

The Fate of the Imaginary in Twentieth Century American Poetry

Charles Altieri
Department of English
UC Berkeley
Berkeley CA 94720-1030

I want to elaborate a curious discovery I made while teaching a graduate seminar in modernist poetry. Under the pressure of student critiques of the moderns, I found myself more pressed than usual to justify their experiments if I was to be convincing that these poets carry cultural capital not only because they made a profitable wager on being difficult but also because that difficulty can serve quite important cultural functions. On the most general level I was singing what is for me a very old song: by resisting their culture's standard procedures for interpreting events and attributing values, these poets open less clotted and moralized paths for negotiation between what minds seek and worlds afford. But the specific harmonies seemed to me to involve quite different modulations. Rather than work primarily with ideas, the class focused on what might be called the roles and attitudes that the ideas authorize. We kept noticing how intelligently and intensely the poets seemed to engage a set of dispositions that Lacan would later characterize as the imaginary realm. Their texts seemed to anatomize the personal and cultural dangers brought to the foreground by a Lacanian reading of the psychological investments we make in pursuing various images of ourselves as if we could through them establish substance for ourselves by eliciting the desire of third parties: I am regarded therefore I am. And, more important, the more we fully we recognized what the poets were resisting, the better we appreciated their efforts to reconfigure mental life in ways that provided significantly different affective economies and modes of appreciating our bonds with other agents.

In particular we found that concentrating on the intricate and debilitating hold the imaginary can wield on private and on public life made it plausible that

art had to begin in quite radical negativity.¹ And the more plausible the negativities, the more engaging the lines of flight that spin off from these negatives. We recognized why writers might believe that psychology had to precede politics, that poetry had insist on its capacity to be something real in the world rather than something imagined that provides substitutes for the world, and that culture desperately needed establish modes of agency that allow express links between impersonality and transpersonality without stopping for long at the various local stations where egos anticipate the comforts of home. But even as we became engaged by these quests, we also found ourselves also becoming intimately involved in an experience of the limitations of these projects that we thought gave us distinctive access to new demands on American poets that first emerged in the thirties.

The tale is easiest to tell in social terms, but it had ramifications for how poets approached every aspect of their work. Modernism had marvelously put the imaginary in a kind of limbo as it opened quite different ways of projecting agency and grounding ways that art might literally constitute values within the world. But the very terms of that success might also reveal a significant problem: art that successfully evades the imaginary might also block itself from addressing those aspects of sensibility governed by imaginary constructions in ways that prove central to any feasible program by which poetry might take on actual social force. It seemed that the darkening of sensibility that plagued almost all the major modernists in the 1930's might stem in large part from their discovery that the constructivist aesthetics on which they had come to rely might make it impossible to develop sufficient frameworks for identifying with those suffering from social injustice and for projecting identities that might do something about that situation. While imagination and the imaginary are quite distinct (more on this later), it may take the imaginary to supplement imagination when poets are concerned specifically with how they can affect readers' involvements in public life. For if poetry is to have social force beyond an elite community, it may have to develop those modes of presence that depend on the activity of the speaking voice as it works its way through various possible identifications and projected

identities. Constructivist aesthetic can develop a variety of voices and can make us keenly aware of the dangerous indulgences these voices elicit, but it cannot readily establish what might be necessary to have these voices form and maintain sympathies and commitments directly engaged with social relationships.

I am not arguing that constructivist modernism lacked a sense of history or an empathy with social conditions produced by industrial capitalism. On the contrary, it might have had too rich, or at least too fine, a sense of history because it was obsessed by a compelling need not just to account for itself historically but to find from within history direct energies and patterns which might better equip individuals to deal with what seemed inescapable dark times. Those ways of engaging history required undercutting any imaginary identities that might make the actual world seem a less depressing place than it was, or that allowed individuals to project beyond what seemed grim realities. Consequently the modernists could not within constructivist parameters adapt the rhetorical stances necessary for convincing others that in fact something might be done to increase social justice or even to elicit sympathy for the oppressed in ways that did not ultimately serve the imaginary interests of those doing the oppressing. Their distrust of concepts and of images, indeed their distrust of any medium not grounded in actual sensation, prevented any direct alignment of art with the sympathies necessary for social progress.

By taking this critical stance on constructivist modernism I think we can then more fully appreciate how specifically poetic concerns took shape when by the late 1930's the limitations I suggest were becoming increasingly obvious, and increasingly painful. Poets had to find ways of dealing positively with the roles the imaginary plays in our lives. Therefore I will argue that many of the major innovations in American poetry from the late 1930's to the present were devoted to elaborating versions of the imaginary that preserved its theatricality and sense of explorative projection while separating these from the modes of identification that Lacan showed made images so dangerous. One large group of poets, typified by those publishing in *The Masses*, took the most direct path: they embraced rhetorical stances and tried overtly to provide images of just and noble

behavior that a population might emulate. Those more sympathetic with modernism's critical sensibilities took a somewhat different tack. They sought a strange alliance between the powers that self-conscious attention to formal energies might provide as visions of agency and the versions of sociality that might emerge if they found ways to bring the theatrical and identificatory dimensions of the imaginary back into play. Their dream was that the formal energies might provide means of invoking the imaginary without binding its energies to specific self-congratulatory roles as well as the social dependencies necessary to keep these roles the objects of desire.

This way of casting the historical situation enables us to honor what I think are major achievements by Wallace Stevens, George Oppen, and the American Auden.² Each of these writers works out distinctive ways of honoring the force of the imaginary while using the resources of art to separate that force from the images and social roles whose authority is usually reinforced by our self-projections. Stevens becomes the central figure in this story because he tried simultaneously to indulge in the powers of the imaginary and to orient them toward the social on the level of process rather than on the level of images and roles. That is, he located sociality in learning to appreciate how we share investments that are grounded not in the objects produced by our imaginary projections but in the very ways we experienced their intensities. But there can be considerable room also to notice how Oppen's capacities for rendering complex social situations brings to poetry something Williams never quite realized within his version of constructivism. And we can see how Auden's deep distrust of vanity of all kinds led him to a performative mode in which imaginary identities are replaced by a process of constantly testing whether one can take responsibility for the process of valuing established by poetic voice.

This story then frames what I take to be the most fundamental directions taken by subsequent generations of American poets. Bishop and Ashbery each in his or her own way was desperate to free imagining from images of the self on the one hand and, on the other, from New Critical tendencies to have imagination sustain both truth claims and moral visions. And each was enormously indebted

to Stevens for the necessary resources. (Ashbery can be seen as bringing Auden's performative voice into endlessly intricate combinations with the depersonalized theatricality of the Stevensian imagination). But it would be a mistake to reduce our story to a tale of influences and models. We also have to bring in two supplementary perspectives grounded in the problematics of the imaginary. On the one hand this story provides significant terms for claiming that O'Hara, Lowell, Plath, Creeley, and Rich explore what may be more daring (and more problematic) encounters with the imaginary because they are less wary and defended in their dealing with processes of identification. For me it is especially important to appreciate how Rich puts the confessional sense of the ego to political purposes by focusing on the social source of pain reflected in the imaginary and the possible community afforded when poetry can share the terms of that pain. On the other hand, we have to wonder the poetics now celebrating itself for its radical experimental spirit may remain trapped within I am arguing are the limitations of constructivist aesthetics. Poet's like Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman are intensely aware of how the imaginary pervades public life. Yet they may fail to put that activity to work in anything but various comic or wittily melancholic tones that retain distance without giving that distance much philosophical resonance. (Lyn Hejinian, on the other hand, has considerable philosophical resonance but not much reach into the domains that Williams wanted to open for constructivist art—her Oppen is Deleuzian rather than Marxist.) Since I am uncertain about this, I find it difficult to bring my story up to the present. But I think it may help us appreciate why and how younger poets with experimental ambitions are trying to free themselves from the authority of LANGUAGE poetry.

I

In order to tell our story well we have to begin where all the ladders seem to have stopped—that is, with academic criticism's increasing unresponsiveness to the intensity and scope produced by the ways that modernism defined its enmities. For without the background created by their negative accounts of their culture and their poetic predecessors, their positive assertions easily seem thin

or strident or coopted by social forces the poets do not quite comprehend. Then it is difficult not to patronize modernism, trusting our current fashions rather than grappling with their sense of urgencies and the possibilities they elicit. Perhaps then the best way to recuperate these energies is to bring their negative force to bear on those who now tend to undervalue its intensity and intelligence. Take the case of a recent essay by Douglas Mao, "How to do Things with Modernism." Mao seems torn between admiration for the modernists and critical dismay at the apparent gulf between their values and ours, so I hope I can develop a way to show how many of their basic values play roles in twentieth century life that simply escape if we are too insistent on aligning ourselves with now dominant evaluative standards.

Mao sets himself the task of identifying problematic assumptions that attach Marjorie Perloff to Pound's work, shape her sense of his heritage, and make her less than fully sympathetic to Wallace Stevens. For he thinks that what attracts her to Pound reveals the continuing presence of a basic, serious mistake fundamental to modernist constructivist aesthetics. Perloff shares with Pound a tendency to set the value of "doing" against the highly mediated processes of analytic thought, and hence to separate poetry entirely from the modes of valuation that have a hearing within the public domain in Enlightenment societies. Mao begins by showing how Perloff's own contrast setting Pound the maker of forms against Stevens the purveyor of Romantic contents essentially repeats Pound's preference for what can enacted over what has to be argued for. Then he focuses on the ideological forces that come into play because of Poundian poetics. In Perloff's case these tendencies become manifest in her love of Wittgenstein, whose emphasis on particular activities link to Pound's preference for doing over thinking and require rejecting Russell's rationalism. Perloff then is simply misguided in her claim that this rationalism "has proved to be increasingly unable to cope with the upheavals of the twentieth century" (166):

What this means is that Poundian poetics could affiliate itself with the essence of the modern, and with doing rather than the failure of doing It is not only that the method of the *Cantos* is associated with a change in

Form (a more visible doing in poetic texts themselves) and a change toward form (a transformation of critical standards under which visible doing attained an unprecedented importance). It is also that insofar as Poundian poetics refused the syntax of logically ordered propositions identified with reason and logical argument, it seemed willing to confront the irrational modern age on its own terms, willing to choose as its weapon something closer to the age's own extra-or anti-rational modes than the confidently syllogistic strategies inherited from eighteenth and nineteenth century discourse. (166)

Mao then gets quite canny. He tells us that he has disdain for critical shortcuts that use "Pound's fascist allegiances to discredit his poetics *tout court*" (169). But having set up the issue in terms of oppositions between the irrational and the rational, he has almost no alternative but to connect Pound's concerns with form and with intuition to authoritarian threats to democratic stability. Even contemporary efforts to separate Pound's authoritarian montage from the collage principles that cultivate open form then are exposed as dangerously anti-rational and threats to an effective democratic literary polity.³ Perhaps more important, this Poundian line of thinking betrays a fear that "one may never be able to do because one knows how to think" (173). Being the most marginal of intellectual practices, and hence the one most threatened by public habits of thinking, radical poetry is most susceptible to this anxiety and hence most susceptible to any fantasy that doing can replace thinking. For Mao, this chain of reasoning can stand as an example of a new perspective on modernism, one that shifts our attention from specific value claims to the roles they play, and do not play, within the "social organization of intellectual life" (173). And this new perspective makes it possible for critics to escape identifications with that marginalization so that they can make greater efforts to understand its causes. That effort in turn enables us to turn from self-pitying defensiveness to lively participation in the realm of social negotiations that is necessary if we are to do engage what elicits that marginalization in the first place. Presumably if we were more "rational" we

For a moment on rising, at the edge of a bed, to be,
To have the ant of a self changed to an ox

It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.

It was being without description, being an ox. (*Collected Poems*, 204-5)

Finally it seems to me crucial to recognize that by setting intuitionism against reason as Mao does criticism ends up buying into binary oppositions that are themselves established rationalism's bid for social power. In Russell's hands these binaries sustain a demand that there must be empirically testable descriptions for all assertions that count as significant and for all domains where poetry has imagined how freedoms could make themselves manifest. So to buy into Russelian binaries is to miss two important aspects of what all of these writers thought crucial to developing a distinctively modernist poetry. First, it is to miss the close connection the writers sought between how one wields language and how one figures and tests possibilities of individual freedom. Being without description does not entail being without the taking of responsibility for expressive activity or without access to what might be expressed within experience. And, second, embracing this binary leads to ignoring a form of suspicion perhaps crucial to pursuing such freedoms. Although rationalism tends to ignore the fact, it is as much a mode of doing as any process that emphasizes intuition, just as any decent modernist poetic will present itself also as a mode of thinking. For intuitionism the doing is expressive: agents hope to discover in how they make the world articulate for themselves how their own desires can be tested in what they make. And for rationalism the relevant doings have to do with organizing social power by specifying what does and does not count as significant description. It matters that we attend to such doings because they remind us that rationalism too establishes roles and practices basic to social life. In fact the authority attributed to reason makes it a fundamental source of socially significant self-congratulatory images that who master the relevant techniques take on as part of their entitlement. Yet each of these socially approved images brings with it considerable degrees of blindness. Consider the temptations of the rational moralist to pride himself on ignoring the claims that feeling might

establish in specific cases. And science itself has its own imaginary identifications—at one pole with the cold lucidity of the one who sees through illusion (often thereby distrusting all calls for action), and at the other with images of practical efficiency and/or moral probity that need not heed the grumblings of disaffected poet types.

In other words, Mao's self-image of the one who knows because he attends to history brings its own blindness to basic aspects of the modernist enterprise. On the most fundamental level he abstracts the techniques of rationalism and so separates them from the various imaginary identities they fostered, identities elaborated throughout the nineteenth century in ways that called out for continual critique. Then, analytically, he frames his basic opposition in way that is insufficiently dialectical. If we are to take into account the range of modernists committed to non-discursive activities of mind, our basic distinction cannot be between doing and thinking but between different ways of thinking that implicate different ways of doing. In part because analytic thinking seemed so limited in its social roles, the poets felt they had to explore what might be possible by letting collage elicit different lines of connection and by testing the degree to which form might provide modes of felt coherence more comprehensive than anything reason's mapping of differences might be able to elaborate. More important, emphasizing the synthetic force of formal energies might provide aspects of identification, modes of satisfaction, and possibilities of self-reflection that provide alternatives to the self-images giving reasoning its power within social life. Exploring modes of thinking not bound to reason might provide release from what had over the past century become the most disturbing aspect of rationality—its tendency to subordinate its instrumental value to the range of social roles that claims to being rational might sustain. In a culture where reason had become subsumed under imaginary identities, it might become necessary to test if alternative ways of producing connections could also produce different possibilities for how humans understood their own agency. Doing might be connected with a new freedom in responding to the world, in appreciating one's own constructive powers, and in understanding how social

identities might be experienced.⁵ Reason's investments in the imaginary provide the impetus for the demands modernism makes on the imagination.

II

Mao's relation to history clearly needs historicizing. There are of course many ways to do that. I am less interested in the historical factors that might "cause" Mao's behavior than I am in the overall structure of need and demand that shapes his particular way of connecting thinking to doing. That concern is what leads me to Lacan on the imaginary, and through Lacan to the critiques of modernity posed by Bergson and by Nietzsche. Mao apparently believes that the reasoning he idealizes depends on independent, often a-historical practices. And he is right about the practices per se: reasoning has to have a framework sufficiently capacious to analyze and to bracket the material interests of the various persons seeking to use its authority. But he clearly is not right about the nature of the investments we make in ourselves as adherents of rationality. For there we posit identities and take immense satisfaction in the kind of person we envision ourselves able to become—and able to present as engaging the desires of other people. Self-presentation by those who champion reason is almost always contrastive: there but for the grace of Russell go I. But thanks to my reasoning I can present myself as the one who seeks lucidity, or the one who already possesses it and so has a worthiness making me different from the poor intuitionists that I am describing—different and better, at least in the domain of the intellect. We license such self-ascriptions because the roles we play involve us in possibilities of being desired and desirable. These roles position us within entire webs of expectations and projections that bind us to ideologies and blind us to tensions between reason as means to an end and reasoning well as somehow earning us the authority to pronounce on ends that in fact may not depend on reason at all.

Lacan matters here because the concept of the "imaginary" provides a useful account of how these investments take place and why they often prove problematic.⁶ There is much more to his account than I can use because I do not want to bring his entire psychoanalytic apparatus to bear. But just Lacan's

simple formulations about the imaginary provide a powerful account of the specific dynamics by which roles and identities become caught up in personal and collective fantasies of power that are not directly accounted for within the particular practice. (There is no reason within philosophy that philosophers pride themselves on their lucidity and have so little patience with other ways of determining values.) Lacan teaches us to be suspicious about the images we invoke in establishing identity because the need for experiencing ourselves as coherent and substantial beings can be taken back to the forms of satisfaction mothers provide when they treat their infants as significant individuals. On this basis Althusser could then develop the concept of interpellation to explain how we take on social roles and ideological identifications not as imposed upon us but as actively chosen means of responding to the calls asking who we are and what we are doing. Without affirming what interpellates us within the society as an extension of our body we face the pure anxiety of having no place where our sense of self can reside.

But for me Lacan proves more useful than Althusser because Althusser's framework is so oriented toward social construction of the individual that it does not allow relatively fine-grained analysis of what is at stake for individuals in the process of postulating identities. Interpellation explains our social involvements without sufficiently analyzing the psychological instabilities and compensations informing the satisfaction it produces. And Althusser provides no space for examining how individuals might push against such subjection by trying out other versions of the imaginary or even by trying to find other ways to envision what can satisfy agents' investments in their own distinctive agency. If psychology without sociology tends to be vain, sociology without psychology is blind. Lacan opens possibilities for combining these disciplines because he enables us to look carefully at the particular ways we project adult versions of the loving responses our mothers offer. Such images establish the self we can take as real because we can also cast it as the self that can be loved. Our goal is not just to answer the call of the other but to envision ourselves loved because of how we frame that response. We need not just to be interpellated but to be interpellated as this

particular individual. The call for response elicits not only my naming my roles in society but also my making myself seem distinctive as this occupier of that role.

Therefore Lacan helps us appreciate what goes into the satisfactions and investments that take place when we can occupy a role or offer an attribution to ourselves that we envision capable of winning the desire of other persons. And, more important, he makes us realize that identities based on images provide a substance that is inextricably bound up with two levels of fictionality—about ourselves having managed to separate specific substances from the flux of experience (our making *hommelettes* of omelettes), and about what can elicit the desires of others in such a way that they provide the bond or guarantee that the image does confer substance. Substance for oneself as a distinctive ego then is the ultimate purely imaginary object because it depends on projections about what the other projects. So our dependence on the imaginary is a constant source of defensiveness and compensatory violence because we have always have to fight against others for the specificity that the image confers. Others may have better claims on the substance I want others to give to me, and I know it is always possible the other might shift the direction of his or her desires. The imaginary, in other words, makes for great theater but unstable character.

Lacan's framework proves especially relevant when we deal with modern society because the greater the social mobility, the more central the domain of psychology to the forming of identities within that mobility. Traditional societies also depend on strong imaginary identifications. But it seems likely that the principles shaping those identifications are somewhat different because for the majority there is little sense that the roles and values are chosen, and so not much cause for anxiety about the self committed to the role or values. Then where there is not much anxiety there need not be a great deal of defensive uneasiness desperately trying to act as if one's identifications were in fact justified. I think modernist writing found itself obsessed with the imaginary because it confronted a society relatively new to mobility (or relatively new to being threatened by the mobility of others) and so perhaps distinctively mired in the combination of defensive and aggressive role playing and moral posturing

familiar to all those who read late Victorian novels or contemporary therapeutic manuals. This neediness was compounded by the nineteenth century crises about religion because these put into doubt the most stable and apparently trustworthy model of individual substance anchored in the love conferred on us by our most significant other. So those affected by this crisis had to seek other ways of satisfying what religion made central to the psyche's sense of available satisfaction in the domain of identity and identification. No wonder that the idea and ideal of being moral would take on an importance far beyond its actual use value in practical life. The concept of the imaginary helps us understand why the appeal of models positing autonomous strong identities might also produce a society rife with repressive and defensive modes of self-delusion. The imaginary haunts all human projects of identification. But it is especially dangerous in those areas where agents claim a lucidity capable of seeing through every one else's imaginary structures. And it is most dangerous in the role of moral judge because there the blindness attendant on lucidity claims tends to be reinforced by the ease with which the moral provides substantial identities based on contrast with the unenlightened or less than righteous. Perhaps the more abstract the identification the more dangerous it becomes because of what it leaves out and because of the armor it easily takes on once all opposition is banished—think current US foreign policy.

III

The artists and writers were not alone in such work. Perhaps the best way to develop a discursive framework for their concerns is to turn briefly to the two philosophers most often invoked in artistic circles—Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson. Bergson clarifies the problematic role imaginary structures play in our relation to ourselves, and Nietzsche beautifully captures the hollowness that comes from social identifications whose substance stems primarily from anticipating the approval of others. Together these philosophers make clear why ideals of rationality seemed destructive for the arts and why intuitionist versions of doing might involve values that have very little to do with fascism and very

much to do with the possibility of treating democratic individualism as a significant ideal.

This is not the place for a full disquisition on either philosopher. I want only to show how each philosopher brings a Lacanian critique of the imaginary to bear and defines for the arts the need for modes of thinking that incorporate doings. Bergson's fundamental contribution was to show what one lost when one took on identities connected to the wielding of rational processes. His arguments begin with the crucial observation that any kind of reasoning depends on sorting the world into sets of categories that we hold in common. These sortings are crucial for practical work, but extremely misleading when we turn to concerns about individual experience and individual agency.⁷ For the distinctive qualities of personal experience simply cannot be formulated within the spatial models necessary for analytic thought. Nor will the images that confer clear social substance suffice for a self-reflexive grasp on how particular events modify consciousness. The various spatial resources necessary for picturing and analyzing experience leave us only shadows of the energies and investments that emerge as woven into the duration that the event takes on:

We should therefore distinguish two forms of multiplicity, two very different ways of regarding duration, two aspects of conscious life. Below homogeneous duration ..., a close psychological analysis distinguishes a duration whose heterogeneous moments permeate one another; below the numerical multiplicity of conscious states, a qualitative multiplicity; below the self with well-defined states a self in which *succeeding each other* means *melting into one another* and forming an organic whole. But we are generally content with the first, i.e. with the shadow of the self projected into homogeneous space. (128)

Many of Bergson's specific formulations seem to me now only stop-gap hypotheses, contaminated by the very epistemic demands that he is trying to resist. In retrospect we can see that there is no need to make what is other to spatial forms "organic," nor to talk about a deep self, nor to locate capacities for freedom in the duration where elements of experience melt into one another. Yet

even these problematic assertions helped modernist artists and writers realize that their work could provide significant alternatives to the limitations created for “rational” thinking by its dependencies on spatial metaphors. Discursive reasoning depends on extensional principles in order to avoid equivocation: if one’s terms wobble nothing can be built on them. But why should the arts accept this model of building where units are fixed and combinatorial rules built out of disciplinary practices? It might be much more illuminating to concentrate on intensional, intricately interwoven aspects of experience. Then art could give substance to what would otherwise be shadow because it would call attention to how relations are formed internal to these intensional fields.

Nietzsche is even richer than Bergson on the practical significance of resisting disciplines based on the extensional principles that enable unequivocal denotations within discursive practices. He shares the idea that such habits made us approach human actions and human values as if what provided common frames of reference was more important than anything bearing on distinct degrees of specific intensity and purposive intelligence. And he presents a powerful case for what culture loses when it makes “truth” its fundamental value. For pursuing “truth” necessarily subsumes novelty, and so comes quickly to appear “so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull” (BG&E, sect 296). But Nietzsche goes far beyond Bergson in clarifying what gets lost when a culture relies on common-sense terms for the psyche in order to provide the illusion that it has produced clear and unequivocal foundations for making claims about psychology. And on that basis he can provide an account of the social problematics generated by ideals of reason that substantially differs from Bergson. Bergson never lost the hope that he could change philosophy from within. Nietzsche on the other hand saw almost from the start that if one wants to challenge the prevailing complexes of imaginary investments one had to alter what might count as the most significant satisfactions we found in intellectual life.

On the most elemental level Nietzsche’s turn against common sense was focused on simple psychological functions. Those who generalize about states

like thinking and willing as if they were single isolated processes miss the many ways such intricate activities are woven into related bodily states. Thus Nietzsche points out how “will is not only a complex of sensation and thinking, but is above all an affect” linking a sense of command with a sense that one can identify with the “executor of the order” (BG&E, sec 19). And he insists on our noticing how thinking cannot be made continuous with the ego but often emerges as something impersonal and driven by imperatives with which it is impossible to attach our standard human value terms.

Then with this shaking up of what counts as practical psychology Nietzsche can show how philosophy itself is not a simple practice but involves aspects of will that bind it closely to problematic aspects of social life. Philosophy cannot easily separate itself from the world of *doxa* without binding itself to a particular, socially mediated imaginary projection of the identities it confers. And it cannot treat its own cult of lucidity apart from the disturbing traces of nihilism increasingly evident in European life. Ironically relying on conceptual frameworks may well encourage nihilism because it makes the contingent and the local highly problematic. What cannot fit operating universals simply does not matter—such features become the grand *différend* within cultural life. Consequently there emerges a substantial gulf between what the mind can sanction and what the individual can feel or trust. Nietzsche sees European nihilism taking hold because individual conative desires become forced into the problematic position of either having constantly to distrust themselves or having constantly to assert themselves over against reason. Both options leave the agent no values that can be enjoyed in themselves or for themselves. And where needs cannot find specific outlets nor performances establish distinctive senses of accomplishment, cultural life becomes a circuit of mutually reinforcing vanities:

[see three quotations on handout]

In accordance with the slowly arising democratic order of things ..., the originally noble and rare urge to ascribe value to oneself on one’s own and to “think well” of oneself will actually be encouraged ...; but it is always opposed by an older, ampler, and more deeply ingrained

propensity—and in the phenomenon of “vanity” this older propensity masters the younger one. The vain person is delighted by every good opinion he hears of himself ..., just as every bad opinion of him pains him: for he submits to both, he *feels* subjected to them in accordance with that oldest insinct of submission that breaks out in him. ...It is “the slave” in the blood of the vain person ... who afterwards immediately prostrates himself before these opinions as if he had not called them forth. (Sect 261)

Nietzsche also realized that the more unstable the sense of ego, the greater the demand on art to provide an alternative substance within which desires can take distinctive responsibility for themselves without having to submit to the options of distrust or rational justification. Art offers at least the possibility of anchoring its assertion of value in what it performed rather than in the opinion it cultivated. Because art did not depend on reason for its sense of value, it was less prone to submit what might be distinctive in its particularity to the leveling abstractions enabling the world to carry out its business. Hence Nietzsche offers this account of his own investments in Greek tragedy:

Already in the preface addressed to Richard Wagner, art, and *not* morality, is presented as the truly *metaphysical* activity of man. In the book itself the suggestive sentence is repeated several times, that the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Indeed, the whole book knows only an artistic meaning and crypto-meaning behind all events—a “god,” if you please, but certainly only an entirely reckless and amoral artist god who wants to experience, whether he is building or destroying ... his own joy and glory—one who, creating worlds, frees himself from the *distress* of fullness and *overfullness* and from the *affliction* of the contradictions compressed in his soul. ... You can call this whole artists’ metaphysics *arbitrary*, idle, fantastic; what matters is that it betrays a spirit who will one day fight at any risk whatever the *moral* interpretation and significance of existence. (Birth of Tragedy, sect 5)

In contrast, Nietzsche sees Christian traditions as utterly opposed to this reveling in appearance because its teachings want to be “*only* moral” and so

“relegates art, every art to the realm of lies” (sec 5). This critique then created a framework that would enable writers like Yeats to take thinking one step further by proposing a marvelous reintegration of humility and pride:

I think that before the religious change that followed on the Renaissance men were greatly preoccupied with their sins, and that today they are preoccupied by other men’s sins, and that all this trouble has created a moral enthusiasm so full of illusion that art, knowing itself for sanctity’s scapegrace brother, cannot be of the party. ... Painting had to free itself from a classicalism that denied the senses, a domesticity that denied the passions, and poetry from a demagogic system of morals which destroyed the humility, the daily dying of the imagination in the presence of beauty.⁸

(Essays and Introductions, 350-1)

IV

We have dwelled long enough on the cultural problems posed by the imaginary within democratic culture. I want to ask now how the modernist writers took on the burden of proposing modes of thinking and of feeling that might actually make a difference in confronting the imaginary identities fostered by their mainstream culture. How could satisfaction be directed and agency conceived in ways that repudiated the habits established by our investments in the imaginary?

Three projects seem to me fundamental for engaging the problematic features of the imaginary identifications at the core of social authority. First, the new art would have to be impersonal or would have to use depersonalizing strategies. Poets had to reject the kinds of images which solicit identifications, and they had to use that particular mode of negation in order to call attention to alternative ways that consciousness might respond to values, find satisfactions in its own activities, and experience its social bonds by routes that did not involve the quest for the desire of the other.⁹ Second, as part of that resistance to the imaginary the new poetry would have to cultivate a transparent concreteness based on foregrounding the play of sensations and the synthetic power of overt formal devices. This writing would have to manifest ways of making sense and pursuing values which clearly did not derive from discursive orientations, with

their sequential reasoning and their pursuit of judgments based on how that reasoning brings generalized criteria to bear on the particulars. The impact of poetry could not depend on how it brought general principles to bear. Instead the poets would have to develop imaginative force by how they presented the mind engaging fundamentally contingent relational fields so that the very terms of the particular relationship would seem more important than any adaption of them for structures of self-regard. Finally, the art had to establish ways of attributing value to these modes of engagement. But how could it do that without bringing to bear imaginary roles and images that specified what was to be valued. My *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* spends a good deal of time on this topic, so for now I will just try to show how the poets shifted the very notion of value in ways that made doing a fundamental feature of thinking. For rather than building events that exemplified features honored by the society—features ranging from graceful composition to attributes of moral wisdom—the poets would make their own manifest handling of the energies of mind and feeling the poem’s claim to significance. Value depends on how an embodied principle of activity develops and maintains complex relational forces within the work. This value can be located entirely in how the particular manifests its distinctive qualities or it can depend on how the relational forces become exemplary and so affect how we stand toward other contexts as well.

I am well aware that these generalizations need further clarification. 1) My claims about impersonality are probably least problematic because we can all recognize Eliot’s enormous influence on the development of modernist values in Anglo-American culture. But I fear Eliot will only continue to matter to the degree that we can appreciate how his concern for impersonality is in fact a profound response to the cultural pressures that I am trying to invoke through Nietzsche and Bergson. As Eliot took pains to assert, pursuing impersonality is not simply a personal preference or a means of honoring classical aesthetic values. Rather it is a response to a culture increasingly dependent on the imaginary substances we trade as our personalities. The expression of “significant emotion” has to have its “life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (*Selected Essays*, p.

11) because the test of the value of the emotion has to be the modes of intelligence it sustains rather than the senses of self-importance it promotes. That is why Eliot said “only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things” (10-11). Even his snotty tone may be necessary in order to indicate how brutal we have to be to keep from resting in self-congratulation about our emotional lives. Only then can we begin not only to understand them but to let art open fresh combinations that break with our efforts to hold on to images of ourselves as “deep personalities.”

Appreciating impersonality cannot stop with Eliot. It is crucial to see that his is one of many modernist efforts to shake up the modes of coherence and self-congratulation connected with agents’ senses of themselves as vital and caring personalities. I have written elsewhere about the ways in which Stevens’ *Harmonium* theatrically refuses to allow any standard image of human personality enter the volume until “Monocle de mon Oncle,” and his intricate shifting of voices and moods prevents states of mind from folding into the comforts of “personality.” And ideals of something stronger than impersonality, some deep commitment to depersonalization seem to me part of what makes Mina Loy so exciting a poet. In Loy’s work a melodramatically cruel lucidity seems inseparable from releasing the sensibility to deal directly with specific affective states without the defensiveness that comes when we ask how what we are encountering fits into larger identity structures. Generalizing comes to seem little more than a defense against what language can encounter when it refuses the consolations of the imaginary. Notice for example in this passage from “Songs for Joannes” how the procreative truth permutes into ironically pregnant alliterative distance from the self:

The procreative truth of Me
Petered out
In pestilient
Tear drops
Little lusts and lucidities
And prayerful lies

Muddied with the heinous acerbity
Of your street corner smile (*The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 62.

2) The issue of opening art to contingency requires more elaborate treatment. Here the great modernist exemplars are Marianne Moore and W.C. Williams, with Williams the easier one to deal with in the brief summary fashion I have to employ here. Let us turn to a quite early poem, "The Young Housewife," because its negative energies in effect define the psychological space within which Williams goes on to develop his version of constructivist values:

At ten A.M. the young housewife
moves about in negligee behind
the wooden walls of her husband's house.
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands
shy, uncorseted, tucking in
stray ends of hair, and I compare her
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car
rush with a crackling sound over
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling. (*Collected Poems*, I: 57.)

The basic negation here is of all claims that the psyche can subsume the individual event and the ego's role in it under any available interpretive category. The poem does bring the speaker's comparing her to a leaf together with the sound of dried leaves marking his departure and somehow contributing to his smile. But the basic effect of the comparison is to impose on us how this little poem resists the synthetic roles metaphor can play. Where synthesis might be, the poem emphasizes discrete sensations that keep a variety of factors in unstable tension. Reading this poem, then, is less a matter of providing an

imaginary position from which to make judgments, or even to make identifications, than it is of experiencing the subtle interplay of phenomena that momentarily bring complex but fluid affects into play. So perhaps the only way to experience these affects fully is to refuse the mind's urgencies to make sense of the scene.

Mention of "her husband's house" somewhat melodramatically sets the stage. In the first stanza everything is arranged, almost ceremonious. The second stanza shifts to highly particularized feelings gathering around the ways that the housewife's body contrasts with that order. Each detail complicates the picture. Her shyness defines an attitude; her uncorseted fleshiness indicates a simple voluptuousness; and her stray ends of hair mark a minimal rebelliousness or at least freedom to be something other than her husband's possession. Yet this projection of possible freedom remains merely a possibility, not something actually internalized by the woman. What freedom she does have seems less an internal state than the pure contingency of the fallen leaf. Correspondingly, we best attune to the poem's details by letting them keep that contingency. Rather than make the details cohere we are asked to let our imaginations indulge a quiet uncorsetedness where stray hairs retain their expressiveness as particulars. Then each detail peeks out at us like an aspect of the woman's spirit, unpossessed but also undirected and unable to reach out to passers-by or to return whatever desire the watching generates.

So far I have dealt with the situation as it appears to the reader-observer. But the significance of contingency is even more striking when we turn to the psychological states of the participants. The last five lines offer two interpretive frameworks. First there is the speaker's own metaphor of the "fallen leaf" that gathers into one imaginative site the motion of the car, the sound of the leaves, and the man's smile. It is tempting to see this metaphor as the poet's projection of interpretive significance for what the speaker sees. That hypothesis links the smile and the leaves but it is not adequate to the role the car is playing. For the car keeps our attention on movement and on boundaries between the agents. So we probably have to see the smile as rueful, an acknowledgement that the

speaker position is equally bound to the loose conjunction of details. His task is not to interpret the scene but to find an attitude adequate to this moment of glimpsed need and fleeting desire, need and desire that seem as isolated from any possible course of action as the floating of the leaf. To adapt to this scene the speaker must reject the roles of possible lover or sensitive interpreter in order to find a figure that more adequately reflects his status as passer-by and that honors her irreducible otherness.

Keeping the focus on his moving on then honors the one thing he can share with the woman—a fatality defined by awareness of the plots they cannot enter and the roles they cannot play. Yet the smile is not merely a submission to fate. The smiling brings a self-reflexive dimension to the pervasive sense of contingency. And, more important, the smile allows the poem a form of will and self-projection that it denies itself in the order of the imaginary. For the smile is something like an active positioning himself in accord with her uncorseted presence, a slight escape from being possessed. By accepting the pure momentariness of this encounter and the promiseless eros revealed to his glance, the speaker affirms a sense of self without turning that sense into an image of the self. After all, so little is ultimately asked of the smile, and so little will flow from it. The smile seems to recognize that any effort to project meaning onto the scene or to expand the self's role would destroy this minimal sense of agency and reimpose the order in which husband's own houses and others comply with the rules of ownership.

Looking back from Williams' *Spring and All*, one might say that "so much depends" on this capacity to smile. In his fully constructivist work Williams develops the sense of agency in "the Young Housewife" into a full dynamics of authorial presence that does takes form as compositional activity rather than as self-projection. The possibility of investing totally in how the work is put together makes will immanent, an aspect of doing rather than of thinking or of projecting identities. Transforming the speaker's smile into the composer's manifest constructive activities establishes for poetry the capacity to make "there is" more important than "I am."¹⁰

3) Williams then could also be chosen as an exemplar of what I want to call the “constructivist anti-ethic” basic to early modernism. Here we have to recuperate modernist poetry’s richest response to the obvious question—how humanly satisfying and imaginatively useful can a poetry that sets itself against the fundamental drive leading us to pursue ego-ideals and ideal egos? So I turn to one of its apparently slightest vehicles, Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” because there is obviously no more economical way of addressing this challenge. (All of Pound’s *A Draft of Thirty Cantos* may be in embryo in this poem.) For “Station of the Metro” establishes ways of presenting a conjunction of compositional and existential energies that can fully engage our capacities for conferring value and for identifying with fundamental human powers while at the same time it fleshes out how impersonal strategies can evade our standard imaginary means of identifying with the possibilities of such values. Much of

The poem is no doubt familiar to all of you:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough. (*Personae*, 119)

Notice first what Pound does with contingency. The poem is insistently one moment made up of discrete sensations that matter because of how they impinge on one another. Rather than project an interpretive stance, Pound intensifies the pull of each particular. Introducing an apparition with the definite article is strange and compelling, especially when that article is supplemented by two further definite indexical modifiers. This poem is not an act of description; it is a process of adapting to the force of sensations as they form momentary conjunctions.

Then we are invited to notice what we gain by the fact that there is no manifest organizing consciousness trying to incorporate the moment within the projection of a self. Everything depends on the interactions among a range of intricate tensions between natural and mechanical objects, between the definite modifiers of the first line and the indefinite one of the second, between faces and objects, and, most important, between intense realism and the bizarre

multisyllabic call in “apparitions” to have that realism undo itself by forcing on us a simultaneously present glimpse of mythic forces. Pound does not want to deny the elemental principles of realism. He wants only to suggest how a full realism, rather than a reductive empiricism, might engage the possibility that “apparition” can play a significant role in our functioning vocabulary. This then is what writing has to be like if it is to make visible the modes of consciousness that can be adequate for this extension of realism. Were this poem to call attention to the speaker position, it would have to give the speaker a social position or at least a way of composing a self-image. And that would mean making some kind of judgment whether or not this speaker can believe in the presence of apparitions. But by presenting the poem as simply writerly energies trying to be adequate to event qualities of a given moment, Pound can let the very word “apparition” carry a much more intense and mysterious set of organizing energies than the attribution of character might provide.

“Apparition” functions as a fulcrum organizing sculptural relations among volumes and weights. On one level it is insistently disorienting because it refuses to let any lesser realism organize itself. We can easily compose a world in which faces are like petals on wet, black bough. But the apparition of faces brings out otherworldly qualities of the wet bough. And its push into other worlds nicely activates the intense monosyllabic aspect of almost all the words that give a dignity and rigidity to the otherwise fluid event. Even though they can not play significant roles in straightforward description, the sounds of words can become defining qualities for the situation “apparition” evokes. Then, on a second level, “apparition,” or, better, “the apparition,” has powerful synthetic and transformative effects. Almost singlehandedly, this definite expression doubles the scene so that it carries a substantial sense of mythic presence. The faces are apparitions because they participate in an ancient ritual descent to the domain of Persephone. Here technology enters an odd alliance with mythology. For how but in mythic terms are we to take in this strange ability to enter underground worlds and be transported as fluid crowds.

Realized in poetry, however, mythology takes on valences giving the concept quite different cultural functions from those attributed to it in Enlightenment discourse. Pound probably does not intend to make us believers in doctrines that interpret or allegorize mythic structures. Instead he wants to modify how we envision ourselves approaching the interface between sensation and belief. Rather than relegate the world to our standard terms for self and for value, we are encouraged to let ourselves enter those hallucinatory spaces that art can treat as extensions of the senses. The poet's language, not his character, becomes both the test of what is possible and the framework within which what counts as the significance of such events will emerge. For the poet's language has the capacity to locate significance in its attuning to those moments where energies push beyond description—requiring a medium that need have no reserve for protecting identities but can try to become a gathering place for how expanded fields of sensation can introduce new possibilities for being alive as humans. (I first wrote “new possibilities for being human,” which is much more laden with imaginary identifications).

V

A poetics so capable of realizing what apparitions can involve can be marvelous at articulating the intricacies of self-conscious and at making visible the life of spirit as it manifests itself in the ways that art brings the senses into fresh expressive registers. But once artists and writers had elaborated these possibilities, and once it seemed that more and richer self-consciousness was not quite society's greatest need, writers began to struggle against the very terms that allowed them their success. Modernism's ability to bypass the various ego forms sustained by imaginary structures might also constitute its limit because that enterprise did not have to face the rhetorical difficulties involved in addressing the actual ways of forming concerns and determining values that govern social life. Nor did they quite have to face the psychological issues involved in perhaps sublimating all their imaginary identifications into the role of poet. By the 1930's the modernists themselves were showing the strains. Wallace Stevens remade himself three times during the 1930's--first into the poet

of “Idea of Order at Key West” who could gather into one voice a range of imaginary reconstructions of the art process, then into the poet of *Owl’s Clover* who would try direct discursive engagement in the political life of the time, and finally into a poet who could be sufficiently abstract to put in the place of political pieties fresh ways of understanding both social bonds and possibilities of social change. Or consider Eliot and Pound, the one driven almost entirely into the world of the *Criterion* where he could suspend his rigorous aesthetic in order to take up the pressing issue of his times, and the other driven in his *Eleven New Cantos* to risk incorporating huge chunks of epistolary and argumentative prose into what he hoped could remain a poetic vortex.¹¹ Then there are the evocatively divergent cases of W.C. Williams and W.S. Auden: where the former finds himself increasingly dissatisfied with the ability of modernist methods to provide imaginative forms appropriate for social life, the latter’s acute analysis of his society makes him so attuned to the dynamics of the imaginary that he seeks a stronger antidote than modernism can provide.

Almost from the start of his mature work Williams had two basic modes—his objectivist constructions or machines made of words and his efforts to honor examples of distinctive American characters making lives that have little to do with mainstream getting and spending. Poems like “Tract,” “To Elsie,” and “Dedication for a “Plot of Ground” seem capable of articulating something like an imaginary version of the self so close to its actual circumstances that the imaginary does not seem to require dependency on the desire of others or to become a substitute for the flux of experience. The imaginary becomes that in a person which elicits our imaginative participation in the distinctiveness of that person’s life. Hence the conclusion of “Dedication for a “Plot of Ground” measures one life by the manifest force of its effect on others: “If you can bring nothing to this place / but your carcass, keep out.” But by *Descent of Winter* (1928) Williams seems to feel a shift in his internal balance. Constructivist poems remain, but the core of his enterprise shifts toward somewhat unhappy and unsatisfying efforts to get his poems more closely woven into the textures of social life.

Spring and All, his previous effort to weave together prose and poetry, offered a clear progression from a hellish rush of associations to a triumphant constructivism in which poetry could manifest its capacity to make concrete sense of assertions that in prose bordered on gibberish.¹² *Descent of Winter* runs a very different course, continually threatening the collapse of the poet's ambition as he tries to align poetry to the challenges faced by prose descriptions of a corrupt social order. The opening two poems offer celebrations of poetry's playful reconfigurations of that prose world into an evocative strangeness given vitality by intricate internal balances. But soon the poems become overburdened as the facts they want to make socially significant seem unable to take on sufficient imaginative weight:

10/9 And there's a little blackboy
 in a doorway
 scratching his wrists

 The cap on his head
 is red and blue
 with a broad peak to it

 And his mouth
 is open, his tongue
 between his teeth—

10/10 Monday
 the canna flaunts
 its crimson head

 crimson lying folded
 crisply down upon
 the invisible

darkly crimson heart
of this poor yard

The grass is long

October tenth (Collected Poems, I: 292-3)

These two along with one more poem literally force the book into a prose that has to grapple with the contradictions involved in the ambition to “make a big serious portrait of my time” (295). Despite the ambition, the very ideal of portraiture forces the poems to reach beyond notions of vibrant realization to the need to be able to bear love for the shoddy world that they address: “there is no portrait without [love] that has not turned to prose love is my hero who does not live, a man, but speaks of it every day” (295). What had been a poetics of presence is now haunted by the absence of what can transform making into loving, seeing into compassionate identification. Consequently this poet so absorbed by modernity now reaches back to Shakespeare for an image of what the poet can do, and for a nostalgic means of dignifying what he cannot quite accomplish in the present:

Shakespeare had that mean ability to fuse himself with everyone which nobodies have, to be anything at any time, fluid, a nameless fellow whom nobody noticed, much, and that is what made him a great dramatist.

Because he was nobody and was fluid and accessible. (307)

For modernist poetry to dream of drama, and accessible drama at that, involves a major failure of confidence. But Williams book cannot even muster drama. The one power it can muster, however, is the willingness to record his own self disgust as he turns desperately to the history of his own family as at least a source of pain that he can try to address within the prose to which he is reduced. Later his volume *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935) would at least bring these conflicts directly into prose by opening with a poem on the need for social testimony, then vacillating between lovely moments of lyric

objectification and haunting challenges to face up to how his society was making mere objects of many of its citizens. The concluding poem “You Have Pissed your Life” turns that objectifying glance on the poet until he has to face the possibility that his work offers nothing more than a texture of lies:

Any way you walk
Any way you turn
Any way you stand
Any way you lie
You have pissed your life

From an ineffectual fool
butting his head blindly
against obstacles, become
brilliant—focusing,
performing accurately to
a given end—

Any way you walk
Any way you turn
Any way you stand
Any way you lie
You have pissed your life (401-2)

With the ambitions of poetry so emptied, the poem can offer only a series of infantilizing repetitions that virtually call out for the comforting female assurance to which he would turn in his late poems to Flossie.

VI

What frustrated Williams liberated both Oppen and Auden, albeit in almost opposed ways. For Oppen the task was to get the personal lament out of social poetry without subordinating the work to the imaginary identities Marxism was providing for American poets. And for Auden the task would require showing how constructivism not only lacked the capacity to address basic social

concerns, including the roles attributed to the imaginary, it also could not fully honor the basic qualities of agency poetry had the capacity to display. Ultimately art is not a matter of objects speaking but of agents taking responsibility within objects for the values that the objects affirm. There may be no way of avoiding the imaginary, but there are better and worse ways to live with that recognition.

{I will not get to write the Oppen section until late Fall 2003}

VII

In his essay on Perloff's "Pound/Stevens Whose Era," Douglas Mao makes the casual remark that instead of the era of Pound or of Stevens we should try out the idea of an "Age of Auden"—not with reference to his role in Britain but to the impact on American poetry of work done after his move to the US. To this aspect of Mao's case I am quite sympathetic. Rather than lament the limitations of modernist constructivism, Auden in America made it his task to struggle against those limits in the hope of providing a significant alternative for staging the imaginary. However to elaborate this alternative I will have to take a somewhat indirect path. His most explicit lyric engagement with the limitations of modernism takes place in his relatively late poem "Homage to Clio" (1955). So I will begin with that poem, then use its framework to dramatize what it helps us see had been at stake in the imaginative mode he had been developing since "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" (1939).

"Homage to Clio" ought be fundamental to contemporary literary education because there is simply no richer rendering of values fundamental to taking historical perspectives. His frustrations with modernism generate the enabling oppositions framing those values: the goddess of history demands a very different kind of worship from that offered to Aphrodite and Artemis? Where Aphrodite and Artemis are celebrated for what they make present, Clio matters because of her power to remind us of the claims of what is absent. Their domain is space; their power the dynamizing of what can appear. Clio's domain is time;

her power the intensity with which we recognize what must always appear incomplete or lacking within our sense of the present.

To honor Clio, then, we need a radical change of heart. Pictures and images no longer suffice. We have to cultivate a silence attentive to what in the present remains withdrawn and impossible to assert:

... We may dream as we wish
Of phallic pillar or navel stone

With twelve nymphs twirling about it, but pictures
Are no help: your silence already is there
Between us and any magical center

Where things are taken in hand. ...(*Collected Poems*, 611)

Yet we also have to keep in mind that these two the possibility that she is a goddess because there is an absoluteness about the work of retrospection that is at least as awesome as the absoluteness manifest by traditional theophany. The new absoluteness emerges when we look beyond luminous particulars to see what they obscure and how they emerge within background needs and desires that give them their potential power. So where the cult of Aphrodite and Artemis culminates in awe, the cult of Clio demands the kind of love that commits to what it cannot understand. Those goddesses exist to be observed; Clio to be addressed in second person terms. Clio does not answer. But she enables us to appreciate the demand on us to reconfigure in memory the traces of what is doomed to die. And she gives us the change to commit ourselves to everything that requires faith and hope precisely because we enter domains where presence simply cannot satisfy our needs for knowledge and for connection:

But it is you, who never have spoken up,
Madonna of silences, to whom we turn

When we have lost control, your eyes, Clio, into which
We look for recognition after
We have been found out. How shall I describe you? They

Can be represented in granite ...

You had nothing to say and did not, one could see,
Observe where you were, Muse of the unique
Historical fact, defending with silence
Some world of your own beholding, a silence

No explosion can conquer but a lover's Yes
Has been known to fill. (612)

I need not belabor the thematic contrast here with constructivist values. Instead I want to go directly to how Auden's criticism of those values generates and supports his own substantial accomplishment in providing an alternative to modernist pursuits of presence. His most striking formal innovation takes place on too large a scale to be documented here, but I can at least indicate how it operates. Auden plays syntax against form in order to give emphasize distinctive qualities by which the speaker's performance can be said to realize and so embody the basic thematic concerns of the text. "Homage to Clio" has an obvious and compelling external formal patterning. But Auden's sentences offer pronounced opposition to the containing framework, as if what it could not possess were far more important than what it could make manifest. The long opening sentence establishes the key because it works itself into the middle of the opening line of the third stanza. The next sentence extends into the third line of the fifth stanza; the third to the middle of the seventh stanza; and the fourth, brilliantly, to the last word of the eighth stanza. In effect stanzaic units do not give a satisfying coherence for the work thinking does. Rather the incompleteness of each stanza reminds us of how silence haunts that thinking. Sentences are driven beyond obvious stopping points because what matters resides in that sense of inescapable incompleteness. Yet by their capacity to extend into those silences, the sentences offer themselves as aspects of the life of the mind that thrive on this very refusal of the modes of authority and of presence afforded by the formal patterning. The sentences in effect exemplify

how a voice can literally engage the goddess while also describing why she deserves such homage.

Now though Auden has to face another problem. How can one perform this homage without either positing modernist self-sufficiency or returning to the modes of satisfaction provided by identifying oneself with imaginary ideals? This is where Auden's concern for the "lover's yes" enters the picture. This "yes" cannot be based entirely on the present: presence demands no commitment beyond the moment. Love, on the other hand, is a matter of believing in what lies beyond what we can see or control. And the lover's "yes" cannot take place when we are driven by the desire to think well of ourselves. That "yes," in fact, cannot quite depend on any form of positive assertion. It requires the silence necessary to enter an open space where one can dwell on how the other can be the cause of those feelings. That form of causality is not aesthetic, not based on how the world emerges as fully vital in a given moment, and not based on our standard modes for experiencing our own capacities for intensity. Rather the causality is analogous to historical causality, that strange sense of force we have to feel but can never quite fully capture by the interpretations we impose on it. Historical understanding for Auden depends on committing ourselves to imaginative efforts at understanding that slowly unfold so long as we learn to keep our silence. For him it is not sufficient to idealize history as a means of bringing art within a causal nexus that specifies how illusions are produced and interests pursued. Auden's version of historical sense challenges us to be constantly aware of loss and of the work it takes to keep alive our commitments to what can never quite satisfy in the present.¹³

But how do we make the appropriate commitments without bringing to bear images of ourselves that bind us once again to the logic of the imaginary? For if we cannot avoid that result, we perhaps should not turn away from the modes of freedom from self that modernism pursued. Auden could let himself idealize history in "Homage to Clio" because he had been working toward an alternative view of the imaginary ever since he began writing in the United

States. Every reader of Auden knows that this writing took on a performative cast that differentiates it strongly from the depressive, oblique ironies of the English Auden. But "Homage to Clio" enables us to attribute both critical and ethical force to that emphasis on performance in ways not he did not, perhaps could not, make sufficiently explicit at the time because he had not yet achieved sufficient distance from the modernism that had been influential in shaping his sense of lyric possibility. Looking back, we can see how his performative mode simultaneously invokes the imaginary and resists letting its force depend upon specific self-images. Auden can be critical of both modernism and the prevailing alternatives to modernism because he understands his own investment in voice as binding him to what constantly hovers on the verge of an inchoate and haunting silence. It is only when his voice finds exchange with other voices that it can present itself as achieving performative satisfaction.

In order to clarify what I think Auden realized in the late 1930's I must risk repeating my central argument although in somewhat different terms. One basic imperative for constructivist modernism was finding alternatives to the unstable and overdetermined aspects of images that let the imaginary do its work. In the place of the unstable image it puts the stability the art object can take on by grounding itself in metaphoric claims about what its own processed make real. Constructivist modernism needs Aphrodite as the only possible alternative to Circe. But rather than trust invocation, the writers and artists tried to give her a literal presence. Works of art were not substitutes for life but a kind of life given intensity by the qualities of self-understanding they put into dialectical play with the world they invoked. It is crucial then that the ideal of presence in modernist art is not at all like the ideal of presence projected by empiricist thinking and subject to intense critique by a variety of contemporary stances. For this art and this writing, presence is not a matter of providing a picture of the real or of somehow providing transparent access to the nature of things (although Pound at times spoke as if this could be the case). Rather presence becomes an aspect of the work that subordinates the imaginary to imagination made intensely aware of its own capacity to interpret its own productivity. Hence Pound's

“Station of the Metro” is as real as a sculptural presence because it makes the elemental play of sounds significant, because it can have “apparitions” distribute a variety of relational forces, and because it vividly blends various material textures of expression with qualities we recognize as intricately psychological.

Powerful as this aesthetic was, however, Auden never found it feasible for his talent or his values. And he eventually helped foster a literary climate in which these constructivist ideals would seem somewhat naively idealistic. It is not impossible to treat works of art as if they have reality as objects. One need only pay attention to non-iconic sculpture and much of expressionist painting—Aphrodite has her claims on us. But one has to wonder if these models were the most appropriate ones for dealing with language, especially with the ways in which silence tends to be folded into the differential textures that give language its meaning and tone its affective force. Indeed the very notion of the object as real seems difficult to reconcile with the degree to which readers have to flesh out in their imaginations the contexts invoked by the figural work texts perform. Writing matters because it helps us negotiate the “unreal” but inescapable aspects of experience that resist any empirical measure or claim to transparency. Consequently writing has the power to address the imaginary in its social codings, a power that dissipates when the properties of the medium carry the burden of meaning. So there is good reason to believe that what makes writing distinctive, what gives it the possibility of modifying how agents act in the world, is precisely its dependency on the rhetorical space where social significations struggle to solicit belief and so to survive. Art that seeks to become real as object can plausibly claim to compose experiences that stand over against the banalities and reductive psychologies that drive social life. But when such art succeeds, it does so at the cost of not being able to address those mired in such spaces. Communication reaching beyond elites depends on risking contamination. And risking contamination only takes on its full social force when it finds ways of making present precisely what gives an agent claims to sustain imaginary identifications.

By 1939 Auden had found ways of sharpening this case and presenting a clear alternative to modernist versions of presence. Instead of emphasizing how the object takes on reality, he put at the center of poetry the forms of presence that the subject could establish by struggling with all the silences that constitute historical existence. This mode of presence would borrow from rhetorical ideals: the poet was a person speaking to other persons and seeking ways to make present for them different ways of taking stances in relation to modern experience. But the poet did not quite seek persuasion and did not quite use linguistic resources primarily as means for moving audiences toward predetermined agendas. Auden's voices would not identify with the standard ethos roles by which rhetors have won over their audiences. Because there is no significant presence in such disguise, he turned instead to the possibility that poetry could be fundamentally a mode for performing sincerity. Achieving that would be no easy task. In traditional thinking (and in de Manian theory) performance and sincerity can only be linked by oxymoron: the one cancels the other. Yet Auden saw poetry as self-consciously working its way through various blockages created by ideology and by self-defensiveness so that speakers could demonstrate a capacity to trust the voice articulating their engagement with their own historicity. Poetry involves self-consciousness about how fully and how well language is brought to the pressures of experience. The poet's task is to explore the degree to which a speaking voice could work its way through all the ironic gestures modernism encouraged without losing the urgency of its conviction. If it could accomplish this, then it made something happen within the language worth an audience trying on its own versions of finding voices for its situations.

Consider how various modes of speaking are staged in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," the first poem Auden wrote in the United States. The opening section of the poem takes the mode of third person speech because that is the most basic framework within which we encounter death: the world becomes object and the voice has to orient itself by utilizing whatever descriptive resources it can:

What instruments we have agree

The day of his death was a dark cold day. (248)

Then the final two sections take on the task of establishing modes of speaking that provide other, more sensitive instruments for probing what his commitment to poetry might make of this situation. First the poet tries second person address in order to enter intimately into the strange gulf between the poet who dies and the poetry that lives. Here we find Auden's famous anti-modernist statement that "Poetry makes nothing happen." But we also find that assertion preparing the way for a series of important statements on what poetry can accomplish because it makes nothing happen:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth. (*Collected Poems*, 248)

So long as poetry keeps the effect and the affect of happening, it gives the mouth a substantial place in the world—not by invoking images but by dramatizing processes within which various dialogues can take place.

The last section of Auden's poem takes on an even more challenging task. In order to explore his possible bonds with Yeats, he actually assumes the formal tone and drum-like rhythm of poems like "Under Ben Bulben." In effect then Auden transforms the role of the imaginary: rather than projecting roles for himself he explicitly tries to identify with Yeats's own self-projection. Then this Yeatsian voice can offer a series of imperatives that define both a legacy and a continual challenge. But the challenge seems manageable precisely because the material voice can be so malleable, so capable of making identifications and, more important, of putting identifications to work within its own performative theater. These final lines offer no specific image of Auden as poet or as moralist. They are entirely an implicit dialogue between what can survive from Yeats and what must emerge from the poet if that survival is to have social significance. Speaking in a Yeatsian mode allows Auden to put on stage two basic human

conditions—the historical framework of needs, hopes, and desires to which Yeats was responding, and the capacity of voice still to make things happen because of how it also demonstrates capacities to hear and to project. Yeats's death establishes the imperative for testing how poetry can itself embody its capacities simultaneously to respond and to keep the force of such voicing alive as a continual present:

Follow poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days

Teach the free man how to praise. (Collected Poems, 248-9)

The language honoring this chain of imperatives can be quite conventional, perhaps must be quite conventional in this context, because the sense of imperative depends on hearing how the voice opens into a shareable sense of the desires poetry has to make continually vital. Anything less would not count as either listening well or speaking responsibly.

VIII

I find it embarrassing and disturbing in this context that for me the major poet in this story is Wallace Stevens because he is also the writer most important for the imaginary projections shaping my own values and commitments. But there is simply no American poet more supple in finding ways to invest in the activities constituting our imaginary lives while at the same time finessing the

drives within the imaginary to attach its illusions of power to fantasies of self-aggrandizement and to the social roles with reinforce those fantasies. And there is simply no American poet more fertile in establishing possibilities for other ambitious poets to elaborate his or her own alternatives to dominant social practices. Here after developing my claims for Stevens I will quickly show how his project gets extended brilliantly in the work of Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery, whence it disseminates into a wide range of work by their successors.

Almost from the start, Stevens' poetry struggled directly with two aspects of the imaginary—its reliance on images as substitutes for an ungraspable reality and its basing identity on desires produced by others rather than on some more performative possibility that one can take on identity by virtue of how one displays investments in one's own states of mind.¹⁴ But *Harmonium* seemed content with constructivist, impersonal strategies for manipulating the resources of distanced irony. By the 1930's Stevens began seeking a style that could carry the force of personal speech even while it evades locating that force in specific images giving false substance to what constitutes the personal. To accomplish this without binding himself to heroic images of the personal, Stevens gradually worked out ways of transforming the impersonal into the transpersonal. He dreams of rendering what constitutes our personal investments in the world at so intimate a level that the very force of investing is something we find ourselves sharing. Whitman could be a model, at least Whitman at his most ambitious. For then his "I" is not the empirical ego but the imaginative force by which we all become first-persons: farmers, nurses, and soldiers all share the orientation of desire by which they care about being as fully as possible the individuals they are.

Stevens develops many ways of bringing this transpersonal aspect of personal activity to the foreground. Several of these I have written about on other occasions. Consider how "Idea of Order at Key West" expands a series of particular invocations into a shared participation in "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." More striking yet are his experiments with what I have called an "aspectual poetics," a poetics that uses the resources of the operator "as" to

establish shifting networks of transpersonal investments. Putting the case crudely, we can say that foregrounding the “as” enables poetry to keep temporal, qualitative, and identificatory modes completely open to the self-reflexive activities by which they are synthesized. We know we are acting as individuals; but we also know that our activity is entirely available to anyone else who can make use of the grammatical resources that “as” affords:

The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:
The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room,
The gay tournamonde as of a single world

In which he is and as and is are one. (Collected Poems, 476)

Such awareness then makes it possible to develop a distinctive model for the values lyric reflection can realize. Stevens elaborated what I call an “exponential poetics” in which the elemental process of explication becomes in itself the basis for self-reflexive intensities that culminate in staking one’s will on the very processes one is undergoing:

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle,
Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,
In being more than an exception, part,

Though an heroic part, of the communal. (388)

Major man is exponent first because it gives a concrete interpretant for the idea of major man, and second because the concreteness it affords as locus for will and identification makes possible increasingly focused realizations of the powers involved in such abstraction. Implicit here is a notion of will that does not depend on separate acts of judgment but that is manifest as an exponent, that is an intensifying of the agent’s commitments to what he or is doing. By organizing

thinking in relation to the idea of major man, an agent produces a version of self-consciousness that does not depend on images but on feelings engaged in the articulating of the investments themselves (278). Then because there are no images, there need be no isolation among the various parts. Each part can sing its distinction and still find that investment in singing something the entire communal takes up each in its own way. Because the communal is not held together by argument or by belief, it has to exist in the qualities of consciousness we bring to our doings. The exponential relation makes visible a fundamental interchange between what language provides as exposition and what it provides as a power involving modes of will and affirmation. modes of will and affirmation.

Rather than elaborate these principles yet once more, I want to turn to two further aspects of Stevens's poetry that best carry his handling of the imaginary into the work of subsequent writers. The first has to do with making the force of imagining so focused and connected to sensual processes that one can separate its intensities from the images that ultimately become their objects. Appreciating desire as a sensual mode brings imagination into a close connection with the will, and so also brings the notion of an exponential process directly into how we engage our own conative activities. The activity of willing here has very little to do with self-reflexive analytic thought. Instead the will emerges as the exponential extension of the person's increasing investment in how energies unfold as the body expands into figurative possibilities. In this vein Stevens' poetry has to commit itself to working out the thematic and affective logic of its own figures, a process more fully elaborated by Ashbery. The other aspect of Stevens I want to address leads us in just the opposite direction (at least initially) because it concentrates on why and how Stevens' late work is drawn to a fundamentally discursive mode, albeit one continually infused by a lurking theatricality manifesting the unrepressible work of the imaginary even when it is confined to prosaic models of expression. This late poetry goes even further than the more sensual and figurative mode toward making the conjunction of value and fact not a consequence of our explicit judgments but a simple corollary of how consciousness finds itself attached to its worlds. Our wills can maintain

imaginary investments without projecting interpretations of the self or the world and without demanding the desire of others. The imaginary thrives because its manifestations emerge simply as ways of monitoring the degrees of participation we achieve within what the world affords at any given moment. Where human values are at stake the mind's role may be less to analyze arguments than to intensify our awareness of the permissions and liabilities that emerge from what elicits our participation. Concepts can indicate what to look for but have no authority beyond that heuristic one.

My example of the first of these aspects is Stevens's "Poem with Rhythms," a text as enigmatic and painful as it is seductive:

The hand between the candle and the wall
Grows large on the wall.

The mind between this light or that and space,
(This man in a room with an image of the world,
That woman waiting for the man she loves,)
Grows large against space:

*There the man sees the image clearly at last.
There the woman receives her lover into her heart
And weeps on his breast though he never comes.*

It must be that the hand
Has a will to grow larger on the wall
To grow larger and heavier and stronger than
The wall, and that the mind
Turns to its own figurations and declares
*"This image, this love, I compose myself
Of these, I wear a vital cleanliness,
Not as in air, bright blue-resembling air,
But as in the powerful mirror of my wish and will."* (Collected Poems, 245-6)

Here Stevens directly poses for himself the question how can there be significant subjective affects that are not bound to images with which we identify. And to appreciate his response we have to ask a series of more concrete questions. Why can this hand project qualities of agency? How can wish and will function as mirrors rather than as originating conditions? And why does the mind addressing its figurations find itself taking on a distinctive kind of vital cleanness?

To address these questions we have first to be clear that the poem is not opposed to becoming attached to images. It is opposed to understanding that attachment through the images rather than through the imaginative framework that gives the images their force. But just announcing this contrast will not suffice. This poem matters because it realizes on every level how this active sense of love can be evoked without typical scenarios and modes of self-thematizing. This force first emerges in the repeated “the”s that proclaim a strange combination of familiarity and absoluteness. Why is it “the” hand rather than “a” hand or even “this” hand; “the” wall and “the” mind rather than “a” wall and mind or “this” wall and mind? “A” hand, wall, or mind would be far too contingent—the scene would be only observation without any specified investment. “This” hand, wall, or mind, would assert that specificity but the specificity would be located entirely in the object as somehow distinctive. By stressing “the” Stevens manages to keep the objects generic while emphasizing the focusing force that desire here makes visible. (“This” and “that” soon emerge, but do so primarily to reinforce the contrast between the objects we desire and the force desire brings in relation to those objects.)

This emphasis on the elemental operators that frame images becomes even more intense and ambitious in the final stanza in order to show how wish and will function as mirrors. I think “it must be” recapitulates the force of “the” on a plane at once more abstract and more intimate than the previous stanzas had realized. The sense of necessity here is sustained in part simply on formal grounds. “It must be” synthesizes in a single expansive moment what had taken three stanzas to unfold, as if what had been driving them is now manifest. And “it must be” seems at the same time to distribute the very forces it gathers: hand

and wall and image all seem participants in some force of necessity, some fatality driving will and pushing it to this level of visibility for the mind seeking to find some kind of substance in this process.

Speech then does not quite issue from a particular subject. It issues from what allows the mind to envision itself manifest in the force of its own figurations. Wishing and willing can take on exponential force for individuals when the reflection process concentrates entirely on the force they deploy. That concentration provides a framework within which we can appreciate what we bring to images. And it helps reconcile us to the fact that particulars often can be enjoyed only on this imaginative level because their referents in the world of fact may never appear. The very process of appreciating our capacity for filling out the figurative nature of our desires is also the mark of their inescapable tragic dependencies on what they cannot control. Escaping the imaginary process of making the self the other of representation only deepens our grasp of what must remain beyond its always too eager reach. Yet this escape also creates a new reality for the “I.” In the last utterance of the poem, the “I” speaking becomes a composing force given substance not as an image but as specifiable power. The “I” is what can give the poem’s intensified “the,” and “this” the qualities of clean self-aware focus making it possible to believe there is a specific force to “my wish and will.” Individual subjectivity emerges (but not an individual subject) because reflection can reach beyond images.

By his last poems Stevens has a much more chaste relation to figuration that allows him a more social understanding of what his lyric reflection might sustain. For the most part pure discursivity must take the place of figuration, if only to intensify the force of those figurings that seem woven intricately into the discursive process. Take for example “The Plain Sense of Things”:

After the leaves have fallen, we return
To a plain sense of things. It is as if
We had come to the end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
For this bleak cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

Yet the absence of imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
The great pond and its waste of lilies, all this
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
Required, as a necessity requires. (503)

The best way to see what is distinctive in this poem is to contrast it to Stevens' much earlier "The Snow Man." That poem had two basic commitments, starkly realized. One was to define as cleanly as possible a world reduced to what demands "a mind of winter." The other was to make manifest the continuing presence of some kind of synthetic force that in fact could serve as the minding of that winter because it had the power to contain the entire scene in an elaborate single sentence. "The Plain Sense of Things" offers neither that concentrated reduction of the scene nor that particular model of compositional power. Instead the pacing is much slower, the language no longer driven by a single syntactic structure. Why? What about the absence of imagination can Stevens render in this mode that he could not in the earlier poem?

Both poems treat the inert savoir as if it were the end of adjectives: being seems deprived of any qualities that relieve its absolute thereness. Yet “The Plain Sense of Things” is not content with the pure sense of the present that allows “The Snow Man” its single synthetic sentence. History enters the later poem, so that it has to deal not only with the blank present but also with the fact that “a fantastic effort has failed.” Here the mind keeps on doing the work of comparison, unwilling or unable to give up on the possibility of still being able to choose adjectives even if they have to take negative form. For even when the adjectives fail, the mind seems capable of varying the modes by which it views this bleakness. At this negative center, even the silence turns out to elicit analogies. None of these analogies has transformative power, but the entire series makes the absence of imagination less a fact to be registered than a condition to be inhabited by observing what it elicits. After choice is mentioned, the poem turns swiftly to a the transformation of a “great structure” into a “minor house,” a measuring of loss that soon generates a strange form of negation: “no turban walks across the lessened floors.” Then there is a second comparison based on physical observation, and finally a bleak generalization about failure that in its turn generates another metaphor. This measuring is so quiet that its strangeness only slowly dawned on me. Why should one register there being no turban when no one would have expected a turban in the first place? So the sense of absence is not really retrospective. It derives from the need for imagination to describe the negative—hence it directly addresses not the scene but mind’s feel for its present situation. Negatives populate scenes so that we can feel a non-presence within them. Then with the abstraction the mind tries to articulate its own heightened response to its own figures.

By the time the poem tells us that “the absence of imagination had/ Itself to be imagined,” it is putting into the mode of necessity what it had already discovered on the order of simple description. Yet this abstraction makes a major change in the poem. It challenges the discursive mode to handle a shift from describing a situation to describing a mental state while maintaining the same distance and flatness it maintained toward the scene. Stevens’ response

to that challenge is magnificent. He turns to “the great pond, the plain sense of it,” even though no pond has been mentioned. Consequently the pond hovers between an actual one and another self-reflexive metaphoric rendering of how the absence of imagination can be imagined (not unlike the projected atmospheric conditions that Ashbery uses simultaneously to present and to interpret mental states). Projected description and self-referential metaphoric reach become strangely identical. No wonder then that the “silence” is “of a sort,” and that “of a sort” provides a completely atypical way for Stevens to open a concluding stanza. I think Stevens is preparing the way for the great figure of the “rat come out to see.” Again the rat could be part of the scene. But it also could be the mind’s figure for its own pushing itself on the scene so as to find ways to figure the absence of imagination. The rat parallels the mind’s uncomfortable but somehow fated presence as witness to this desolation, and as one more feature of the desolation that has to be imagined. Imagination is no longer an abstract term. It becomes just what can encompass an identification with how this rat emerges in this situation.

Appreciating the rat requires recognizing why any analogue with a human observer would limit the poem. Confronted with this scene, the most the mind can do is compose a figure for its own estrangedness in a bizarrely intimate way, as if responding to this strangeness provided sufficient means for adapting to it. Yet for this knowledge to take hold the poem also has to go beyond the figure of the rat. That figure binds the mind to pure contingency: no reason brings the rat to the situation or explains why the figure seems so apt for the situation. Nonetheless the bond to that contingency seems not contingent at all: all this had to be imagined. As the mind seems forced to confront absolute contingency it reaches also for a corresponding sense of necessity. The daunting nature of that task becomes the poem’s richest evidence for why it has to call upon imagination. Only imagination could establish the theatrical terms by which there can be figures for the viewing of this poverty. And only imagination can bring to bear on this poverty a sense of it as inseparable from our destiny as human being. Pursuing a plain sense of things in this most unplain way is the price we

pay for having the investments we do in recognizing and appreciating our situations. But it is also our glory, so long as we can imagine imagining an identification with this rat as a basic aspect of that glory. That imagining provides an instrument for coming to terms with a fatality too comprehensive and abstract to be engaged by discursive reasoning.

“The Snow Man” could rely on its single sentence in order to establish how the mind might be adequate even to this situation. Ultimately lucidity is possible. Here the situation is quite different. There certainly can be a movement toward containing and recasting the series of reflections elicited by the plain sense of things. But even a mobile Stevensian sentence is not the appropriate vehicle. Rather than rely on the single sentence, this poem can only prevent the absence from dominating the sense of imagination by bringing to bear an even more plastic power, the power provided by the “as” as it brings to bear a range of interpretive contexts that seem inseparable from the process of self-reflection even as they prevent any single image of the self from taking form. First there is the simple assertion of what we might call a mode of vision: all this had to be imagined in the mode that necessity requires. All this has to be attuned to the contingent emergence of the rat as the locus of realization for a bleakness that itself may be elemental rather than contingent. But all the physicality of the poem then brings to bear the need for the more immediate and contextual force that the “as” affords. This entire chain of figurings has to become the object of reflection so that we can treat the imagination of the absence of imagination as a basic process enabling us to give a concrete dimension to the idea of necessity. Our thinking and our figuring all become aspects of recognizing that we are not so much describing the absence of imagination as ritually manifesting where we are positioned when we make that attempt. We have to align entirely with necessity, but at a distance, in another tree provided by everything that our ability to use “as” makes visible. The “we” who open the poem then can share an identity as those capable of participating fully in the journey the poem composes.

I have claimed that there are three basic ways the imaginary returns in Post WW II American poetry. The most obvious way has very little to do with Stevens, Oppen, or Auden. This is the way epitomized by Lowell and by Sexton and in quite different ways by Rich and by Creeley. Here we find the relation to self-images that still dominates popular understandings of poetry as expression and that still proves attractive for the ways it offers of attracting and moving audiences. But Lowell and Sexton were not committed simply to self-expression. They were committed to expressing the imaginary sense of self that overdetermined situations and made the pursuit of self so sublime an enterprise. This pursuit is not an empirical analysis but an effort to make articulate what made the person care about working through this sense of self. Thus we find Sexton's constant defense of self-theatricalizing—her life as an actress was inseparable from her poetry. And we find Lowell insisting on his own alienation from the very images of self that drive him, so that the writer has at once to see the ironies elicited by his passion and refuse to submit to the irony. Passion just is self-presentation that refuses any decorum about self or any submission to idealizing readerly strategies.¹⁵

The other two basic modes of engaging the imaginary seem to me to follow directly from Stevens, with each emphasizing a very different aspect of his dealing with the imaginary.¹⁶ At one pole there is the work of Elizabeth Bishop. The Stevens that matters to her is the Stevens of the "as," the endless fluidity of imagining that charges the world with affective possibility while deferring any synthetic ego that wants responsibility for that charge (and so submits itself to the risk of losing all capacity to respond to anything not caught up in the struggle to defend that sense of responsibility). At the other pole it is John Ashbery who most intricately and ambitiously extends both Stevens and Auden. From Stevens he takes both the sense of expansiveness and the possibility that the expansiveness affords a fluidity capable of holding off the pull of ego ideals and ideal egos. Stevens offers a path of abstraction: the imaginary as presented in the poem becomes a possible locus of identity for anyone willing to tie himself or herself to the order of words he presents. And from Auden he adapts the wry

performative mode that anchors responsibility in how the will attaches to processes of imagining rather than selves imagined. To be sure, Ashbery's abstraction is very different from Stevens'—not toward some collective self but toward some endlessly permuting process of imaginary identification far too fleeting and insubstantial to sustain any claim for enduring personal substance. Poetry becomes a means of living within the imaginary's full panoply of social roles while seeing how those roles themselves can be no more than something like the material of a puppet theater. Where the Lacanian imaginary cannot be separated from the desire and need for something like a full armoring of our defenses, the imaginary in Ashbery becomes something closer to a Victoria's Secrets fashion show run at double time. We are no more free in Ashbery's world, but we are a lot less bound to specific obsessive scenarios and all the modes of oppression of self and other that they entail. And that unboundedness can be the locus of intricate pleasures and strange moments of connection between lives that have few other grounds for community or intimacy.

In order to deal succinctly with Bishop I want to focus on one poem that simultaneously distinguishes her sharply from constructivist modernism and puts those differences to work as a version of an aspectual poetics clearly bringing Stevensian concerns into domestic settings. Compare her "A Cold Spring" to Williams' "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital." Williams' poem spends fifteen lines describing the way to the hospital, all as dead detail matched by the fact that the poem does not arrive at a main verb until the end of this sequence. After that flat description continues as the focus changes to a parallel between the children and the scene, all subject to the "cold, familiar wind." Then spring emerges:

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance—Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken (183)¹⁷

The poem celebrates this event by offering two compositional analogues to this quickening. The last stanza exaggerates enjambment in order to make palpable the poem's own concerns for the rootedness that its sequence provides. And these last lines offer almost a revel of verbs, as if the richest way to appreciate spring for us is to marshal feelings contrasting the heaping of actionless detail against this closing sense of almost detail-less pleasure in activity. Imagination affords as an alternative to any self-staging something like an equivalence between our feelings for language and our feelings for the quickening of spring.

Now let us look at Bishop's opening:

A cold spring:
the violet was flawed on the lawn.
For two weeks or more the trees hesitated;
the little leaves waited,
carefully indicating their characteristics.
Finally a grave green dusk
settled over your big and aimless hills.
One day, in a chill white blast of sunshine,
on the side of one a calf was born.

The mother stopped lowing ... (Complete *Poems*, 55)

I imagine Williams and his constructivist peers hating this poem. This is precisely the use of pathetic fallacy and projection of delicate sensibility that modernism wanted to drive out of poetry. But the presence of pathetic fallacy need not reveal a reactionary sensibility, or at least not an entirely reactionary sensibility. The violet "flawed on the lawn" shows that this poet has not ignored the spirit of playful materiality basic to modernism's efforts to undo self-congratulatory identifications with nature. And the verbs carrying the pathetic fallacy seem also to serve a range of functions not typical of traditional sensibilities. These verbs

seem to me devoted to resisting what in their light seems the melodramatic contrast in Williams' poem between the deadness of late winter and the quickening of spring. Here we will see spring quicken. But it does not replace deadness. Rather it fulfills a sense of hitherto frustrated expectation that seems an active condition of the landscape—not a quickening perhaps but an active waiting that can be at least as intense as the quickening. However to appreciate that intensity one has to discipline the imagination not to look for raw contrast. Here pre-spring consists of a dense series of locations, each with its own relation to the overall atmosphere. Bishop's rendered eye moves carefully through different registers of vision—close-up with the leaves and the single cow, but at a distance in time and space as it observes the trees and the “grave green dusk.” Imposing conventional imaginary roles would eliminate this movement in favor of the rush of self-congratulation. Here, though, poetry is inseparable from a discipline that in turn is inseparable from a delight in the small differences enabled when we project a variety of analogical possibilities. What for Williams cries out only for contrast, for Bishop invites a complex dwelling within which the projections of the imaginary are distributed within a new awareness of what constitutes attention to a scene.

Bishop will have her proliferation of verbs as spring emerges, with each verb tied to a specific kind of activity as a warmer day takes hold. Consider for example the range and location of the verbs developed in this passage from the middle of the second stanza:

Four deer practiced leaping over your fences.
The infant oak-leaves swung through the sober oak.
Song-sparrows were wound up for the summer,
and in the maple the complementary cardinal
cracked a whip and the sleeper awoke,
stretching miles of green limbs from the south. (55)

Then she allows herself a synthetic crescendo analogous to Williams' conclusion:

Now, in the evening ,
a new moon comes.

The hills grow softer. Tufts of long grass show
where each cow-flap lies. ...
Now, from the thick grass, the fireflies
begin to rise:
up, then down, then up again:
lit on the ascending flight,
drifting simultaneously to the same height,
--exactly like the bubbles in champagne.
--Later on they rise much higher.
And your shadowy pastures will be able to offer
these particular glowing tributes
every evening now throughout the summer.

Where Williams is content to celebrate establishing verbal equivalents for this “now,” Bishop wants to flesh it out. She wants not only the force of the “now” but a sense of its consequences because of the modes of inhabiting the landscape that it allows. Initially the “now” parallels the moon as a source of light, albeit light for the active imagination as it deploys itself to participate in what the scene makes available. The second “now” stretches this sense of participation so that it moves from the life of the eye to a sense of metaphoric identification with the effects of the fireflies’ flight. The “bubbles of champagne” seem not transformations of the scene into the artist’s composed world but extensions of the space where perception takes place (deliciously inverting Mallarmé’s *Salut*).

The final “now” is the poem’s most distinctive because of how it locates the imaginary. In one sense it is more quiet than the others because it is buried within the last line rather than starting both a line and a sentence. Here the dramatic priority is given to the shift to second person address that Bishop wants us to see as earned by all the intimate attention that the poem gives the scene. But even that shift in focus turns out to expand what this final “now” can carry. First, this “now” matters because it has come to include the future: the speaker sees now and sees in the “now” how the pastures will offer the same life throughout the summer. The coming of spring is not just a punctual event but

one that carries a strange fullness of time because we can see in it a full course of significant differences in our lives. Spring is a container for imaginary investments as well as a source of release. Moreover the event is not without its shadowy other, the sense of imminent loss that is the other side of every moment of renewal. But because the sense of spring includes this temporal expansiveness, it allows projections in which that dark other is itself an enabling stage for various kinds of expected recurrences. Finally, the embedding of this last “now” offers a powerful sense of just why this projection into the future can bear so much affective weight. The statement is very simple: these tributes will take place “every evening now throughout the summer.” But what it contains and synthesizes is extraordinarily intricate. This casual expression brings together three quite different aspects of potential investments in how time unfolds—as the promise of repeated pleasure, as the intensification of the present moment now also distributed into those repetitions, and as a capacious projection throughout the summer. This “now” quickens not just our sense of the contrast with winter but our sense of the contrast with any sense of time incapable of blending intensity and promise. Adding the ego would only detract from the fullness of this state. And adding the ego would also transform the awareness that summer too has its contingency into nothing but lament.

X

Where Bishop turns the imaginary outward, distancing it and embracing it by letting it lavish its capacity for investment on manifestly figural dimensions of various scenes, Ashbery turns theatrical lights on its psychological functioning. These lights substantially transform the “now” so fundamental to modernist poetry. For Ashbery the “now” calls forth both exhilaration and melancholy—exhilaration because it frees us from what has gone stale, and melancholy because that freedom is inseparable from an awareness of utter contingency. There is melancholy in seeing our attachments to those older ways exposed as woefully adequate (“Adequate” was a typo for “inadequate” but I think my unconscious had the better term.) And there is melancholy about the fact that by the time we get even a workable grasp on what can give meaning to

the present, we are already in the past, “leaving you the ex-president of the event.” “Now” is the site where all our images seem to enter the dump together, but in ways that make the transition from scene to dump itself the locus for a parallel fusion between the melancholy and the exhilarating.

There is exhilaration in what emerges when the “now” need not seek an anchor in the past or the future. And there is exhilaration in realizing how this sense of the “now” restores Auden’s stress on sheer performance while affording a new and distinctive sense of the identities available to the performers. Because Ashbery’s “now” refuses any attachment to temporal sequence, it also puts pressure on any assumptions about substantial continuing identities. This “now” is not the time of objective structure but of the manifest twistings and turnings of consciousness trying to hear what speaks through it and what evokes its mostly illusionary sense of its own powers. There remains from the poetics of sincerity a strong sense that there are significant personal desires driving these poems. But their power as lyrics depends on their refusing to allow themselves the illusion that the energies released can be incorporated by any single set of projections about personal identity. Instead the “now” of speaking, as well as the “now” of attempting to listen to what is spoken, make demands on expression and on attention that undo any claim the speaker might have to presence and to authority. Yet the force of the present is not primarily negative. Ashbery’s significance may consist largely in how he renders the present tense so that its enablings are much more engaging in their projective dimension than in their more problematic recuperative dimension. And that is in large part why he can come to terms with alienation from his cultural environment. Rather than dwell on the distances irony produces, he models ways of taking satisfaction within a sense of self modulates between the pains of being fractured and the joys of being redistributed among the permutations of what then emerges. These emphases make confession a process that cannot be fully appreciated within the domain of representation.

Where confession had been, Ashbery has speaking submit itself to the figural possibilities within the language so that to hear the speaker is also to hear

how the speaker's identity merges into roles and desires that have inescapably public modes. What makes us transpersonal does not produce a Stevensian sublimity but tends toward a demotic orgy where multiple possible identities in effect take over whatever tune seems sustaining the effort to make language perform some desired task. What makes us subjects also undoes any possibility of our becoming just one subject. Hearing what enters our speech orients us toward intricate textures of imaginary overdeterminations that make us continually incapable of fixing on any single presence—public or private. “Now” depends more on a sense of what emerges and passes than it does on any sense of attachment to what might be objective and might recur throughout the metaphoric summers the imagination seeks. Yet this submission to loss is not all bad news. The invitation to melancholy is as much a product of these underlying projections as any other state, and as capable of fusing with other states involving other lines of connection and dispersal. We enter a strange path of lyric pleasure in which we find ourselves almost sufficiently distanced to play assigned parts in the theater that language brings with it without worrying about any form of authenticity. Authenticity is another theater, not without its pleasures and roles but also without the authority to make its roles dominate what they distribute.

This theatricalizing of the theatrical within our sensibilities seems to me to provide a very valuable and distinctive means of coming to terms with what seems absurd and alienating in our public lives. Ashbery combines an ability to maintain an intricate sense of reserve modulating from ironic distance to almost bare self-consciousness with a lavish excessiveness where metaphor becomes too in love with its own productivity to sit still for self-congratulation, or worse, for self-interpretation. The result is an odd and intricate interplay between the demotic, the epigrammatic, and the enigmatic, an interplay whose speed and scope simply dwarfs the effort to establish coherent identities as placeholders for the play and plays defining our desires.

Perhaps the major problem with Ashbery's work during the 1960's and 1970's was that critics found it easier to indulge in abstract praise like the discourse I have been presenting rather than attending in detail to how the

imaginary operates within particular poems. I cannot right the balance here but I can at least address it by turning to two representative lyric moments in his work from this period. The first, from “Pyrography” shows him remaking Bishop’s pastoral figures, but in ways that have very little to do with landscape:

But the variable cloudiness is pouring it on,
Flooding back to you like the meaning of a joke.
The land wasn’t immediately appealing; we built it
Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves:
An arch that terminates in mid-keystone, a crumbling stone pier
For laundresses, an open-air theater, never completed
And only partially designed. How are we to inhabit
This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,
As in a stage set or dollhouse, except by staying as we are
In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet
Unrealized projects, and a strict sense
Of time running out, of evening presenting
The tactfully folded-over bill. (*Selected Poems*, 212-3)

Here the use of figurative language explicitly transforms landscape into theater. And doing that radically changes how the speaker comes to understand his own place in this transformative process. First there is the acute self-consciousness of seeing the self not as privileged perceiver but as producer of what gets claimed for nature. Then the important shift emerges. Such self-consciousness is in no way paralyzed by its awareness of this ironic situation. Instead, reducing the self to mere image intensifies the poem by releasing a play of metaphor. Because there is no need for even the illusion of illusionism here, the speaker might as well enjoy the pull of the metaphors that come to mind for this theatrical situation. And with this shift the very notion of self has to change, since that too is more construction than discovery. So the proliferation of metaphors eventually moves from open air theater to the proscenium stage because it is crucial that the self within such theater has illusions of depth but no possibility of closure. And that awareness in turn allows the passage one more self-reflexive twist.

Precisely because there is no fourth wall to the sense of self, there emerges the possibility that the “we” of the poem is itself something more than a rhetorical gesture. Without strong boundaries the “I” can be treated seriously as a “we,” at least to the extent that the figures for the self apply so clearly to a wide range of existential situations. Ultimately that sense of self has its reward in the lovely final figure: figure itself here can define the situation by a casual but still radical conceit of the evening as ominous waiter because there is no need to loop back to give the self a sense of substance. Substance emerges, and flows away, simply by how the language brings on the stage whatever members of the audience will take on its figurations.

“Ut Pictura Poesis” allows us to see Ashbery’s appreciation of the imaginary working its way through an entire poem. I chose this particular poem because its length is manageable and because it elegantly combines the two aspects of the “now” that interest me—the “now” that opens the performing self to its multiplicity and the “now” that brings to the poem a sense of unnameable urgencies with only the most fleeting of presences:

You can’t say it that way any more.
Bothered about beauty you have to
Come out into the open, into a clearing,
And rest. Certainly whatever funny happens to you
Is OK. To demand more of this would be strange
Of you, you who have so many lovers,
People who look up to you and are willing
To do things for you, but you think
It’s not right, that if they really knew you ... [Ashbery’s ellipses]
So much for self-analysis. Now,
About what to put in your poem painting:
Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium.
Names of boys you once knew and their sleds,
Skyrockets are good—do they still exist?
There are a lot of other things of the same quality

As those I've mentioned. Now one must
Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed
Dull-sounding ones. She approached me
About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was
Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments.
Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head
Locked into mine. We were a seesaw. Something
Ought to be written about how this affects
You when you write poetry:
The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone. (235)

I don't much like the opening. But it makes sense if we imagine what we have to go through in order to reflect on our relation to making poetry. One has to look at one's desires and activities from the outside. But we cannot really look at ourselves quite from the outside. "I" can become "you," indeed cannot not become "you." But the "you" will still be treated with a certain degree of sympathetic fantasized identification that belies any possibility of objectivity. The split subject is still pervaded by defensive and projective fantasies. So even to raise the issue of address the poem leads us into a situation where the roles of "I" and "you" are not quite clear but nonetheless intriguingly intricate as affect modulates between self-projection and anxiety.

It seems as if the poem takes on a clear direction when it gets to why the issues of address arose in the first place. What can a reflective position allow us to say about what goes into our poem painting? Ashbery's response takes the form of somewhat bitter irony, as if asking the question at all demands the kind of answer that one has to find ways of escaping. In part the irony is in the details. All the efforts to provide contents that might be approved by some public sense

of self seem unable to escape both cliché and the self-disgust that comes from feeling one is trapped in cliché. But there is even greater irony in the very form he gives the question. He knows that only a very strange writer or critic would ask the question in quite this way. We like to think the “poem painting” is elicited by some urgency that establishes what to put in it. Here instead the speaker presents the situation as entirely rhetorical and entirely under control. Yet we have already seen in the address situation that not much seems under control or amenable to being pictured.

Now Ashbery deals superbly with an obvious problem. Does the poem have to rest in this rather banal irony? Are the protections of irony a necessary price for surviving the modes of self-consciousness required for living in so media-driven a society? Having reduced poetry to rhetoric, must he maintain distance from the very idea of being compelled to write? Ashbery’s response is to go in exactly the opposite direction. He accepts the need for irony but transforms the affective modality of irony so that it also becomes a kind of generosity. The poem veers sharply away from what can be controlled into the rush of concerns and fantasies that are entirely discontinuous and so perhaps have equal claims to enter the space of composition. And then he continues to establish a process of playing against the temptations of the ironic stance—not by returning to truth but by allowing the threat of irony to open into other more complex affective states. Once the rush of urgency breaks in, the theorist-author tries to gain control by proposing the calm statement that “Something ought to be written about how this affects you when you write poetry.” But when the poem responds to this mild imperative, it does so in manner that completely transforms the prevailing style and tone. Rather than writing “about how this affects you when you write poetry,” the poem suddenly becomes gorgeous poetry in its own right.

Wary self-consciousness suddenly blossoms into both a diction and a syntax that celebrates how poetry can draw on linguistic resources, and in the process get out of this now ridiculous prosaic confidence that writing can directly follow from or be accounted for by the analytic mode. In effect the sense of

subjective agency dispersed into the split roles of the opening here returns as an unlocateable energizing of the mind's activities, probably because it has had enough frustration from seeking the handbook style called for by the title. Listen to the sound play that gives such resonance to the poem's statement about "the extreme austerity of an almost empty mind." As in the best of Stevens, poetry celebrates its distinctive linguistic powers by becoming supremely clear statement. Then Ashbery pushes this sense of permission even further in the next line, literally composing the "Rousseau-like foliage" of a desire to communicate.

But irony will not be so easily dismissed. The poem cannot rest in this lyrical exuberance but has to see this exuberance also from the outside, if only because that perspective is probably necessary for realizing an inside deployed within it. So rather than revel in an irony that can handle the imaginary by keeping it in its place, Ashbery elaborates an irony that composes its own place. Poetry lies ultimately not in what it presents positively as answers to our questions but in the relation between beginning and undoing keeping us constantly attuned to the play of desire that pervades our language without being subsumable within it. In our culture we cannot not seek understanding, just as we cannot not pursue the mode of self-awareness about poetry that opens this text. But we also cannot not distrust everything that goes into our efforts to understand, including the effort to make sense of our distrust. Yet rather than treat such antinomies as grounds for self-indulgent pathos, Ashbery projects an attitude accepting and even willing this relationship between doing and undoing.¹⁸ At the very least it brings to the fore all the resources of language the psyche can muster as its contribution to this endless process.

This essay has been so long that just the fact of conclusion seems something to celebrate: there is no need for resonant rhetoric. But I do want to draw two consequences from my story. The first has to do with the situation of poetry now. Where does one go after a century of working out the various permutations of the imaginary as delusion and as permission? Perhaps some of

the best new work will forge new combinations from these attitudes, for example by bringing modernist severity back to what remains the theatrical space Ashbery makes of both nature and society—think Joshua Clover and Jeffrey O’Brien. Or perhaps we can have a new subjective lyricism suffusing its own imaginary investments and seeking a new sincerity within the theater of sincerity—think Jennifer Moxley and Karen Volkman. And the second has to do with the ambitions of contemporary criticism. I hope the poets can teach us to let up on our moralism without surrendering the intensities that drive us to it. The cultural power of literary criticism may depend on its first recognizing its limitations: it works best when it accepts the authority of those who work directly with the imaginary and when it grants that imagined and imaginary actions cannot compete with discursive philosophy in articulating and justifying what best serve as our fundamental beliefs. Criticism is inherently practical, in the sense that its subject matter is not the world but the ways people make worlds and deal with such makings. If it can accept that it can also reject the authority of philosophy and accept its responsibility for working within the struggles made necessary by our inescapable struggles with the imaginary dimensions of our lives. It can show how the imaginary becomes oppressive and elaborate the ways artists find to evade that oppression or put its pressures to creative ends. And when it is society that becomes most oppressive, it can devote itself to exploring what works of art can bring as alternatives to that oppression. Knowing which oppression to engage will never stop being a problem, but there is no reason why criticism should be any easier than life.

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¹ Theodor Adorno is the great thinker of the negatives within modernism. But I think he concentrates only on those negatives that are directly resistant to “instrumental reason” and so is not sufficiently sensitive to the range of positive alternatives that the negatives generate. For Adorno modernist art matters because it holds on to the negative because all the available positives remain subject to the authority of that reason. I think the artists and writers propose alternative possibilities for the very ideas of value and of authority. Ironically those like J.B. Bernstein who try to use Adorno’s critiques as the basis for positive assertions can only do so by providing an alternative account of truth that my essay “Adorno on Beauty” argues cannot suffice. In my view art’s negatives require seeking values that simply bypass or finesse the very ideal of “truth.”

² One might be able to make similar claims for the Pound of the *Pisan Cantos*.

³ In my view this stance, perhaps most forcefully presented by Houston Baker, represents the now dominant sophisticated critique of modernism. It now seems almost obvious that exposures of modernist its fascism or its elitism or its gender politics now do little more than dignify the critic because those charges, even if true, do not engage contemporary audiences because the qualities rejected are not real threats inside the academic world. Criticism of modernist resistance to rationality on the other hand does confront a range of still vital positions and expectations and so seem quite important to develop, in part because the critiques also help secure a contemporary hold for versions of pragmatism and Habermasian idealizations of public space.

⁴ Mao’s essay concludes with Steven’s “The Bouquet,” which he suggests may simply frame the issue of the relation between sensitivity to particulars and a sense of how such consciousness is utterly indispensable “to a world whose routine is brute force” (180). I do not see how this version of pathos is preferable to Pound’s fantasies of taking up arms against marginalization; nor do I see how Stevens’ recognition promises any better social role for poetry.

⁵ My own rhetorical roles here make it sound as if Modernist poetry had significant similarity with pragmatism. But, despite the noble efforts of Patricia Rae, the relevant doings seem to me unlike pragmatist values because they are not shaped by social practices and not tested by any cogent measures. The formal doings have to produce their own communities and demonstrate uses that might not be at all connected to the situations out of which they emerge.

⁶ For a useful brief yet general summary (and bibliography) of how Lacan uses the concept of the imaginary see Laplanche and Pontalis, 210. Laplanche and Pontalis do not mention the Althusser connection.

⁷ In Bergson’s summary of the argument within *Time and Free Will* Bergson claims that to construct a number we need space in order to specify differences and then a process that will account for how the elements are “dynamically added together and form what we call a qualitative multiplicity” (226). But “when we consider material objects in themselves, we give up this compromise” because we regard only what makes them spatially distinct from one another. Therefore we also give up that multiplicity “when we study our own selves.” We deal only with units that succeed each other and so lose the sense of substance provided by the ways in which the sensations of self are “not external to one another” (226). Consequently except for rare moments “we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colorless shadow which pure duration projects into homogeneous space” (231).

⁸ This is a good place to make the crucial distinction between the imaginary as a problem and the ideal of imagination as a modernist principle of value asked to do the work writers and poets felt could no longer be performed by reason. Yeats is almost explicit on the contrast, since imagination is defined as that which allows the self to escape from itself into the presence of beauty. Then, from I.A. Richards *Coleridge on Imagination* (1936) at least to Northrop Frye’s work on the Bible, the concept of imagination can be said to have dominated critics’ assertions about how literary texts fostered values. Imagination provided modes of synthesis and intricate hypothetical experience which could be employed to establish what the critics called “non-discursive knowledge”⁸ capable of competing with the kinds of knowledge established by science. Analogously, imagination took on moral force because it could exemplify virtue compatible with complex experience, could help

establish sympathy, and could bring to reflection the comprehensive forms of desire fundamental to cultural life. Correlatively, American poetry from the 1940's to the 1960's everywhere idealized the concept of imagination. Stressing Imagination sanitized the imaginary and put all the emphasis on how poetry might be a mode of responding to the world rather than of absorbing the world into the self.

Important as this concept is, however, I fear we pay a substantial price if we simply stop with the contrast between imagination and the imaginary. Imagination wins too easily, and too easily becomes subsumed within both moral and epistemic frameworks that reintroduce imaginary structures while proclaiming their difference from them. By making the made imagination a mode of knowing that could compete with science, the New Criticism arrogated to itself the authority of those who know, without even providing a disciplinary basis crucial for securing a possible range of actual knowledge claims. And moral criticism's use of the imagination as a dialogical principle basic to the development of sympathetic identifications made it all too easy for critics and writers to bask in their nobility without in fact having to do anything very demanding. Both routes of idealization manage to return the kinds of roles on which the imaginary feeds while minimalizing the theatricality the imaginary makes possible for artistic imagining. And both routes of idealization clarify the challenge facing poets like Stevens who want to restore that theatricality while distancing themselves (not always successfully) from such forms of self-congratulation. In his best poetry praise for the imagination becomes a means of releasing the energies of the imaginary while refusing to let those energies congeal under any images that will sustain specific identities and identifications.

⁹ The contemporary movie *Adaptation* turns on the difference between how one projects oneself giving love and how one envisions oneself being loved by others.

¹⁰ I have learned from my colleague Brian Glaser to make this distinction between *Spring and All* and Williams' earlier modernist but not yet fully constructivist poems. And in drawing this distinction between "there is" and "I am," I adapt Williams' statement "This is after all the substance, and therefore the explanation, of my poems and my life in which *there exists* (instead of *you exist*) (*Imaginations*, 302).

¹¹ If we were to put the situation of the thirties in more general terms we might say that poets aware of the limitations of constructivist modernism explored two options. Many returned to traditional rhetorical practices. Utilizing strategies for establishing ethos might articulate roles that could solicit identifications and in so doing modify the ways that agents represented themselves to themselves. Modifying agent's senses of themselves might modify their ethical and political commitments. Or so it seemed to poets as diverse as those writing for *The Masses* and those pursuing objectivist sincerity. And one could argue that confessional writing simply pushes to an extreme this emphasis on identity and identification while collapsing the exemplary and edifying into the idiosyncratic and the symptomatic. At the other pole, we find the Stevensian strategy of attempting to restore the force of the imaginary while finessing any attachment of imaginary projections to specific ego ideals and ideal egos. Abstraction seeks the core values of our imaginary projections while protecting ourselves against the kinds of specificity that reduce those possibilities to particular quests to create individual substance out of what one can solicit from the desire of the other. What in Stevens remains primarily a philosophical

enterprise blossoms into new psychological economies in poets like Bishop and Ashbery who do not abstract from imaginary selves but let the imaginary proliferate so as to make it impossible to rely on simple processes of identification. The imaginary becomes a means not of anchoring the self but of making us aware of its capacity for endless permutations intricately balancing distance with intimacy. These experiments are not likely to produce social cohesion. But they may help encourage ways of lessening violence among competing imaginary investments so that there is at least a more complex and peaceful space for working out what it takes to charge our lives with senses of shareable significance. It is at least arguable that ambitious contemporary poets are still exploring what might be possible within these dispensations.

¹² I develop this claim of poetry in contest with prose in my chapter on Williams in *Painterly Abstraction*.

¹³ The ending of Auden's poem makes it disturbingly clear how difficult it is to remain faithful to Clio when other versions of the self provide an imaginary version of fullness of self within the present:

I dare not ask if you bless the poets

For you do not look as if you ever read them,

Nor can I see a reason why you should.

After all his praise of silence and of love, he ends up having to project a contrast by which he sees himself ennobled. It seems as if Auden treated his own irony here as a kind of protection allowing him to make visible both his struggle with other poets and his identification with the wisdom role these contrasts secure for him.

¹⁴ I have to admit that I have been making versions of these arguments for almost thirty years, although I hope this different context affords a somewhat fresh perspective. Honesty, not vanity, prescribes my listing some of these efforts.

¹⁵ I find Allan Williamson's critical work on Lowell very useful in staging these features of his modes of self-presentation and the challenge they pose to the reader.

¹⁶ In suggesting these parallels I do not want to insist that Bishop and Ashbery actually derived basic stylistic traits from the older poets, although that was probably often the case. It suffices for me if these analogues simply do the work of thickening our appreciation of what Bishop and Ashbery accomplish.

¹⁷ In the larger context of *Spring and All* this poem also provides the sense of root and direction that enables the volume to stop wandering self-consciously through false openings and enter a perpetual present.

¹⁸ See also the conclusion to Ashbery's "As One Put Drunk into the Packet Boat":

The summer demands and takes away too much,

But night, the reserved, the reticent, gives more than it takes. (Selected Poems, 164)