics, union, and pragmatic rebuilding. Whether stranger, blackbird, or wind, whether optimist or pessimist, old or new, stormy or peaceful—whatever you have to say, "Speak it," Stevens demands. At last Stevens hands his voice to whoever would have it, and asks the same in return. He has no interest in restraining or ordering us but seeks the words we would speak to each other—whatever they might be.

In this figure we have come full circle, back to our beginnings in "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" where Stevens directly borrowed the other's voice, and proclaimed that each creature ought to have its own voice. Emerson's "Circles" remains useful: the philosophical ancestor to Williams and Stevens writes, "When each new speaker strikes a new light, emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker, to oppress us with the greatness and exclusiveness of his own thought, then yields us to another redeemer, we seem to recover our rights, to become men" (Emerson 127). We cannot be fully ourselves if others cannot be *their* selves. But poetry can push us further toward that goal, praising unity in action despite differences in aspect.

The Last Laugh?

Jessica Berman writes that a habit of all of modernism is to bring "to the fore narrative's role in helping us imagine justice" (7). I find this terminology compelling and I believe Williams, Moore, and Stevens might have agreed as well. What is poetry for except to "imagine justice" for an unjust world? Every time we meet the other in the text we are imagining the same action writ large in society. Berman further claims that "as soon as we are situated within a plurality—that community or company whose perspectives or stories we consider when we reason or judge, or that web of stories that surrounds the narratable self—we are in the realm of politics" (20). To engage with another is to find a duty or responsibility for the other. Often the trouble is recognizing this link. Stevens finds it in activity, in the shared laughter of action and motion. Moore

found it in the marriages of one voice with its counterpart. Williams found it in the reversal of social hierarchies, and the flattening of his authority as a physician. Eliot and Pound found it in the mockery of their literary selves. And Owen and Sassoon might have found it had they had the chance to see their circumstances from a greater distance (which Owen, tragically, would never get). Literature, though it be marginalized, ignored, prescribed, or suppressed, remains a living laboratory for the world that produces it. Berman agrees, saying that literature “offers a place where selves can account for their being among others in the world and where the process of acting in the world may be recorded, instantiated, and reimagined” (21). Telling stories, songs, and jokes unites us and develops connective tissue between all of us.

Poetry remains an essential site of interaction between individuals. Lyric poetry is a genre of intimacy, of transacting immediate, often intimate experience from one to another, apart from the more public realm of the novel or drama. It is in the poem that we find Lakritz’s “allo-trope,” most clearly, the action of double- or slanted-speaking, where metaphor dominates (2). Slater characterizes William James’s pragmatism as built on the idea that religion exists to make us into moral creatures (165), and I would extend this assessment to poetry, as well. The difference is that poetry must do this *without* dogmatic instruction, which forces its continual reinvention of itself and the abandonment of its own authority. The emphasis in the poetry of Stevens and his ilk is upon the *search* rather than the finding of final truth (Slater 166). Put another way, it is in the *action* that we find unity. Misak writes that “the pragmatist might well recommend debate, advocacy, economic incentive, and other measures over censorship and brute force” (152). We know this from reading all of these modern poets, by now: it is both more *ethical* to respect and honor another’s voice and more *effective* to do so if we are interested in society’s betterment.

Deming writes that the “essence of poetry is change” (125). It changes the self, the reader, and society. Our experience of poetry—like all our shared activities—never leaves us unchanged, like Eliot’s platinum. George Santayana puts it aptly:

The great function of poetry is... to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but indefinite material to

build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. (161)

To this, Santayana adds: “the function of poetry, like that of science, can only be fulfilled by the conception of harmonies that become clearer as they grow richer” (168). Only by *acting*—together, in *harmony*, with others—can the goals of a new society crystallize.

We must finish with the king *eiron* himself. Stevens’s much later poem, “Of Modern Poetry,” says it best: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (ll. 1-2). This is modern poetry’s pragmatic ethical task. The goal is not perfection, but motion. “Of Modern Poetry” itself ends on this note of motion:

... It must
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind. (*Collected Poetry...* 219)

It cuts off perfectly imperfectly: we do not need completion, only the attempt, the beginning. It is the doing, not the done, that matters—at least this side of paradise. We must act, for one another, and create a living “whole of Harmonium” that Stevens and his circle wished for society to become.

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