DESIRE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

by

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A DISSERTATION

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

December 2013

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Desire and Subjectivity in Twentieth Century American Poetry

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Degree awarded December 2013

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

December 2013

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Many studies of American poetry view modernism as an eruption of formal and technical innovations that respond to momentous cultural and political changes, but few attempt to consider the flow and restriction of desire among these changes. This dissertation argues that American modernist poets construct models of desire based on the rejection of sensual objects and a subsequent redirection of desire toward the self and the creative mind. In addition, these models of desire result in a conception of subjects as whole, discrete, and isolated.

In the first chapter, I distinguish between Walt Whitman's sensualist model of desire and Emily Dickinson's intellectualist mode that defers satisfaction. I contend that Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) develop from Dickinson's perspective of deferred satisfaction to an outright rejection of physical desire. The manner and implications of this reorganization of desire differ among these poets, as do the poetic techniques they utilize, but underlying these differences is a related refusal to pursue objects of sensual pleasure. Pound withdraws desire from the world by turning objects into static images; desire is then able to flourish in the creative

mind. Stevens allows the imagination to remake the world, creating manifold abstractions for subjects who otherwise reject sensuality.

The second chapter provides a close reading of Eliot's *The Waste Land* to show how the presentation of sexual futility leads to a poetic experience of separation as a means of spiritual reformation. The third chapter reads H.D.'s *Trilogy* as a contemplation of the destruction of World War II and the persistent, unified self that outlasts it. Rather than interacting with this devastated world, H.D. insists that desire must be redirected toward the effort of spiritual redemption. In the fourth chapter, Elizabeth Bishop begins to question the deliberate rejection of the world. She sees a world that reasserts itself and imagines a subject who, though still yearning for unity, must admit an inescapably physical environment. The conclusion considers how postwar American poets continue to dissolve the subject and release desire into the world, emphasizing the present moment rather than a lasting, unified self.

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Lind, Joshua Hjalmer. "Hollowland." *Pravic: A New Grammar for Science Fiction* 4 (2013). *In Press*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks go to Professor Ford for helping me to develop as a scholar and writer. She improved this work immeasurably by pushing me to articulate my ideas more clearly and with greater understanding of the broader academic conversation. Also, her dedication to the craft of writing is unmatched, as her thoughtful and detailed attention to my early drafts would undoubtedly prove.

I would also like to thank Paul Peppis, John T. Gage, and Beata Stawarska for their valuable participation both as committee members and inspiring scholars.

DEDICATION

For my wife and son, who put up with many long and lonely weekends.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the criticism that seeks to describe and explain American poetry, it is common to begin with Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson as representatives of two separate strands of poetic practice opposed to each other across a variety of stylistic and thematic concerns. These two become the progenitors, in one way or another, of all the American poetry that follows. This manner of approach is particularly well suited to my aim here, which is to focus on desire and subjectivity in American modernist poetry. Whitman and Dickinson employ two distinct and opposing models of desire; Whitman, in broad terms, is a sensualist, believing in the pursuit and enjoyment of objects of desire; Dickinson, by contrast, is an intellectualist who values self-restraint. Whitman's model is concisely described in his brief poem "I am He that Aches with Love":

> I am he that aches with amorous love;
>
> Does the earth gravitate? does not all matter, aching, attract all matter?
>
> So the body of me to all I meet or know. (265)

For Whitman, desire is active throughout the universe, pulling all bodies together. It is sensual and can be described in physical terms. Whitman's concept of satisfaction, therefore, is based on the act of touching. The physical sensation of bodies coming into contact is not only a means toward satisfaction, it is also a sufficient answer to metaphysical uncertainties, or what Whitman calls "the terrible doubt of appearances":

> To me these [doubts] and the like of these are curiously answer'd by my lovers,
>
> my dear friends,

When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding me by the
hand,

When the subtle air, impalpable, the sense that words and reason hold not,
surround us and pervade us,

Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom, I am silent, I require
nothing further,

I cannot answer the question of appearances or that of identity beyond the grave,

But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,

He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me. (274-75)

For Whitman, the physical sensation of the lover's hand controverts the idea that things may be appearances rather than reality. Desire can be satisfied by the physical experience of desired objects. Whitman's sensualist perspective conceives of a desire between subjects and objects that can ultimately be satisfied through physical conjunction.

Emily Dickinson, of course, employs a different structure of desire. Rather than imagining the general sensual interplay of all things, Dickinson conceives of desire as emerging from relations between subject and object that remain perpetually unfulfilled. Her speakers often find themselves chasing a receding or escaping object:

Delight – becomes pictorial –

When viewed through Pain –

More fair – because impossible

That any gain –

The Mountain – at a given distance –

In Amber – lies –

Approached – the Amber flits – a little –

And That's – the Skies – (Fr539)

For Dickinson, the mountain in the distance is beautiful or desirable specifically because it is in the distance, out of reach. Whereas Whitman's model involves the attraction of all objects toward each other, Dickinson's deemphasizes physical objects and derives delight (which is also pain) from the distance separating subject from object. When the subject approaches the mountain, the "Amber flits," always remaining out of reach. For Whitman, the future portends a consummation of touching, while Dickinson conceives of a future of deferred satisfaction. The subject attains the desired object just as it is drained of its allure. Dickinson's subject must chase new objects, such as "the Skies," which are even more impossible than mountains because intangible. In Dickinson's work, satisfaction is repeatedly postponed, objects "flit" away, and subjectivity is defined by the pain and pleasure of eternal distance.

In this dissertation, I examine several American modernist poets in order to discover the models of desire that inhabit, inform, and shape their work. I contend that poets such as Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and H.D. develop from Dickinson's perspective of deferred satisfaction to an outright rejection of physical desire. Whereas Dickinson retains the object of desire but pushes it away in order to maintain the painful-pleasurable experience of unfulfilled desire, modernists largely divert desire from objects and direct it toward the self and its imaginative and aesthetic capabilities. The manner and implications of this reorganization of desire differ among these poets, as do the poetic techniques they utilize, but underlying these differences is a

related refusal to pursue objects of sensual pleasure. Ezra Pound withdraws desire from the world by turning objects into static images; desire is then able to flourish in the creative mind. Wallace Stevens allows the imagination to remake the world, creating manifold abstractions for subjects who otherwise reject sensuality. T. S. Eliot refuses interaction with a depraved world and instead pursues the poetic experience of separation as a means of spiritual reformation. H.D. contemplates a destroyed world and directs desire toward the discrete and persistent self that outlasts it. Finally, though, Elizabeth Bishop begins to question the deliberate rejection of the world. She sees a world that reasserts itself and imagines a subject who, though still yearning for unity, must admit an inescapably physical world.

Before examining the work of these poets in detail, it is important to define the term “desire” further. The word is closely associated with human sexual drive, of course, but it has a long and complex history in psychoanalytic literary criticism, derived at first from Sigmund Freud’s dynamic theory of the human psyche. One of Freud’s most well-known conceptions of desire in formal terms is the Oedipal triangle: a male child desires his mother and is threatened by his father; he ultimately passes through the Oedipus complex by learning to redirect sexual desire toward a more appropriate object. This is a dynamic view of desire and prohibition, whether or not one accepts the particulars of the formulation. A model arises, the triangle, in which the self projects desiring energy toward particular objects and interactions, and has them frustrated or redirected in turn. My critical perspective is based on the idea that creative artists can imagine new models of desire either related or unrelated to the Oedipus complex. One of Freud’s most useful applications of his critical theory occurs in “The Moses of Michelangelo,” where he reads

the sculpture of Moses as the triumph of self-regulation over a desire to be angry or vengeful. Desire, in this case, is not overtly sexual but is, instead, the energy the self directs at the world. It is more visceral than a "motive" and more rational than an "impulse." Desire can be read as generalized libidinal energy, a way of interacting with the world.[1] We can get a sense of this understanding of desire by reading Dickinson's "A Pit - but Heaven over it" and mapping desire and restraint as they are structured in the poem. The poem begins by locating the subject within her environment:

> A Pit - but Heaven over it -
>
> And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad;
>
> And yet a Pit -
>
> With Heaven over it. (Fr508)

Dickinson sets the speaker between good and bad outcomes, represented by heaven and the pit of hell. In this middle ground, the speaker is uncertain both how to achieve a good outcome and avoid a bad one:

> To stir would be to slip -
>
> To look would be to drop -
>
> To dream - to sap the Prop
>
> That holds my chances up.
>
> Ah! Pit! With Heaven over it!

The speaker is stuck between two opposing wishes: to move within the world in an attempt to reach heaven or to remain motionless in order to avoid perdition. Ultimately the speaker counsels caution and restraint. The intense desire to achieve heaven paradoxically demands that she withhold herself from the world, leaving her unable to

move backward, forward, or sideways. Dickinson's organization of desire draws a line toward heaven but requires that one not proceed along it; the desire to ascend demands utter stillness, providing the tension that makes the poem compelling.

"A Pit - but Heaven over it" also helps exemplify the concept of subjectivity used throughout this essay, which attempts to compare models of desire or interaction with spatial models of the self. In particular, dispersive models of the self are aligned with sensualist models of desire, while conceptions of whole and discrete selves attend models of restraint or rejection. In Dickinson's poem, the speaker is perfectly balanced; any movement would lead to a fall and the forfeit of heaven. The physical move of stirring, the sensational move of looking, and the psychological move of dreaming are each perilous because they disturb the speaker's stasis. All the lines end with the letter "p," which leads back to the percussive, explosive, and dangerous word "pit." The only way to ensure heaven would be to refuse motion altogether. The structure of this state of affairs again emphasizes Dickinson's model of deferred desire, but it also reveals how this deferral must be accomplished: through stillness and unity. For Dickinson, the self must remain whole and unmoved. The poem ends by equipping the subject with a bomb that must never detonate:

> We - could tremble -
>
> But since we got a Bomb -
>
> And held it in our Bosom -
>
> Nay - Hold it - it is calm.

Dickinson's subject retains the explosive possibility of exercised desire, but the poem suggests that survival depends on one's refusal to act upon it. The point she rests upon is

where she must remain; the self is unified at that immobile spot. Dickinson's model of desire accords with her model of unified subjectivity.

Whitman's model of universal attraction and physical satisfaction, on the other hand, calls for a form of subjectivity marked by dispersal. At the close of "Song of Myself," Whitman's vision culminates in an image of the body dispersing into the world that surrounds him:

> The last scud of day holds back for me,
>
> It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
>
> It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.
>
> I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
>
> I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.
>
> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
>
> If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles. (247)

All of nature, filled with the objects of desire, ultimately accepts a subject who dissolves and joins it. The very air is infused with the self; the subject transcends his mere physical space and enters into everything that surrounds him.[2]

Pound, Stevens, Eliot, H.D., and Bishop develop from Dickinson's conception of the unified subject in the same way that they emerge from Dickinson's model of deferred desire. This structure of self is single, unified, discrete, and isolated. I am building here on T. E. Hulme's argument in his essay "Romanticism and Classicism." A deeper discussion of Hulme occurs in the chapter on H.D., but it will be useful now to point to

the distinction he makes between spatial organizations of selfhood in romanticism and the classicism he saw reemerging in the early twentieth century: “The view which regards man as a well, a reservoir full of possibilities, I call the romantic; the one which regards him as a very finite and fixed creature, I call the classical” (117). For Hulme, optimism about human potential was misplaced in light of the historical and cultural developments at the end of the nineteenth century. Hulme’s word “fixed” intimates the challenges facing the subject in a modern era marked by rapid technological change, global war, environmental degradation, and cultural fragmentation. These challenges threatened to un-fix the modern subject, resulting in cultural and literary attempts to regain a sense of fixity. The rejection of desire, the unity of the self, and the empowerment of the imagination provided these poets answers to the apparent ills surrounding them.[3] This paper traces the development of these models of desire and subjectivity in American poetry of the modernist period.

Modernism is much more diverse than the discussion above suggests, of course; some modernist poets are intensely interested in physicality and the sensual experience of objects. William Carlos Williams, at least at some level, remains a sensualist in the tradition of Whitman. He believes that the subject exists in the world in order to interact with it. For Williams, this is a sensual process involving vision and our other senses; one must exist “to enjoy, to taste, to engage the free world” (207). Like Whitman, he sees the subject awash in the free flow of objects, necessarily interacting with them. His contention that “He who has kissed / a leaf // need look no further” echoes Whitman’s conception of satisfaction based on physical sensation (228).

In a number of ways, however, Williams does not fully share Whitman's belief in universal gravitation. First, he demands a poetic process that selects from among the world's objects. For Williams, poetic articulation is not simply agglutinative, the addition of objects using Whitman's cataloging technique. This is evident in how much more local Williams is than Whitman. The rivers, parks, and homes of New Jersey provide the sources of Williams' poetry, while Whitman famously ranges from the "cry of the Cossack" to the "locusts in Syria" in his all-encompassing vision (288). At the level of the individual object, Williams investigates the boundaries and edges of things:

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air—The edge
cuts without cutting
meets—nothing—renews
itself in metal or porcelain—

Whither? It ends— (195)

Williams begins by rejecting the rose as a complete and symbolic flower, focusing instead on the petals and how they end along a definable edge: one side is the rose and the other is nothingness. He performs the same operation on the stem, distinguishing its substance from the "columns of air" within them. The flower, from this perspective, is a complicated mixture of being and non-being, not an object that can be celebrated simply

or collected ecstatically in a catalog of the world's munificence. Williams strives to understand the process of how an object comes into being, especially for the artist or poet. Through art, the rose begins again, reflected in metal or porcelain, renewing itself after passing through the non-being of empty space. The edge of the rose is both an end and a beginning. In fact, throughout *Spring and All*, Williams shows how endings always give rise to new beginnings. The world is made through an evolutionary process in which, when sameness comes to an end, the radically new emerges. Williams' phrase "Suddenly it is at an end. THE WORLD IS NEW" is the paradox of every existing thing (182). The poet, therefore, must perceive the object by reflecting its physical objectiveness as well as considering the surrounding nothingness. This is an incredibly complex and tenuous relation to the real, especially when compared to Whitman's metaphysical certainties. The tensions of Williams' poetry center on how one can overcome the stark separation from the object, the nothing that defines it as an object. Williams contemplates where the flower goes after the poet's reflection and answers, "It ends," suggesting that an object is utterly lost without the poet's ability to draw its outline or discover its edges. The flower experiences another, and perhaps perpetual, end after artistic representation. From this perspective, the poet's task is to articulate the edges of things in order to recover them as objects:

> But if it ends
>
> the start is begun
>
> so that to engage roses
>
> becomes a geometry— (195)

Poetry must discover a geometry of engagement that exceeds mere touching. For Williams, one way to approach the object is to chisel reality down to isolated objects described in spare and direct language, capturing their physicality but also the white space of where they necessarily end. This chiseling involves breaking up Whitman's long line. Williams writes that Whitman's "structure has to be realized. He composed 'freely,' he followed his untrammeled necessity. What he did not do was to study what he had done, to go over it, to select and reject, which is the making of the artist" (*Selected Essays* 230). For Williams, the poet must discriminate between the world's many objects, understanding them as things that emerge from non-being. Williams' objectivity, therefore, is paradoxically based on the ending of the object in empty space. He still believes we desire objects and must move toward interacting with them, but such movement cannot disregard the disruptions between subjects and objects. Williams often uses line breaks to signify ruptures that remove the object from easy tangibility:

> Crisp, worked to defeat
> laboredness—fragile
> plucked, moist, half-raised
> cold, precise, touching
>
> What
>
> The place between the petal's
> edge and the. (*Collected Poems* 195)

Though "plucked" and "moist" suggest sensual knowledge of the flower, Williams breaks away from a description of how this "touching" works by not attaching the flower to anything. Instead, he breaks the verse paragraph and asks "What" rather than answering how it might articulate to the physical world. He offers a series of discontinuities, one between the "petal's / edge" and another between that edge and the unknown thing that goes unspoken at the abrupt end of the line.

Another way Williams approaches objects is through coining words that help reveal objects. Williams argues that "[t]he value of the imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence // This separates" (207). For Williams, it is important that these are "new" words. Too often, words are taken as transparent representations of things. Williams strives, instead, to destroy old and encrusted words so that new insights about the world might emerge. In a 1934 essay, he praises Gertrude Stein for just such a creative destruction:

> Stein has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean. It can't be helped that it's been forgotten what words are made for. It can't be helped that the whole house has to come down [. . .] because it has to be rebuilt. And it has to be rebuilt by unbound thinking. And unbound thinking has to be done with straight, sharp words. Call them nails to hold together the joints of the new architecture. (*Selected Essays* 163-64)

Stein's manner of deconstructing language verges on the nonsensical, which Williams acknowledges in his essay. Williams' own method involves inserting white space

between lines or the words themselves. This occurs most famously in the case of the red wheelbarrow:

> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens. (224)

Williams looks at a solitary object and describes it directly and concisely in a mere sixteen words. However, the words are broken down and spread across eight lines, creating breaches of white space. The poet's imagination must cross the space separating the object as a discrete thing from a subject who desires it. The poet does this partly by disrupting language and removing from it the burden of representation. He breaks "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater" into separate parts, interrupting the conventional comprehension of the words and forcing one to reassemble the constituent parts. But the lines are also enjambed, fluidly linking one line to the next. Rather than offering a purely objective description, as the poem is sometimes read, it develops a tense vibration of language. The line breaks point to nonbeing within the object which the poet must enter

in order to come out with the word that builds it anew. One of the ways this poem builds a new relation to objects is through its subtle sense of progression. Though the poem appears to present an inert image, there are two ways Williams introduces movement. First, he repeatedly compresses the lines, following three-word lines with one-word lines. The image develops through insistent concision, a collapsing movement. Second, the one-word lines develop steadily toward authentic and autonomous movement. "Upon" suggests the stillness required to rest one thing upon another; "barrow" is a wheeled object that can be moved if one exerts a force on it; "water" is a substance that moves on its own, but does so according to the external and universal force of gravity; "chickens" represent the animal's prerogative to move about on its own. The importance of this progression is that it ultimately leads back to the human subject. Though there is no subject described in the poem, the human perceiver is suggested in the first line, the one who determines just how much "depends / upon" the scene he sees. The breaking of these words vivifies the static image and authorizes human involvement in the surrounding world.

In this sense, words are an entry into active and dynamic situations. Though they do not provide unmediated access to objects, neither are they obfuscations of things. For Williams, desire moves through words. James Breslin reads the disruptions of the wheelbarrow poem in terms of the poet's entry into the scene: "The particulars in the poem, broken apart to be seen clearly, are drawn together by the ecstatic feeling generated by the poet's discovery. This kind of crisp, intense lyric, in which self is dissolved into scene, is one way Williams had of constantly renewing himself" (*Williams* 55). Breslin sees the image as a way to invite the subject's emotion into the surrounding

world. Emotional energy enters the world through the openings made possible by Williams' fractured words, the fissures in his presentation. For Williams, the move from object to imagination is not a move away from reality but is, rather, a way of apprehending the world:

> But the imagination is wrongly understood when it is supposed to be a removal from reality in the sense of John of Gaunt's speech in Richard the Second: to imagine possession of that which is lost. It is rightly understood when John of Gaunt's words are related not to their sense as objects adherent to his son's welfare or otherwise but as a dance over the body of his condition accurately accompanying it. By this means of the understanding, the play written to be understood as a play, the author and reader are liberated to pirouette with the words which have sprung from the old facts of history, reunited in present passion. (*Collected Poems* 234)

The imagination does not allow possession of a lost object but is instead a dynamic interplay of words and situation, a "dance" upon our conditions. Williams approaches the object through words that work within the situation. If words are "clean," broken away from a history that traps them in unexamined meanings, they have the ability to traverse the gap between subject and object. Williams believes the imagination is an energy that liberates words so that they can access reality. The poet's task is to discover the words that join the subject's desire to the object newly conceived: "I take what I find, I make a poem out of it. I make it into a shape which will have a quality which is no longer you. It's come out of you, but I've objectified it. I've given it a form, a human habitation" (*Interviews* 24-25). Only by seeing the object as both substance and absence, a beginning

and an end, is Williams able to find the words to apprehend the object and insert the subject into it.

Williams insists on the importance of objects and still maintains a model of desire that imagines the subject's eventual connection with the object, but it must achieve this union by passing desire through words. Objects end and begin in a space that can only be traversed by the passionate interaction of subject, word, and object. Though still a sensualist in many ways, Williams believes the subject must "pluck" the object as one plucks a lute, in order to hear its music, perceiving it through art. This is one of the reasons Williams so deplored Eliot's influence on modern poetry, for Eliot takes the aesthetic experience in place of the object, whereas Williams uses the aesthetic experience to achieve the object. Williams condemns both Eliot and Pound because they "rejected Whitman as a master" (*Interviews* 143) and were unable to relinquish old poetic forms and European languages in favor of the newness and directness of the young American language. For Williams, these direct forms allow access to the object, which, therefore, does not need to be rejected.

Ezra Pound, in his imagistic works, rejects objects of desire in order to redirect desiring energy into poetic creation. Pound made shifting claims about imagism during his active involvement in the short-lived movement. His most well-known statement defined a poetic image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" ("A Retrospect" 253). In his essay, Pound refers to British psychologist Bernard Hart, who defines a complex as "a system of connected ideas, with a strong emotional tone" (61). Hart traces these complexes as they encounter

psychological resistance and emerge in symptoms like projection and phantasy. Pound's poetry written during his imagistic phase seems to respond to Hart's definition, figuring a complicated relationship between sexual desire and the rejection of sexuality. The "complex" of these early poems centers on this tension. Pound's poetic images present the metamorphosis of active desire into static natural objects. A potentially sexual situation unfolds but is captured or stilled into a final image that rejects sexuality. The poetic image, from this perspective, is the poetic speaker's denial of carnal appetite. Pound argues that intellectual thought and poetic creation are undertakings greater than sexual gratification. The suspension of desire into still images, however, threatens to divest his poems of their productive capacity, rendering them desexualized creations of the mind.

Pound's short, imagistic poems develop dynamic, potentially libidinal situations and then transform the associated desire into images of natural objects. For example, "Gentildonna" describes the potent presence of a passing woman and then abruptly metamorphoses this tension into an image of leaves:

> She passed and left no quiver in the veins, who now
> Moving among the trees, and clinging
>   in the air she severed,
> Fanning the grass she walked on then, endures:
>
> Grey olive leaves beneath a rain-cold sky. (*Personae* 92)

The poem describes a woman passing, and yet in some aspects, she remains, "clinging / in the air." She departs as a libidinal object but paradoxically inhabits the air left behind.

Pound's poems frequently bring absence and presence into just such an ambiguous simultaneity. She both moves and clings, fans and endures. Though she is gone, the poetic speaker records her passing and intently remembers her presence, her enduring qualities. Because she is absent, she leaves "no quiver in the veins": departed, she no longer generates the speaker's physical desire. The sexual possibility of her presence is transmuted into the resulting natural image: "Grey olive leaves beneath a rain-cold sky." The object of desire is replaced by an image that quenches desire: grey, wet, and cold leaves.

The poem formally accomplishes this quenching of desire by substituting leaves for the woman, replacing the pursuit of sexual pleasure with the rendering of the poetic image. But this substitution does not resolve desire; it merely suspends it. The enjambment of the first two lines reinforces her presence by pausing first on a relative clause in which the woman is the subject ("who now") and then on the word "clinging," which is both semantically and syntactically static. In fact, the first four lines comprise a string of clauses that depend on the woman who is not present except as a pronoun without an antecedent. So while the speaker replaces the woman with cold, wet leaves, he does this in remembrance of her. The image in the final line is set off, first, by the colon that ends the previous line and, second, by the white space between them. In this space, a transformation occurs that attempts to clear out the woman and institute a non-human replacement.

A similar transformation of sexual desire into the image of wet leaves occurs in "Alba":

As cool as the pale wet leaves

of lily-of-the-valley

She lay beside me in the dawn. (*Personae* 109)

On the most immediate level, the poem is the antithesis of "Gentildonna," for the lovers lie together in the dawn. The image seems to register the speaker's feeling of contentedness after a night of passion. But there are important tensions in the poem. First, the speaker establishes a contrast between an embrace, which is commonly figured as warm, and the simile that stresses coolness. The cognitive difficulty of this simile disrupts our habituated notion of lovers and warm physical sensation. The woman's primary features are coolness, paleness, and wetness. Second, the poem emphasizes the simile by placing it at the beginning. Rather than beginning with the subject phrase ("She lay beside me in the dawn") and ending with the simile, the poem defers the subject until the final line. This structure emphasizes the leaves and minimizes the woman. We must wait for the subject of the unfolding comparison. The significant indention of the second line diverts attention from the image of the woman that begins the final line. Ostensibly about presence and physical connection, the poem defers the appearance of the woman with whom the speaker interacts.

In both of these poems, the speaker's sexuality is metamorphosed into poetic figures of static natural objects, the first in the sudden image following the colon, the second in a cyclical figure. This metamorphosis finds its most concise formulation in Pound's famous "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough. (*Personae* 109)

"In a Station of the Metro" has long fascinated critics because the relation between the first line and the second line is left unarticulated. One critical strategy has been to see two distinct objects juxtaposed in order to encourage a contemplation of their similarities. But it is possible to see the faces of the first line *transformed into* the petals of the second line. In such a reading, the second line is a consequence of the first rather than a comparison to it. The second line presents the poetic speaker's reaction to the situation in the first line. The speaker, or the one confronted by the faces in the crowd, mentally objectifies the faces into petals on a tree branch. And, in fact, this is the process Pound describes in his explanation of the poem's genesis:

> Three years ago in Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another, and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. ("Vorticism" 284)

The appearance of the beautiful faces is followed by the recognition that he cannot adequately express the emotion generated in the experience. It is only through the wet, black bough that he comes to a solution. Confronted by faces in a crowd, Pound transforms them into static petals. The poem is not a juxtaposition of images but a reorientation of desire into a distanced aesthetic mode. He has found more than just words; he has found an image that restrains desire. The desirable human objects are arrested and transmuted into the poetic image. The paradigmatic form of this reorientation is Ovid's telling of the Apollo and Daphne myth: Apollo, enflamed with desire, chases Daphne, who transforms into a tree. The desirable object becomes an

inanimate one. Rather than falling into the dissolution of sexual satisfaction, Apollo regains himself and treasures a crown of laurel leaves, the poetic representation of Daphne. Desire is suspended rather than spent.

While this persistent metamorphosis in Pound's work signals the impediment of social or sexual gratification, it carries out another function related to Pound's claims about how the mind operates. In his postscript to Remy de Gourmont's book *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, Pound entertains the idea that "it is more than likely that the brain itself, is, in origin and development, only a sort of great clot of genital fluid held in suspense or reserve" (295). On the surface, this idea debases intellection by animalizing it, reducing it to simple physiology. And in some ways, Pound supports this conception by arguing, for example, that dreams occur when a person tilts his head to go to sleep (299). Thought is physiological and undoubtedly sexualized from this perspective. But within his argument there is an elevation of the sexual, as well, and perhaps a call for its complete transformation. He delineates three "channels" for spermatozoide: "hell, purgatory, heaven, if one wants to follow yet another terminology: digestive excretion, incarnation, freedom in the imagination" (309). Thought emerges as the apex of a Dantean trajectory of sexual energy. According to this concept, the highest manifestation of sexuality, however, must be incorporeal rather than incarnate, mental rather than physical.

Discussing the human evolution of "new faculties," Pound suggests that "all sorts of aptitudes developed without external change, which in an earlier biological state would possibly have found carnal expression" (306). Pound insists that the capacity for thought and ideas involves the suspension of sexuality from its carnal ends as well as a

metamorphosis into new form-making possibilities. From Pound's perspective, fecundity rather than physicality ties sex and thought together. In "Ortus," Pound describes the creative process as a transformation of sexuality, though still figured in terms of sexual reproduction: "How have I laboured? / How have I not laboured / To bring her soul to birth" (1-3). Creative thought is a birth-giving process through which the poet "labors" to bring forth the forms he has generated. K. K. Ruthven points out that "ortus" means "birth" or "springing out" (187). This is consistent with Pound's notion of the mind's capacity for productive thought. The poet's creation is "beautiful as the sunlight, and as fluid" (5). The word "fluid" hints at the same ideas that end up in Pound's postscript to Gourmont: the fluid fecundity of spermatozoide. Pound argues that these new creations have reproductive force:

> creative thought is an act like fecundation, like the male cast of the human seed, but given that cast, that ejaculation, I am perfectly willing to grant that the thought once born, separated, in regard to itself, not in relation to the brain that begat it, does lead an independent life much like a member of the vegetable kingdom, blowing seeds. (301)

Thoughts, ideas, and poems are born of the productive mind and are themselves able to reproduce.

But there's an unresolved tension between how Pound conceives of the poem as transformed sexuality and the process of transformation. Again, the imagistic poems arrest sexual desire and replace it with images that defuse it. The immediate replacement of "faces" with "petals" in the "Metro" poem is a steeling of one's self against sexual desire. These poems are denials of desire rather than its elevation into a higher realm. The

experience of desire is quenched, substituted, replaced, suspended, and arrested rather than transformed. The fluidity of Pound's imagistic poems is concretized into static images. "Ortus" confirms this poetic process by explaining the poet's effort "To give these elements a name and a centre!" (4). Here, poetry is the act of circumscribing and naming elements, suspending flow and movement, and obstructing desire. The speaker has "laboured to bring her soul into separation" (7). But in this separation that causes its being, the poem gets isolated from its surroundings. The speaker goes on to insist that the poem is "no part, but a whole, / No portion, but a being" (15-16). This suggests that fluid, protean desire must be unified and solidified rather than act as a part in a flowing reproductive system. Poetry, from this perspective, must be separated, isolated, fixed, and totalized.

This analysis of Pound's view of cerebration allows us to recognize the insistent urging that occurs in another important group of Pound's poetry, the poems about poems. If the imagistic poems metamorphose desire into a static image, the hortatory poems encourage social intercourse. He urges his poems to connect with the reading audience like "blowing seeds" across the landscape. For Pound, the poem should be a means toward reintegration, reconnection, social intercourse. Paradoxically, however, he asks this intercourse of the very poems that have been frozen into static images of suspended desire. They seem bound to fail because the flows required for social interaction have been stilled, fixed into images. In "Further Instructions," for example, Pound exhorts his poems: "Come, my songs, let us express our baser passions" (1), but his imagistic poems arrest rather than activate sexuality. He diagnoses the problem when he complains: "You are very idle, my songs" (4). They are idle rather than active because they bind desire in

the static image. Even when he turns hopefully to his "newest song of the lot," he says, "I will get you a green coat out of China" (18). The "green coat" that covers the poem's libidinal energy is one more poetic image of leaves, enacting this familiar suspension of desire. Though he implores his poems to "Ruffle the skirts of prudes, / speak of their knees and ankles" ("Salutation the Second"), he himself invariably speaks instead of leaves and petals.

While Pound wrote many poems in this period about the need for poems to interact, perhaps even physically, with readers, he also continued to insist on a distanced relation to sexuality, as in "The Condolence":

> And now you hear what is said to us:
> We are compared to that sort of person
> Who wanders about announcing his sex
> As if he had just discovered it.
> Let us leave this matter, my songs,
>   and return to that which concerns us. (13-18)

If it is clear that one must not indulge the purgatory of "announcing his sex," it is less clear what the heaven of one's true "concerns" should be. The absence of a clear statement reveals this poem as primarily a rejection rather than a creation. Even the poems that seem aggressively sexual are descriptions of possible but rejected desire. The woman in "The Garden," for example, is a "skein of loose silk" who is likely to unwrap into nothingness. The speaker refuses to descend to her libidinal needs. Never is he a more separate and unified figure than when he threatens but withholds his libidinal energies. He is self-possessed, while the woman is in danger of "dying piece-meal"

because she desires connection. "The Encounter" similarly finds the speaker rejecting connection, while the woman's fingers are made into a poetic image of papery thinness. In the form of always-merely-possible lovers, these poems dramatize a rejection of sexuality.

Pound carries out the suspension of desire in sexual situations by creating poetic images like the leaves and flower petals in poems like "Gentildonna," "Alba," and "In a Station of the Metro." Each static image rejects desire, separating the poetic speaker from social and sexual intercourse. Though Pound theoretically attempts to sexualize cerebration and access the fecundity of poetic creation, his poetic practice seeks to desexualize poetry. The poems are frozen images rather than opportunities for interaction. In his literary theorizing, Pound calls for increased sexual energy in the production of thought and poetry. The mind that transcends carnal desires achieves a fertility exceeding the power of sexuality, which can be extinguished. Though Pound believes in the reproductive capacity of thought, he asks his poems to exercise the very tactile, mobile, libidinal ability he has arrested in them.

While Ezra Pound rejects sensual satisfaction and redirects desire to the creative mind, he does so largely through assertion; in his imagist phase, Pound is a declarative poet. Wallace Stevens, by contrast, engages in a similar rejection but follows it with a fully developed sensuality of the mind, conceiving of a capacity for meaningful experience distinct and separated from the physical body. Stevens is less interested in the tangibility of objects, their sensuality, than he is in the way they are produced by the imagination. The mind, from this perspective, does not work on the level of physical

objects but rather forms the world according to its own principles. In “Variations on a Summer Day,” for example, he explains that the interaction with an object, such as the sea, is always an “exercise” through which one repeats, with variations, the possibilities, but not the actualities, of interaction:

> An exercise in viewing the world
>
> On the motive! But one looks at the sea
>
> As one improvises, on the piano. (233)

For Stevens, the sea is not a stable object with uniform properties; it is formed and reformed by the viewer, an improvisation, an abstraction of the real object, turning the sea into a set of variations. The speaker creates objects through his imagination and is free to turn the rocks of the cliffs into “the heads of dogs / That turn into fishes and leap / Into the sea” (232). Stevens emphasizes the priority of the imagination in our experience of the world: “If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into the real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man. It creates images that are independent of their originals” (“Imagination as Value” 735-36). The world, therefore, is perceived through abstractions such as similes and metaphors. In “Poem Written at Morning,” he describes how things are conceptualized through metaphors:

> By metaphor you paint
>
> A thing. Thus, the pineapple was a leather fruit,
>
> A fruit for pewter, thorned and palmed and blue,
>
> To be served by men of ice. (219)

Stevens does not attempt an objective description of the pineapple; he understands the object through an array of metaphors, turning pineapple into leather fruit, imagining the pewter on which it might be served and the coolness of the men who serve it. He insists that the experience of an object involves the substitution of one thing for another. Presented with a pineapple, the subject produces a constellation of other objects and effects. Stevens argues that we do not have access to objects except through the particularities of the mind that perceives them. External objects, therefore, are transformed when filtered through human experience:

> The truth must be
>
> That you do not see, you experience, you feel,
>
> That the buxom eye brings merely its element
>
> To the total thing, a shapeless giant forced
>
> Upward. (219)

Stevens suggests that a sensual object, that which we see with our "buxom eye," is only an element of a much greater abstract thing formed by human experience. The world is conceptual rather than sensual; it is a power of the imagination, a "total thing" existing beyond any manifestation of physical things.[4]

Stevens' notion of the poetic imagination reverses the relationship between the conceptual and sensual realms in two important ways. First, he suggests that the poet has greater access to abstractions than things; the imagination, the conceptual or formal level, is immediate and takes precedence over physical sensation. Second, conceptual forms are more abundant than things; the primary area of activity and interest for human experience is the realm of the imagination. Rather than being constantly confronted by the objects of

the world and only rarely perceiving the realm of forms beyond them, Stevens considers forms many, varied, and mutable. There is a profusion of forms rather than objects, and instead of interacting with things physically, Stevens imagines interacting with abstractions.

Stevens' poetic technique, therefore, involves strategies of abstraction, the most noteworthy being the poem of iterations, in which the speaker constructs multiple responses to the physical world, replaying and adjusting his emotional and imaginative reactions. In an iterative poem like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," the speaker describes a seascape in Mexico, but this is a "description" only in the broadest sense, for the particulars soon become very general:

> In that November off Tehuantepec
> The slopping of the sea grew still one night
> And in the morning summer hued the deck
>
> And made one think of rosy chocolate
> And gilt umbrellas. Paradisal green
> Gave suavity to the perplexed machine
>
> Of ocean. (98-99)

The first line provides contextual information, fixing the poem's time and place: November in Mexico. Stevens describes the natural landscape of the sea in the second line, but he does so with a deflating irony, using the word "slopping" to refer to the actions of the sea. In the second stanza, landscape gives way to imaginative response,

where the speaker considers what the landscape makes him think of: “rosy chocolate” and “gilt umbrellas.” These subjective and idiosyncratic comparisons emerge from the poetic speaker’s mind. He also merges sea and sky, as the sea absorbs the clouds that float above and become new imaginary objects: sea-clouds.

> The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm
>
> And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green
>
> And in its watery radiance. (99)

The poem follows these “sea-clouds” as they move “below” the water’s surface “in the swimming green.” Stevens substitutes the new object, the sea-cloud of the imagination, for the mundane sea, the sea as an external object of nature.

Stevens extends the poet’s powers of invention when he begins to repeat the description of the sea. Each of the poem’s five sections begin with the same first two lines, but everything else is changed. For instance, the first variation of lines 3 through 5 are: “At breakfast jelly yellow streaked the deck // And made one think of chop-house chocolate / And sham umbrellas.” In broad outlines, Stevens presents the same scene but alters words, especially adjectives. “Rosy chocolate” becomes “chop-house chocolate”; “gilt umbrellas” become “sham umbrellas.” In each of these changes a pleasant or attractive modifier is deflated by an unpleasant one. The word “sham” even hints that the speaker’s search for a comparable image is suspect. The revised sections alter the scene so that no landscape truly exists. In this way, the actual sea and its surroundings lose their continuity as external objects, leaving the speaker adrift on his own imaginings. If so many variations can arise in the mind of the poet, then the poet’s mind is more powerful than the landscape.

Yvor Winters has criticized Stevens for the authority that the imagining subject assumes in remaking his surroundings. Winters argues that Stevens "postulates the absolute severance of the intellectual and the emotional" ("Wallace Stevens" 91), leading to what Winters considers an inaccurate valuation and intensification of emotional experience. That is, he views Stevens' subject as one who does not react to a world within certain constraints but instead intensifies experience through an imagination severed from a responsibility to the world. Winters contends that, for Stevens, playful intellectual thought is "valuable simply for the independent emotional excitement which one may derive from it" (92). Winters calls this form of thinking "hedonism" because it avoids any intellectual constraint, which is the foundation of moral order. Rather than requiring our senses to confirm the objectivity of things in the world, Stevens' promiscuous eye allows the subject to exercise possibilities that exceed the visible object. Though Winters perceives Stevens' gentle self-ridicule that accompanies this process, he also recognizes the authority that Stevens grants to the subject.

It must be noted, however, Stevens rarely celebrates *sensual* intensity after the severance of intellect and emotion. In fact, in Stevens' work, emotional intensity often involves heightening of loss. The imaginative recasting of the landscape in "Sea-Surface Full of Clouds," for example, reiterates how distant the speaker is from the scene before him, for he is constantly exchanging impressions of the world. Though the mind is more powerful than the landscape, the world is paradoxically lost in the process; the speaker is unable to possess the sea or the clouds sensually. Reiteration effectively separates him from the world and reveals the insolidity of his surroundings. From this perspective, objects are unstable and irrecoverable. Stevens suggests that we have access to the

products of the imagination but rarely to physical objects. For all the lush imagery and playfulness of Stevens' verse, the intangibility of its objects through abstraction provides a constraint that limits its free play. In fact, Stevens often emphasizes the sense of loss that accompanies the movement from sensuality to abstraction. In "Autumn Refrain," Stevens replaces objects with words. A nightingale heralds the passing of a sensual world, but the speaker cannot sensually apprehend the bird's song:

> The skreak and skritter of evening gone
>
> And grackles gone and sorrows of the sun,
>
> The sorrows of sun, too, gone . . . the moon and moon,
>
> The yellow moon of words about the nightingale
>
> In measureless measures, not a bird for me
>
> But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air
>
> I have never—shall never hear. (160)

The speaker is separated from the physical world and experiences the loss of the bright day and fruitful season when words replace things. The yellow moon that replaces the setting sun is a "moon of words," insubstantial, transferred from object to abstraction. The nightingale, too, becomes words, a thing the speaker only experiences through poetic reference. Stevens alludes to Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," another poem in which a poetic speaker tries to achieve a release from the human world. But for Stevens, it is a double loss, because he does not even hear the nightingale that for Keats "Singest of summer in full-throated ease" (206). Stevens' speaker only experiences names that replace things: "the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air." The declining

physical world is paralleled by a retreat into greater abstraction. The loss is more intense because the speaker still perceives a real world he cannot attain:

> And yet beneath
>
> The stillness of everything gone, and being still,
>
> Being and sitting still, something resides,
>
> Some skreaking and skrittering residuum,
>
> And grates these evasions of the nightingale
>
> Though I have never—shall never hear that bird.
>
> And the stillness is in the key, all of it is,
>
> The stillness is all in the key of that desolate sound. (160)

The loss of the sensual world, the speaker's inevitable separation from it, is exacerbated by the "residuum" he can sense poetically. Though the speaker has never heard or seen a nightingale, its poetic possibility suggests a world that resides beyond our ability to apprehend it. If there is an intensification of emotion in this poem, it is an intensification of loss. Rather than sensual hedonism, or even an excess of the imagination's freedom, Stevens insists on loss as a necessary constraint. Stevens' moral order allows the inventive play of imagination but only in a realm without access to the real world. Stevens rejects interaction with objects of desire, but the mind's creative fecundity taking its place is merely an isolated and isolating activity. The stillness accomplished by turning away from the world allows imaginative productions, but they are always, for Stevens, "in the key of that desolate sound," marked by the departed world.

Stevens also marks loss by replacing objects with lines of movement. “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” one of Stevens’ iterative poems, replays persistent loss rather than persistent presence:

> The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
>
> It was a small part of the pantomime. (93)

Though the poem ostensibly takes the blackbird as its subject, Stevens sees it as part of the “pantomime” of nature, suggesting that external objects can only suggest existence rather than exemplify it. Nature is representational but only in a dramatic sense rather than an objective or scientific sense. In the pantomime, the blackbird is recast over and over by the subject imagining the world. The blackbird appears in spatial terms defined by the speaker:

> When the blackbird flew out of sight,
>
> It marked the edge
>
> Of one of many circles. (94)

The speaker constructs a system around the bird that maps its progress with imagined concentric circles. The imagination is powered by the subject’s desire to retain the object in his own context. The speaker retains the blackbird in terms of these circles even though the bird has flown out of sight. The speaker has schematized his loss, and the schema is like the imagined skreak and skritter of the lost nightingale of “Autumn Refrain,” except that it is severe and detached rather than palpable. The poem as a whole, with its thirteen attempts to construct the blackbird in the imagination, is itself a sequence of concentric circles that replace the experience of a blackbird with abstract and

expanding lines of poetry. The poem ends with temporal dissonance, signaling the ultimate end of the day even while it is ongoing:

> It was evening all afternoon.
>
> It was snowing
>
> And it was going to snow.
>
> The blackbird sat
>
> In the cedar-limbs. (95)

The speaker resigns himself to an ending because the day is intangible; it is a world he cannot grasp. The snow, which covers over the world in blankness, is ever present, itself avoiding or exceeding temporal rules by seeming eternal. Despite the erasure of darkness and obliterating snow, the speaker senses the blackbird abiding. The bird remains the residuum that the speaker cannot obtain but cannot relinquish. The bird represents persistent loss, and the poem is an elegy for that which has always departed.

The most extreme abstraction is death, a form of loss that signals an end to the subject's power to construct reality as an experience of the imagination. In "The Emperor of Ice Cream," the body is laid out and covered so that it cannot face the world: "And spead [the sheet] so as to cover her face. / If her horny feet protrude, they come / To show how cold she is, and dumb" (64). The lifeless subject cannot see the world to make a picture of it; dead, she is dumb, unable to speak her connection to the world. The corpse represents blankness, the extinguishing of the mind's capacity to form the world from sensory impressions. Sensuality is only important as an input, not as a goal in itself. Rather than a collection of sensible objects, "Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination," as he says in the title of a late poem comparing the physical world

surrounding the speaker to the objects one sees when driving a car at night. The headlights reveal objects along the road for only a moment before they are gone:

> There was a crush of strength in a grinding going round,
> Under the front of the westward evening star.
>
> The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins,
> As things emerged and moved and were dissolved.
>
> Either in distance, change or nothingness,
> The visible transformations of summer night,
>
> An argentine abstraction approaching form
> And suddenly denying itself away.
>
> There was an insolid billowing of the solid.
> Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air. (*Opus Posthumous* 110-11)

The grinding of the wheels is a metaphor of touching, a reference to the possibility that there may be physical contact with the world. For Stevens, however, this contact is correlated to movement through the world, involving the perpetual introduction of things that are just as perpetually lost; they emerge, move, and dissolve away. Therefore, the subject always exists in the act of imagining the world. All that exists are objects that cannot be grasped, paradoxically leaving only the act of our grasping. Stevens argues that the subject can never really access the true object and that, in its place, we have only the

experience of it: “The subject-matter of poetry is not that ‘collection of solid, static objects extended in space’ but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it” (“The Noble Rider” 658). Stevens explores loss as an inevitable part of life, but he offers the imagination as an activity that can provide a fullness that will not dissolve away, at least until the finality of death. Though objects themselves are “insolid,” there is a conceptual realm in which they are “billowing” with possibilities.

Ultimately, Stevens suggests that things themselves only provide opportunities for us to create what is valuable about life. Therefore, our creative capacity, the sensuality of the imagination, is more important than our grasp of the physical object. In a 1948 letter, Stevens argues that reality, as it is so called, is only preparatory to life:

> After all, as you spend your summer getting well again, aren’t you in an extraordinary position to carry on the struggle with and against reality and against the fifth column of reality that keeps whispering with the hard superiority of the sane that reality is all we have, that it is that or nothing. Reality is the footing from which we leap after what we do not have and on which everything depends. (*Letters* 599-600)

Stevens rejects reality for being dull and lifeless unless it can be infused with the productive influence of the mind. He imagines “combatting the actual” in order to achieve the “gayety of the mind” (600). The physical world, for Stevens, is barren and lacks the lushness of the imaginative landscape. Desire cannot be satisfied by objects but must be expressed in the poetic experience provided by the imagination.

The chapters that follow explore the nature of poetic expression in Eliot, H.D., and Bishop as a move away from sensual interaction with the world. Similar to Pound's rejection of sexual desire and Stevens' redirection of abstract constructs of the imagination, Eliot and H.D. reject desire for the world in order to construct new paths in terms of poetic experience. In Eliot and H.D., the new structure of desire takes on a spiritual cast, sometimes blossoming into a transcendent spiritual possibility that echoes Dickinson's dilemma, a pit but heaven over it. Bishop reflects this same wish for rejection and the unified self, but objects in all their particularity begin to emerge in Bishop's conception, changing the nature of aesthetic experience to one of dynamic interaction with the world.

Notes

[1] Freud argues against the notion of a generalized libidinal energy in his disagreement with Jung as well as in his clinical studies and metapsychological texts. However, his critical responses to art and literature often consider broader, non-sexual energy, such as his consideration of anger in "The Moses of Michelangelo."

[2] The poetry of Whitman and Dickinson is much more complex than the description I have given here, of course, but I contend that much of the tension that one sees across the body of their work is structured as complications, developments, or temporary reconsiderations of the respective models. For instance, Dickinson's volcano poems often imagine the impossibility of restraint, and her poems of puncture or division contemplate the impossibility of stillness and unity. But these are examples in which she tests rather than overturns her philosophy of deferral. Likewise, Whitman's catalogues

sometimes reveal the impossibility of sensation in the sense that he cannot simultaneously be everywhere or possess everything. In other words, their respective poetic visions involve explorations of the contours and implications of their overarching models of desire.

[3] The phrase "rejection of desire," throughout the text, is meant to refer to a formal analysis of the poetic works of these poets and is not meant to suggest or hypothesize about their personal lives. Similarly, "rejection of desire" does not diagnose the broader cultural context, especially in light of contemporaneous free-love movements and a general trend toward relaxed sexual regulation. Instead, the phrase refers to the dynamics of subjects and objects of desire in the texts themselves. While this is nominally a "psychoanalytic" perspective, I do not intend to direct it toward the poets or their socio-historical background.

[4] This "total thing" is similar to Plato's notion of forms, conceptual ideas without properties that can be sensed in themselves. Forms exist beyond any physical object; objects can only temporarily and imperfectly approximate the form. The classic example is a chair; each really existing chair is unique and particular, but underlying this sensual variety is a conceptual unity. The total thing of "chair-ness" exists beyond any specific chair (*Phaedo* 74).

CHAPTER II

PURGATORY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DESIRE IN T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*

I argued in the introductory chapter that modernism marks a transition from a romantic subject who interacts positively with the natural world to a new subject who refuses to release desire into the world. Modernists reorganize desire into discrete, distinct, and self-authorizing subjects. Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens diminish the external world in favor of the desiring self. T. S. Eliot's poetic project in *The Waste Land* is related to these others in the sense that he withholds desire from external objects, reorganizing it around the self. However, he is more interested than Pound or Stevens in investigating the subject's interaction with a degraded world and how one might convert unfulfilling worldly experience into meaningful and transcendent possibilities. In Eliot, the subject's desire is retracted from the world and new sensations are created through the purgatorial, refining fire of poetic experience.

In his essay on Byron, Eliot notes that Byron characterizes Don Juan's sexual encounters as strangely innocent. Behind this sexual innocence, Eliot finds a sense of passivity: "The *innocence* of Juan is merely a substitute for the *passivity* of Byron; and if we restore the latter we can recognize in the account some authentic understanding of the human heart" (236). This notion of a substitution is provocative for two reasons. First, it shows that, for Eliot, criticism involves the attempt to expose underlying concepts from a textual surface that might belie them. Poetic expression is not direct communication but an act of substitution. That one thing can stand for another is both metaphorical (from a literary perspective) and Freudian (from a psychological perspective). Indeed, the notion

of a substitution is very like Freud's method of dream interpretation, which sees dream images as condensations or displacements the dreamer constructs from his daytime wishes.

Eliot also views the substitution in terms of sexual desire. Sexual feeling is, for Eliot, an important question, one that can lead to an "authentic understanding of the human heart." This, too, joins Eliot's concern to Freud's in many ways. Erotic desire drives the vicissitudes of human experience. In his poetry, Eliot makes a complex substitution: sexual desire is replaced by literary experience. He repeatedly portrays physical consummation as unfulfilling. In its place, he offers poetry as a site of emotional experience that supplants the sensual. The section of *Don Juan* that Eliot quotes in his essay speaks of the authority of desire:

> Alas! They were so young, so beautiful,
>   So lonely, loving, helpless, and the hour
> Was that in which the heart is always full,
>   And having o'er itself no further power,
> Prompts deeds eternity cannot annul. . . .

As Eliot argues, Juan and his lover Haidee are helpless, and therefore passive, in the face of their sexual urges. Juan does not seduce but is himself seduced by his heart, over which he has no power. The pair is only active in the sense that they commit the deeds of love, but their conscience and rationality are passive. The differentiation between activity and passivity points to an internal rift between desire and the part of the self that surrenders to it. In Byron, this is not a struggle between the sexual urge and its restriction; it is a natural impulse toward sexuality to which the subject yields naturally. Byron goes

on to consider an earthly damnation for Juan and Haidee, but in their passion they are "quite antique, / Half naked, loving, natural, and Greek" (II.194). Sex is a natural expression of internal human nature.

Eliot not only explicates this passage from *Don Juan* in his essay but also alludes to these lines in the closing section of *The Waste Land*:

> My friend, blood shaking my heart
>
> The awful daring of a moment's surrender
>
> Which an age of prudence can never retract
>
> By this, and this only, we have existed
>
> Which is not to be found in our obituaries.[1]

In some ways this echoes Byron, encapsulating the same idea. The acts that "eternity cannot annul" in Byron are the same as those in Eliot that "an age of prudence can never retract." In each, the deeds of passion can never be undone. But Eliot introduces the notion of prudence, which is not found in Byron. Byron views sex as a part of human nature. Sex is elevated, joined to eternity; its deeds outlast the ravages of time. For Eliot, by contrast, no amount of prudence can undo what is essentially an imprudent act. Eliot's version intensifies the sense of sinfulness of the sexual act. It is a fall from grace rather than a natural expression of it.

Eliot's lines are detached; they are not part of a longer narrative like Byron's. *The Waste Land*'s famously fragmented structure divorces sexuality from other events in an unfolding life. Byron's lovers experience their consummation, whereas in Eliot one can only look back at it. Sensual pleasure is unavailable to Eliot's speaker because it has always already happened. In fact, for Eliot, one only exists after it: "By this, and this

only, we have existed." The speaker, trying to understand desire and consummation, speaks of obituaries, memories, and wills read "under seals broken by the lean solicitor / In our empty rooms" (408-09). To exist after pleasure is to live after death, and it is the only form of life Eliot makes available. Thus the theme of the living dead, present throughout the poem, signifies Eliot's understanding of desire as an energy without hope of earthly gratification. Unlike Byron's sexualized subject, Eliot finds existence meaningful only in the tension between sensual pleasure and the prudence that forbids it.

Although Eliot forecloses consummation as a means toward satisfaction, he offers an alternative route to it. In his literary criticism, he suggests that literature allows for a nearly physical experience. In his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," he points out the ability of poetry to become experience: "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary [. . .] in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes" (64). This quotation conveys two important aspects of Eliot's poetic project. The first is the obvious emphasis on wholeness and unity rather than fragmentation. This seems odd at first considering the extent to which the modernists are supposed to have expressed feelings of fragmentation and the fact that Eliot's poem established fragmentation as a modernist mode. But Eliot, throughout his social and literary criticism, is intently interested in unity. The second implication for Eliot's poetic practice is his insistence that good poetry is itself a meaningful experience. From this perspective, a thought is not a reflection on experience but is itself a rich and significant event. This event, this poetic experience, takes the place of physical consummation in Eliot's view on

desire. *The Waste Land* is not merely the dramatization of sexual frustration or failure; it is also the unifying poetic experience that solves such erotic failure. Poetic effects, for Eliot, are more than mere aesthetic achievements. Poetry exceeds mere thought and enters the realm of sensation. In one of his 1926 Clark Lectures, he contends that "[i]t is a function of poetry both to fix and make more conscious and precise emotions and feelings in which most people participate in their own experience, and to draw within the orbit of feeling and sense what had only existed in thought" (*Varieties* 50-51). From this perspective, poetry is not solely intellectual but is, in addition, the cause of visceral, physical reaction.

The experience of Eliot's poetry is built upon four ideas: ritual, expression, redirection, and structural divergence. Maud Ellmann argues that Eliot's fragmentary style is an abject ritual, and the poem "[repeats] death as if it were desire" (275). In this sense, the multiplicity of voices and the chaos of allusions create their own waste material that cannot coalesce into meaning. But Ellmann's description of the poem as a "ritual" suggests that it performs some act beyond its own meaninglessness. F. O. Matthiessen points out that Eliot is able, through his special compression, to "condense into a single passage a concentrated expression of tragic horror" (22). In other words, one aspect of the "ritual" of the poem is that it "expresses" horror. Expression, in this sense, is more than description, depiction, or portrayal. Cleanth Brooks' analysis of *The Waste Land* focuses on Eliot's "paradoxical use of symbols," which he refers to as "[working] by indirection" (209). According to Brooks, Eliot includes the complexity of the real world in order to resuscitate Christian tradition: "Eliot's theme is the rehabilitation of a system of beliefs, known but now discredited" (209). For Brooks, Eliot seeks new,

defamiliarizing methods in order to espouse Christian beliefs before a secularized readership. Brooks suggests that Eliot's method is essentially a "confusion" of opposites that allows a clear belief to emerge (210). As one of his examples, he explores the uses of "rock" as a symbol throughout the poem. While most instances of "rock" in *The Waste Land* emphasize the barrenness of the modern world, Brooks points to the earlier "Come in under the shadow of this red rock" line as an example of a countervailing symbolization because the rock protects the speaker (208). The complexity of this symbol, Brooks argues, is a mode of its truthfulness, which indicates the Christian theology of death and rebirth (208).

However, Eliot uses rocks to insist that desire is experienced at the most elemental level. Before demonstrating this, however, it is necessary to see how Eliot emphasizes structural divergence, or the impossibility of reaching a satisfying consummation. In several places, including "The Metaphysical Poets," he calls special attention to Donne's line "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone" from "The Relique." He suggests the line succeeds partly due to the proximity of the contrasting images of "bright hair" and "bone." He refers to the "sudden contrast of associations" in these two images (60), but he refrains from describing them in detail. A closer look reveals that the two objects are structurally divergent from each other, symbolizing the inability to consummate a physical relationship. The speaker in Donne's poem imagines his grave dug up in some distant future, but the person who digs it up finds the relic of the beloved's hair encircling the speaker's desiccated arm. One reason Eliot finds this poem so successful is that Donne extends the distance of time through which the emblem persists: "To place the discovery of the token at the moment when the grave is broken

open, instead of at the moment of shrouding the body of the late deceased, intensifies and makes more perdurable the passion, makes more vivid and significant the wreath about the arm, now bone" (*Varieties* 125). The wreath of the lover's hair is more intense against the bone than it would be against flesh. In a sense, the passion is more acute because it is less achievable between hair and bone than it is between hair and flesh. Eliot values the line because it dramatizes desire in terms of impossible consummation. It is somehow pure and uncorrupted because gratification remains out of reach.

This recognition illuminates Eliot's invocations of "rock" in *The Waste Land*. Eliot juxtaposes rock and water that can never come together. One obvious difference between Donne's line and Eliot's is that Eliot repeats this juxtaposition over and over:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think. (331-36)

Rather than one striking moment, as in Donne, *The Waste Land*'s rock represents accumulated futility; one substance cannot achieve its desired complement. Eliot has found a way to intensify Donne's juxtaposition by bringing rock and water both closer together and farther apart than hair and bone. There is a repetitive friction as they tumble incessantly around each other, creating a staccato rhythm as the lines get shorter:

If there were water
And no rock

If there were rock

And also water

And water

A spring

A pool among the rock

If there were the sound of water only

Not the cicada

And dry grass singing

But sound of water over a rock

Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees

Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop

But there is no water (345-58)

Despite the intensity of their interaction, they never get any closer to culmination: the stanza ends with the finality of “But there is no water.” Eliot achieves a purity of poetical figure by denying contact between rock and water. He demonstrates that sensuality, the union of physical substances, is impossible. In one of his Clark lectures he suggests that Donne’s shortcoming in “The Extasie” is his reliance on physical love: “What is there for Donne? This union in ecstasy is complete, is final; and the two human beings, needing nothing beyond each other, rest on their emotion of enjoyment. But emotion cannot rest; desire must expand, or it will shrink” (*Varieties* 114). According to Eliot, culmination in physical consummation ends desire. Donne therefore succeeds where he divides lovers and distances seeker from sought, and he fails where physical union represents the realization of human potential. If Eliot’s speaker is caught in the contemplation of rock

without water, this impossibility opens up a higher realm made possible by that very divergence. For Eliot, wanting is meaningful in itself; the meaning of wanting is achieved not by the physical congress of objects but by the movement of words in poetry like parallel lines that never touch. Writing of Lucretius and Dante, Eliot explains that "poetry can be penetrated by a philosophic idea, it can deal with this idea when it has reached the point of immediate acceptance, when it has become almost a physical modification" ("Dante" 162-63). Eliot employs this structural divergence, that is, the necessary lack of consummation, in his own poetry and conceives of its experience as almost physical.

The scene of rock and no water, however, can be read alongside the physical encounter between the typist and the "young man carbuncular" to see how even obvious sexual consummation leads to emptiness. There is no lasting relationship here to sanctify. It exists only as long as the act itself. Sex is only an action, signifying nothing. After their physical encounter, the typist "smoothes her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone" (255-56). Her motion is equated to the arm of the gramophone, mechanical and perfunctory. The sexual act does not complete a union and, in fact, barely affects its participants. The woman is untouched, for whatever touching occurred was merely physical. The young man's hands are much more active than hers, but they are almost desperate in their actions: "Flushed and decided, he assaults at once; / Exploring hands encounter no defence" (239-40). Hands are too physical to achieve the type of experience Eliot values. The man and woman do not share any thoughts afterwards. Instead, his hands resume their blind searching, grabbing at mundane objects in the same way he had grabbed at the typist; he "Bestows one final patronizing kiss, / And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit" (247-48). The unlit stairs suggest a reversal

of an ideal of love, such as the Renaissance model outlined in Castiglione's *The Courtier*. Rather than "ascending the stair of love," which one does by substituting spiritual for carnal experience, Eliot's young man plunges downward into darkness. In an earlier draft of the poem, the young man "Delays only to urinate, and spit" (*Facsimile* 46), but Eliot follows Pound's advice to drop these lines. These bodily displays press the distinction too bluntly. Eliot closes with the unlit stairs to symbolize the loss of a higher spiritual attainment in favor of baser physical acts. He dramatizes the poverty of physical union.

Eliot develops a sense of the insufficiency of physical sensuality through his comments on the work of Donne and Dante, which he amplifies through his use of urban imagery. Many critics have persuasively argued that *The Waste Land* is primarily concerned with life in the modern city, but in many ways this interpretive avenue has not been fully explored.[2] It is as if our assumptions about the dehumanizing effect of the urban environment are too readily accepted to require detailed argument. Even when there is a more formal theoretical underpinning, such as in Marianne Thormählen's study involving a consideration of German social thinker Oswald Spengler, it only works to confirm the general malaise caused by modern urban living. Thormählen points out, for example, "In Eliot's poetry, and particularly in *The Waste Land*, the metropolis is a huge, decaying receptacle which holds millions of people unable to reach across to one another" (237). "Reaching," in this case, indistinctly suggests poor communication or insufficiently meaningful interaction; in the city, we merely fail to communicate with others.

Eliot, however, takes this reaching seriously. He conceives of the city in terms of the need for intimacy. At the same time, however, he recognizes the ultimate

impossibility of such closeness. In his earliest poetry, he attempts a few positive characterizations of the modern city. In “Second Caprice in North Cambridge,” for example, he tries to make the modern urban environment conform to the Romantic ideal: “With an unexpected charm / And an unexplained repose / On an evening in December / Under a sunset yellow and rose” (*Inventions* 15). Though he describes a degraded environment, Eliot finds an urban sublime. Like the Romantic poetry he revises here, the early Eliot suggests that the full range of human capacities might still find fitting expression in the landscape, though it is now inevitably urban. This perspective was exploratory, however, and does not last in Eliot’s verse. His poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations*, for instance, depict modern speakers who cannot find fulfillment in the urban landscape. In many poems, an observer walks through the streets and spies people in windows or doorways, emphasizing the boundaries between public and private. The city in these scenes has an almost soul-crushing effect in “Morning at the Window”: “And along the trampled edges of the street / I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids / Sprouting despondently at area gates” (*Collected* 18). The home provides only a brief respite from the surge and press of a city that tramples us. One must nevertheless emerge and confront it. Eliot captures that dramatic moment at the gate, paused precariously between public and private, where we must steel ourselves to the welter of the street. In “Preludes,” he multiplies this effect across the city:

> The morning comes to consciousness
>
> Of faint stale smells of beer
>
> From the sawdust-trampled street
>
> With all its muddy feet that press

To early coffee-stands.

With the other masquerades

That time resumes,

One thinks of all the hands

That are raising dingy shades

In a thousand furnished rooms. (13)

The urban environment produces ubiquitous despondency. The solitary image stands for a thousand rooms; the street is a mass of muddy feet. At this stage, Eliot still represents the attempt to break through and reach out to another. The observer, after taking in these discouraging scenes, is "moved by fancies that are curled / Around these images, and cling: / The notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing" (14-15). At this point, Eliot continues to imagine a sensitive and recoverable center of humanity.

However, in Eliot's vision, this hope begins to fade in the absence of meaningful connection. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the speaker questions the value of walking the streets where he only sees reflections of his own loneliness: "Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirtsleeves, leaning out windows?" (5). Such a gesture is worthless because people are ever more remote. They become, in fact, mermaids, mythical beings that he struggles to hear, with whom he fears he will never be able to commune. He becomes only this desire to reach out and touch: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (5). He laments the inability to touch another, imagining himself a creature with an overgrown ability to grasp but who

has nothing to hold, reduced to these claws, this need. Starved for human connection and intimacy, the speaker imagines the city has become a desolate sea floor with the sexualized mermaids out of reach. Prufrock's primary problem is that he is unable to achieve the social or sexual interaction he craves. The tragedy, if it can be called such, is that sexual desire persists in an environment in which it cannot be consummated.

The Waste Land presents a very different depiction of sex. Sexual activity is not impossible; it is pervasive, meaningless, and unsatisfactory. Sex proves no deliverance for the speaker and, in fact, offers physicality at the expense of intimacy. The city mechanizes sexual interaction. The concept of urban desensitization was already well-developed in Georg Simmel's 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in which he argues that the modern city is a form of social organization that substantially affects the psychology of the people who live there. Specifically, the metropolis forces people into increasingly abstract relations:

> the metropolitan type [. . .] creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it. Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it. Thus the reaction of the metropolitan person to those events is moved to a sphere of mental activity which is least sensitive and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality. (326)

The young man carbuncular and the typist have moved their sexual interaction to a less sensitive level. They are protected by their indifference to a possible emotional meaning to their relationship. Sexual interaction takes place on the same level of abstraction that Simmel attributes to money: “To the extent that money, with its colorlessness and its indifferent quality, can become a common denominator of all values it becomes the frightful leveler—it hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair” (330). Sexuality is no longer based on the sensitivity of emotional relations but is instead a process of abstract exchange through which people lose their individuality rather than express it. In Eliot’s poetry the city is characterized as crowds of people, as well as being a landscape enveloped in fog. In this environment, people cannot be seen except as masses, somehow abstract, undone, devoid of particularity. To bring two of these people together is not to recover them from abstraction but to recognize their indifference, their mechanical exchange. That which was formerly sensitive is now protected by disinterest. This appears in the irony of the typist’s “perilously spread” underclothing strung out in public, for she does not feel any shame in the display:

> Out of the window perilously spread
> Her drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,
> On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
> Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays. (224-27)

This is less a display of her most private clothing than it is the desensitizing of another layer of the self. They are held out to the turmoil of the city. There is no escape from public interactions, no possibility for private intimacy. Eliot twice mentions the fact that

the divan is also used as a bed, which suggests a "publicizing" of sex. She piles her private underclothing in a sitting room, and they have sex there, as well. Sexuality, because it has been put through the desensitizing indignities of the urban environment, is unable to provide the satisfaction that Eliot's earlier speakers such as Prufrock seek. Eliot suggests that Prufrock's reaching would fail even if he were able to grasp his object. He describes the young man's actions as attempts rather than accomplishments; he does not caress, he "Endeavors to engage her in caresses" (237). The caress is impossible even at the moment it occurs. Eliot rejects sexuality by suggesting that satisfaction eludes even those who attain physical union.

Though the sexual episode must obviously be interpreted on the level of the two participants, it is important to note that Eliot chooses to present the scene as the narration of Tiresias, the blind seer. The implications of this decision are many and complex, so much that Eliot's claim for the importance of Tiriesias is well-founded. In his notes to the poem, Eliot calls Tiresias "a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character'" but "is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest." Critical response to the problems raised by Tiresias has diverged considerably. Some scholars have attempted to read the entire poem through the lens of Tiresias, while others have sought to limit his unifying role, especially as the narrator of the entire poem.[3] Without trying to adjudicate this dispute, it is safe to say that Eliot's choice of Tiresias as narrator of this section is not without import. In fact, the list of implications encapsulates many of the concerns found in other sections of the poem. Although Tiresias appears explicitly in only nine lines, Eliot emphasizes the importance of this "personage." Tiresias dramatizes the

impossibility of sexuality and the need to substitute poetic expression for the satisfaction of desire.

One aspect of this choice is simply that Eliot gains emotional intensity by utilizing a specific speaker rather than an unnamed, generalized, and omniscient narrator. His very early works, such as his “caprices,” employ anonymous speakers, often in the first-person plural “we.” He does not describe the speaker but instead focuses on depicting the urban environment. Without an identifiable speaker, the poems end up exploring feelings of indifference rather than more intense emotional states. “Interlude in London” demonstrates this tendency:

> We hibernate among the bricks
>
> And live across the window panes
>
> With marmalade and tea at six
>
> Indifferent to what the wind does
>
> Indifferent to sudden rains (*Inventions* 16)

Nameless people live across from one another, protected from the wind and rain, but also protected from acute emotion. Readers are not invited to identify with any discernible character. While this impersonality may have been Eliot’s principle intent in his early work, he pursues a very different strategy in *The Waste Land*. The narrative is interrupted three times to allow Tiresias to voice his reactions to the unfolding drama. And, of course, the primary emotion is suffering. It is palpable in a human form. Though emotion is personalized in the form of Tiresias, he is a viewer rather than a participant. By presenting the scene as Tiresias’s vision, Eliot gives character and particularity to one who does not act but watches instead. This has the paradoxical effect of heightening the

emotion while distancing the action, as Eliot insists on separating desire from consummation. His note on Tiresias gives further evidence of this separation. He suggests that there is something crucial about *viewing* an event that exceeds *participating* in it. This upends our usual notion in which to participate in an event is more authentic and meaningful than to witness it. Watching is different from participating because it involves holding back rather than experiencing, retaining desire rather than expending it.

Along with being personalized and being separated from the action, Tiresias is physically separated from what he narrates. As a blind seer, he does not really *see*. This means, first of all, that Eliot again deemphasizes physical sensation. Therefore, Tiresias is not really a voyeur or a peeping tom: his reflections or insights are abstract ideas rather than sensual experiences.[4] Tiresias's perspective avoids the sensuality of what he perceives. He recognizes the poverty of the senses, their inability to connect people, their essential insufficiency. The blind Tiresias sees how meaningless it is to see, and he feels how empty it is to feel. The sexual encounter he perceives is just the most extreme example of this insight, the act that most dramatically exposes the gap between the senses and the impossibility of consummation. In many ways, Tiresias is also necessary because the young man carbuncular and the typist are unable to understand their feelings. Tiresias acts as an objective correlative, a figure appropriate to the emotions depicted in a literary text. Eliot infamously criticizes Hamlet for excessive, unattached, and unexplainable emotion; Shakespeare depicted what Eliot called "intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object" ("Hamlet" 102). But in *The Waste Land*, Tiresias is the poetical figure through which the reader comprehends the scene's intense emotion as well as the realization of the insufficiency of the senses. That is, Eliot's poem

requires a watcher: the scene is less about the feelings of the young man and woman than it is about the feeling of the one who witnesses the failure of desire. The narrator's knowledge adds depth and complexity to the drama unfolding in the text. Through the perspective of Tiresias, Eliot employs one of the methods he outlines in "On the Definition of Metaphysical Poetry" for investing sense with thought: what he calls the word made flesh. Homer exemplifies this method: "When Helen looks out from Troy, and thinks she sees her brothers in the host, and Homer tells us that they were already dead, we partake at the same time of her feelings and those of the omniscient witness, and the two form one" (*Varieties* 55). Tiresias is such a narrator who knows what the participants do not understand. He helps express the desire that goes unfulfilled in the sexual act.

Tiresias also intensifies impossible sexual union because he is a hermaphrodite. In his note, Eliot writes that "the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem." What Tiresias sees, of course, is a sexual encounter, but one in which the adding of two elements yields something less than its parts. In a way, the sexual act *expends* the participants. Tiresias, on the other hand, brings the sexes together in a way that retains them and their perspectives. Eliot considers the idea of multiple perspectives in his dissertation, where he argues that a perspective is merely the possession of a solitary "finite centre" and cannot comprise reality unless overlayed with the perspective of another finite centre: "There are two (or more) worlds each continuous with a self, and yet running in the other direction – *somehow* – into an identity. Thus in adjusting our behaviour to that of others and in co-operating with them we come to intend an identical world" (*Knowledge* 143). This is a dialectical view combining two

perspectives. Eliot uses the term "identity" in this context to mean a unity of two perspectives, which can establish an ideal meaning, a shared mental understanding. This is in some ways a call for community, but in the episode of the typist and the young man Eliot demonstrations how the most intimate community fails. Eliot rather plaintively admits he is uncertain *how* unity is achieved, but in Tiresias, he presents one possible solution. As a hermaphrodite, Tiresias is "throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts" (218-19). "Throbbing" indicates unresolved sexuality; though he contains both sexes, he cannot achieve release through sexual activity. The sexual collision of man and woman is, for Tiresias, an internal struggle, but for that reason it is an effort of unity. Eliot describes both the difficulty and the value of such a struggle: "no finite centre can be self-sufficient, for the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or lesser extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them" (*Knowledge* 147-48). As both male and female, Tiresias watches sexual activity that leads to neither relief nor satisfaction because these are one-sided perspectives and therefore destined to fail. Tiresias is at the tense boundary between man and woman but is not sexually active. Instead, he painfully unifies, transcending the failure of sex.

Eliot also separates desire from consummation by exposing the distance between two temporal planes. Tiresias does not immediately experience but rather "foretells" the sexual event: "I Tiresias [. . .] / Perceived the scene and foretold the rest" (228-29). The event he foretells appears to be in the future, but he narrates it as if it is the present, indeed, in the present tense. Eliot again separates viewer from experience by divorcing

them in time. Eliot refuses access to an unadulterated present because it would rely too heavily on the sensual. Tiresias repeats "At the violet hour" (215; 220) and produces a mostly chronological narrative, but it is punctuated with references to foretelling:

> (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
>
> Enacted on this same divan or bed;
>
> I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
>
> And walked among the lowest of the dead.) (243-46)

He exists in the present but also foresees the empty sexual act to come. Temporally, therefore, he does not describe an occurrence but rather an eternal occurring. He is both drawn to and condemned to view the unfulfilling act again and again. He represents the repeated recognition of impossible desire.

This temporal separation that distances poetic speaker from acts of desire occurs throughout the poem and is especially prominent in the first section, "Burial of the Dead," where Eliot separates present from past. Eliot presents other episodes taken to suggest sexual encounters as memories of youth. Marie describes a childhood memory:

> And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,
>
> My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
>
> And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
>
> Marie, hold on tight. And down we went. (13-16)

Marie's sensual experience occurs in an unrecoverable past, before she is transformed into the adult who now avoids the passions of winter: "I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter" (18). The abrupt transition to present tense wryly undoes the activity now relegated to the past. Its matter-of-factness punctures the narrative drama of the

sequence and retreats from youthful activity. The hyacinth episode is another description of passionate, or at least emotionally powerful, moments:

> "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
>
> "They called me the hyacinth girl."
>
> —Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
>
> Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
>
> Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
>
> Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
>
> Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
>
> *Oed' und leer das Meer*. (35-42)

This narrative takes place in the past, presenting two people separated by a year from their earlier encounter. Whatever the nature of their interaction, it remains in the past. And like the sledding scene, the last line of this episode deflates the earlier emotion. The line "*Oed' und leer das Meer*" ("desolate and empty is the sea") depopulates the landscape and ultimately proves the present a place in which past consummation cannot be reclaimed. The twin forces of memory and desire, announced as primary concerns in the opening section of the poem, are shown to be inadequate in bridging the gap that confronts them. Memories of earlier sensuality mix with, and stir up, desire, but Eliot carefully undercuts the possibility of consummation in each case. Another feature of this temporal disconnection is that the earlier period is marked by gardens and flowers while the latter becomes the dry and desolate waste land. Marie's reminiscence begins in a public park, while the hyacinth reminiscence occurs in a garden. Eliot sets the earlier episodes in a natural world of beauty and light, while the present is a depraved and

darkening world. He contrasts what was with what can no longer be, separating consummation from asceticism. In “Unknown Terror and Mystery,” Ronald Bush suggests that the sexual scene in the hyacinth garden represents the pivotal moment in *The Waste Land*: “If [Eliot’s] speaker can sustain his love into eternity, if this moment can be made from the foundation of a set of permanent values, then his emotional self will have been validated” (256). He argues that Eliot returns to this moment again and again in his work, but that, for Eliot, the problem is ultimately insoluble. As Bush points out, the moment is in the past and admits no resolution. However, *The Waste Land* is, at root, Eliot’s attempt to dramatize the transformative value of the loss of satisfaction. The poem derives its energy from the tension between the desire for satisfaction and the recognition that satisfaction is ultimately empty. The moment is in the past, and Tiresias sees its recurrent irresolution in the future.

Eliot places Tiresias at the intersection of these contending principles, but the poem itself leaves Tiresias after the music of the gramophone. As Tiresias recedes and the generalized poetic speaker returns (257-65), there is a respite from the intensity of Eliot’s theme of sexual frustration and its lessons. In a poem of jarring transitions, the break between the sexual encounter and the subsequent verse paragraph is decidedly less discordant than many others in the poem. The two sections are connected by the music of the gramophone that leads to the music that “crept by me upon the waters” (257). And there is a similar musicality to the verse, as well, although it is no longer in rhyming iambic pentameter. In fact, the sections are similar enough that we might assume this is not a wholly new section at all except we know from the facsimile of the early drafts that Eliot placed significant white space between the two. Despite their correspondences, the

differences are instructive. The former arrays man against woman, while the latter presents collective "fishmen" (263); dusk and darkness give way to "noon" (263); the failure to communicate transforms into easy talk: "a clatter and a chatter from within" (262); the messy apartment is replaced by cathedral walls in "splendour of Ionian white and gold" (265). In each case there is an easing of the tensions that were present in the sexual episode.

Eliot replaces the earlier sordidness, brought into clear relief by the irony of its mellifluous rhyme and meter, with a more textured poetry with greater metrical and rhyming variability. Eliot retains some rhymes, but they now appear organic, as in the short and long lines: "Of Magnus Martyr hold / Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold" (264-65). Rather than rattling numbers of a purling stream, Eliot introduces rhyme to staggered lines with less adornment. Classical references and Latinate words give way to Middle English words such as "clatter" and "chatter" or the long emphasized o's of "lounge" and "noon." Eliot reverses the irony and uses the common to reach the beautiful rather than the opposite. The music passes through the socially imbricated environment in order to reach the church of Magnus Martyr. The poetic voice descends and the irony recedes while the dramatic trajectory leads upwards. In Eliot's note to this line, he describes his admiration for "The interior of St. Magnus Martyr," which he feels is "to my mind one of the finest among Wren's interiors." By referencing interiors, Eliot highlights the movement of this stanza from the external observer who wanders the city to one who seeks beauty in interiors. The Ionian columns suggest support and elevation as well as the obvious implication that religion might provide them.

For a poem as dark, chaotic, sterile, and debased as *The Waste Land*, the possibility of respite or perhaps even salvation represented by the church would make for a fittingly uplifting conclusion. But, as is quite obvious, the poem does not end here. Eliot cannot arrive at the church of Magnus Martyr and consider the matter, or the poem, sufficiently resolved. But what remains unaccomplished in such a moving stanza that makes it fail to achieve dramatic resolution? The poem escapes to Magnus Martyr, but it does not reorganize desire. That is, the poetic speaker is led away from the music of sexual frustration and toward a music that speaks of community and religious order and beauty, but he is not transformed through this pilgrimage. He witnesses a bit of brightness in the city and is led to a house of worship, but the poem dwells on the scene's physical features there. The speaker comes to view the objects of religious beauty, such as Ionian columns, but he comes to the place of worship unchanged. Eliot builds to a conclusion in which the speaker must learn how to worship. As the rest of "The Fire Sermon" makes clear, unrestrained sexuality is too insidious to escape by mere flight. It flows through the world like a dirty river:

> The river sweats
>
> Oil and tar
>
> The barges drift
>
> With the turning tide (266-69)

Eliot replaces the gold of Magnus Martyr with a sweating river; the refuge of the church is swept away like a barge with the turning tide. The river represents the "cauldron of unholy loves" in Augustine's *Confessions* to which Eliot alludes in the line "To Carthage then I came" (307). Augustine curses the insistence of physical desire: "To Carthage I

came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and, out of a deep-seated want, I hated myself for wanting not. I sought what I might love, in love with loving, and safety I hated, and a way without snares" (13). The boiling cauldron, for Augustine, is a figure for the unrelenting force of physical desire; he suffers the tension of the various forms of love, certain that he is overtaken with improper drives. For Eliot, the Thames is the figure for this flood of clamorous needs. He intensifies his presentation of physical desires with the three songs of the Thames-daughters, which shorten and repeat tales of sexual undoing. In the last of these, Eliot's speaker dismisses the rhyme and musicality of the other two and plainly says "I can connect / Nothing with nothing" (301-02). The Thames-daughter realizes the emptiness of sexual union. This is, in a sense, Tiresias's realization as well as the primary lesson of the poem to this point. Nothing can be joined, neither past to present nor male to female. If one does not seek the satisfaction of desire, however, one simply retains desire toward no end. Eliot closes "The Fire Sermon" by presenting this continued burning of desire:

> Burning burning burning burning
>
> O Lord Thou pluckest me out
>
> O Lord Thou pluckest
>
>
> burning (308-11)

These words from the Buddha's fire-sermon depict the mind on fire; the world is alight with sensation and elicits the fires of passion. These fires tempt the mind, *The Waste Land* calls for a means to transform the mind.

But first, Eliot envisions the opposite of burning desire. The “Death By Water” section offers a counterexample in which desire drops to absolute zero. Phlebas the Phoenician is “a fortnight dead,” drained of all volition and desire:

> A current under sea
>
> Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
>
> He passed the stages of his age and youth
>
> Entering the whirlpool. (315-18)

Phlebas is subject to the actions of the world rather than making the world conform to his desires. The form of the lines on the page suggest the swelling of the sea; the two short lines and two long indents create white space between the otherwise long lines, suggesting a current in the water that picks at Phlebas. It is well-known, of course, that Eliot originally intended a longer “Death By Water” section and, after Pound reduced it to what would become its final form, Eliot considered cutting it entirely, but the part that remains is an effective erasure of desire that appears in counterbalance to the fire-sermon. The almost monosyllabic section reduces expression to its bare minimum as the simple actions of the world subsume the power of the individual. In the context of the preceding section, “Death By Water” adds to a palpable easing in the poem by putting two kinds of negative emotion alongside each other, represented by burning and drowning. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot describes a “structural emotion” that does not derive from the poet’s expression of his feelings: “This balance of contrasted emotion [in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*] [. . .] is, so to speak, the structural emotion, provided by the drama. But the whole effect, the dominant tone, is due to the fact that a number of floating feelings [. . .] have combined with it to give us a new emotion” (57). The excess

of desire described in the fire-sermon is given an opposite outlet. But this opposite, the utter end of desire, is not truly a solution; it is the means to a solution. Submerging desire does not end it; the image of drowning that Eliot takes from *The Tempest* is a means of transformation rather than closure.

Eliot refers to a similarly transformative process in his response to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," where he discusses the unconscious redirection of emotional energy: "The imagery of that fragment, certainly, whatever its origins in Coleridge's reading, sank to the depths of Coleridge's feelings, was saturated, transformed there—'those are pearls that were his eyes'—and brought up into daylight again" (*Use of Poetry* 146). This drowning metaphor, which ends desire as it is traditionally conceived, is, for Eliot, a means for metamorphosis. He foreshadows the transformation of desire in "The Burial of the Dead," when the clairvoyante, Madame Sosostris, informs the speaker "Here, said she, / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor, / (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)" (46-48). Despite the dry and barren wasteland depicted throughout the text, Eliot structures a promise of water, and though it drowns Phlebas, it also transforms his eyes into pearls. The "stages of his age and youth," or the sensual experience of the world, are left behind and another realm becomes available. Eliot goes on to criticize Coleridge's poem because it is a fragment that does not develop a vision for the transformed feeling: "[Coleridge's image] is not *used*: the poem has not been written. A single verse is not poetry unless it is a one-verse poem; and even the finest line draws its life from its context. Organization is necessary as well as 'inspiration'" (*Use of Poetry* 146). By contrast, in Eliot's poem, fire and water are set against each other in the service of a conclusion that can retain but transform desire. The lesson of "Death By Water" is that to

be desireless is to be dead; to forget “profit and loss” (314) is to fall into the whirlpool of death. Eliot demands a dialectical resolution to the tension he sets up, one that can transform desire to something higher, a spiritual and poetic release.

In spite of his voluminous writings, Eliot nowhere describes such ideas concisely, primarily because his full conception is dialectical. Eliot insists on the importance of including objects in poetry. In his essay “Swinburne as Poet,” Eliot criticizes Swinburne for allowing the object to disappear: “Swinburne defines [a] place by the most general word, which has for him its own value [. . .] it is not merely the sound that he wants, but the vague associations of idea that the words give him. He has not his eye on a particular place” (147). A poem like *The Waste Land*, with its dramatic presentation of particular urban objects, shows that Eliot avoids such pitfalls in his own work. But there is an obvious counterargument: objects by themselves are not enough to explain our experience of them. Eliot constructs an opposition between objects and the vague, general words of Swinburne, valorizing the former and denigrating the latter. By the end of the essay he offers a synthesis that brings language and feeling together: “the language which is more important to us is that which is struggling to digest and express new objects, new groups of objects, new feelings, new aspects” (179). Eliot implicitly contends that objects themselves are not enough; language digests objects. Rather than simply presenting objects, poetic language must transform objects into new feelings. Eliot’s concept is dialectical; poetry is the relation between objects and subjects.

Eliot considers this relation between objects and subjects in his 1926 Clark lectures, in which he points out what he sees as the lamentable transition in intellectual history from ontology to psychology. He argues that Descartes was the first to respond to

ontological questions with psychological answers. This modern perspective began when Descartes "clearly stated that what we know is not the world of objects, but our own ideas of these objects" (*Varieties* 80). He calls this an "extraordinarily crude and stupid piece of reasoning" (81) because it emphasizes the mind's capacity to create reality: "Instead of ideas as meanings, as references to an outside world, you have suddenly a new world coming into existence, inside your own mind" (80). Eliot's problem with this perspective is not merely that it is incorrect but that it allows for a misguided use of emotion. His antithetical examples are Donne and Dante. Donne's poetry is guilty of "teasing the idea": "Donne, instead of pursuing the meaning of the idea, letting it flow into the usual sequence of thought, *arrests* it, in order to extract every possible ounce of the emotion suspended in it" (85-86). For Eliot, this is a perversion in which reality has a meaning that the poet disregards in order to procure a desired emotional experience. The foundation of that experience is missing, falsely supplied by the fancy of the poet.

But Eliot employs Dante as a counterexample to Donne's psychological view. Eliot quotes an ontological example from the *Purgatorio* in which the spirit of Statius attempts to embrace Virgil, who refuses and replies,

> "Brother, do not so, for thou art a shade and a shade thou seest."
>
> Statius, rising, replies:
>
> "Now canst thou comprehend the measure of the love which warms me toward thou, when I forget our nothingness, and treat shades as a solid thing" (qtd. in *Varieties* 89).

Dante's insistence on reality is most powerful, for Eliot, in a scene in which reality *is first forgotten*. The scene illustrates the undeniability of reality, but it does so within the

context of our perceptions, however mistaken they may be, and against the motives of desire. In other words, this is not a settled scene between Statius and Virgil. It is, rather, a recognition of the impossible, a restraint in the face of the surprising knowledge that our ability to satisfy our desire, our ability to match our solipsistic perception to reality, is inevitably remote. Eliot's argument for ontology over psychology does not accomplish an easy universe of pacific objects among which we count ourselves; being, for Eliot, is a process of disillusionment, a stark recognition of incompatibility, a bracing return from fancy. Eliot's "ontology" is based on the forced dismissal of our yearning. He therefore doesn't dismiss psychology; he requires that the psychological reaction to the reality of being is a part of what it means to exist. In Eliot's synthesis of the ontological-psychological problem, we are the perpetual rejection of our desire. And it is fitting that Statius and Virgil are shades, insubstantial against their surroundings, for to be too material suggests an authority over reality that we do not possess.

Eliot puts the subject in a middle ground between desire and restriction, life and death, and free will and determinism. Subjectivity, for Eliot, is a form of purgatory. His synthesis of the ontology-psychology problem, which occurs more in his poetry than in his criticism, is apt to be overlooked. Yvor Winters, for example, delivers a blistering critique in his essay "T. S. Eliot or The Illusion of Reaction," where he attacks Eliot for his "determinism." He contends that Eliot allows the individual no agency to direct his own actions, and complains that Eliot sometimes argues that we can and must control ourselves and determine the contours of our personalities and, at other times, argues that our natures are determined and there is no hope of transcending them. But then Winters chooses from among Eliot's positions (the one he prefers far less) and admonishes him

for such a foolish and morally repugnant view: “Eliot’s position is one of unmitigated determinism. The point of view here indicated is, furthermore, related to the Marxist and Fascist view that the individual lacks the private and personal power to achieve goodness in a corrupt society” (100). For Winters, our ability to shape ourselves against our environment must be absolute. To allow that we are in some ways determined, according to Winters, leads to the ultimate rejection of personal agency, which takes the form of personal character, the power to do the right thing. Winters finds support for his reading of Eliot in various sources, particularly *After Strange Gods*:

> No sensible author, in the midst of something that he is trying to write, can stop to consider whether it is going to be romantic or the opposite. At the moment when one writes, one is what one is, and the damage of a lifetime, and of having been born into an unsettled society, cannot be repaired at the moment of composition. (qtd. in Winters 100)

According to Winters, Eliot is in no position for moral action because the range of his action is already predetermined. But this is a misreading of Eliot’s critical position, and it leads to a jaundiced view of *The Waste Land*. Perhaps the problem that arises for Winters centers on the word “is” in the quotation he takes from Eliot: “one is what one is.” “Is” suggests a stability of being that, as we just discovered, is always, for Eliot, wrapped up in emotional experience, even as such experience must be subsumed to reality. Determinism is carefully balanced with free will throughout Eliot’s work and typifies the synthesis that marks his examples of transformation. Eliot remarks in his essay on Pascal, for instance, that “[i]t is recognized in Christian theology—and indeed on a lower plane it is recognized by all men in affairs of daily life—that free-will of the natural effort and

ability of the individual man and also supernatural *grace*, a gift accorded we know not quite how, are both required, in co-operation, for salvation" (153). Eliot does not condemn the poet to remain as he "is" but instead suggests that free will and divine mercy allow for spiritual and intellectual progress. This balance of human and divine mirrors the unity of subject and object.

Eliot's view of free will as an integral part of human existence allows for a moral reading of *The Waste Land* that an interpretation like Winters' does not. For Winters, Eliot's determinism affects his artistic method as well. Winters contends that Eliot observes our debased surroundings and then presents them as such. The world must be fully accepted as it is because, according to Winters' reading of Eliot, we are derived from and beholden to those surroundings: "Eliot, in dealing with debased and stupid material, felt himself obliged to seek his form in his matter: the result is confusion and journalistic reproduction of detail" (111). While there is indeed a good deal of confusion, Eliot offers it as a pervasive and undeniable aspect of contemporary urban life. But this is not mere mimesis. For Eliot, the poem must be up to the task of including that with which it seeks to come to grips. Eliot articulates his moral and aesthetic vision in reaction to the chaos he allows into the poem. Chaos, in fact, provides the context for moral action. In *After Strange Gods* he explains that the chaos of the passions is not, in itself, the province of art properly conceived:

> violent physical passions do not in themselves differentiate men from each other, but rather tend to reduce them to the same state; and the passion has significance only in relation to the character and behavior of the man at other moments of his life and in other contexts. Furthermore, strong passion is only interesting in strong

> men; those who abandon themselves without resistance to excitements which tend to deprive them of reason, become merely instruments of feeling and lose their humanity; and unless there is moral resistance and conflict there is no meaning. (59-60)

Eliot argues that poetry must present a conflict between desire and personal restriction. The task of the poet is to recover self-control from the mire in which the modern world threatens to submerge it. Eliot insists that it is in just such a moral struggle that "men and women come nearest to being real" (*After* 46). People lose their very substance if they do not act against base desires, those passions that inhabit us all. And for this redirection of desire, the subject must have free will. The aim of poetry is to offer a means for this redirection. Eliot's defense of Baudelaire provides an insight into his notion of a poet's ability to respond to a depraved world. He underscores the "sublimation of passion toward which Baudelaire was always striving" ("Baudelaire in Our Time" 100). For Eliot, Baudelaire is not a purveyor of sin but one who is surrounded by it. Baudelaire does not submit to his passions; he contains and examines them. Poetry is an avenue for sublimation, for a reorganization of desire. Eliot argues that Baudelaire works toward this sublimation through the poetic intensity of his representation of the modern urban environment:

> It is not merely in the use of imagery of common life, not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the *first intensity*—presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself—that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men. ("Baudelaire" 234)

Eliot values Baudelaire's poetic representation of the city because its emotional intensity exceeds mere description; it is objectively accurate, but it also includes the human relations to the city. One of the ways it achieves intensity is to show the city's rough and vile contact with us: "Teeming city, full of dreams, where in broad / Daylight the specter grips the passer-by!" (34). These lines are from Baudelaire's "*Les Sept vieillards*" ("The Seven Old Men"), which Eliot quotes in the notes to *The Waste Land*, where he first uses the phrase "unreal city." For Eliot, we approach our surroundings most significantly when their tensions are exposed and we see them intensified. On one level, Baudelaire's specters are the seven old men, but on another, the city is the specter who accosts the modern subject with its decrepitude. We cannot refuse to notice the corrupt world, for it takes hold of us. In Baudelaire's poem, the old man is multiplied seven times, replicating himself, surrounding the speaker with his decayed and degenerate form. The subject must navigate these disorienting dangers. The poem ends "And my soul danced, danced, like an old lighter / Without masts, on a monstrous, shoreless sea" (35). The intensity of this image, a bewildered subject adrift upon a sea of senselessness, provides an experience of release. Eliot argues that Baudelaire "perceived that what really matters is Sin and Redemption" (235); he contends that Baudelaire's urban imagery demands a response to sin, an approach to good and evil. Eliot believes Baudelaire engages in a moral struggle to transform his relationship to the world through poetry as a mode of release.

Eliot's unreal city is much like Baudelaire's, intensifying modern life. It is first a staging ground for the dead: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many" (62-63). The city is not just decrepit; it is made up of the dead. In this case, Baudelaire's debased city is given another layer in the form of

Dante's imagery of hell. Spiritual growth in Dante requires movement through hell and purgatory before reaching paradise. Eliot searches for a way to transform death into spiritual renewal and offers the image of the planted corpse:

> There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying "Stetson!
> You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
> That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
> Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
> Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
> Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
> You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!" (69-76)

The city of the wandering dead gives way to a specific conversation about the buried corpse that, although grotesque, provide an opportunity for spiritual transformation. Eliot creates his own structure of redemption and renewal based on the vegetation rituals of primitive humans. He points out in the notes to *The Waste Land* that "[n]ot only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem" comes from Jessie Weston's study of the Grail legend, as well as James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. These works investigate the imaginative and symbolic history of humankind and look for persistent patterns and enduring myths. Weston in particular finds commonalities in the Grail legend as it takes different forms through history. She argues that a primitive vegetation ritual is at the heart of each of these iterations. The burial of the dead represents an end to the mundane, corporeal body and the birth of a transcendent spiritual being.

For Eliot, this rite is more than just a story from the past; it represents transformational possibilities for the present. In a discussion of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, he describes how ancient rituals can retain their significance if they include modern concerns:

> The Vegetation Rite upon which the ballet is founded remained, in spite of the music, a pageant of primitive culture. It is interesting to any one who had read The Golden Bough and similar works, but hardly more interesting. In art there should be interpenetration and metamorphosis. Even The Golden Bough can be read in two ways: as a collection of entertaining myths, or as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation. In everything in the Sacre du Printempts, except in the music, one missed the sense of the present. ("London Letter" 189)

The Rite of Spring, according to Eliot, does not bring the ritual and the imagery of the past into sufficient "interpenetration" with the modern world. Whether or not this is a valid criticism of Stravinsky's ballet, Eliot clearly indicates his interest in vivifying the vegetation myth with contemporary human concerns. For Eliot, the modern mind is a direct descendent of the primitive mind. The interpenetration he recommends in his review arises in *The Waste Land* through the careful intersection of Baudelaire's modern depraved city and the ancient burial that inaugurates the vegetation ritual.

The buried corpse also symbolizes the denial of desire, the submersion of will, and the metamorphosis of the self. Because it is underground, it cannot interact sensually with the world. For Eliot, the realm of sensual human relations is inadequate to the spiritual needs we possess. He argues that romantic love poetry is not able to find a

transcendental action: "Indeed, in much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them" ("Baudelaire" 235). Eliot insists on moving beyond human relations toward a spiritual transcendence that gives up sexual desire for poetic sensation. This substitution or sublimation is a moral struggle, requiring not only the recognition of our incapacity to be fulfilled by sensual means but by the need to escape these failures by activating the symbolic power attending poetic sublimation, that is, the union of thought and feeling in poetic practice. Rather than leaving the vegetation myth as some inert part of our human past, Eliot intensifies the tension inherent in the burial of the dead by challenging the modern reader, when he again quotes Baudelaire: "You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!" (Hypocrite reader! my twin! my brother!). The reader is implicated in the actions of the poem, dragged through the city and its sexual degradations in order to build toward a spiritual transformation. The ancient mind is implicated in the present, and the burden of renewal and transcendence long figured in the vegetation myth recurs here as a moral struggle to deny sensuality.

Eliot effectively presents this moral struggle and transformation in the complex ending of *The Waste Land*. Winters and others find merely allusive chaos rather than the resulting poetic unity achieved through sublimation. According to Winters, the array of quotations at the end is confused and helpless, and it allows Eliot professions on both sides of an issue that, for Winters, can support only the purest of positions: "He has loosely thrown together a collection of disparate and fragmentary principles which fall roughly into two contradictory groups, the romantic on the one hand and on the other the

classical and Christian" (112). Winters declines to identify which quotations support which of these positions, but it is possible to interpret these quotations in light of the tensions in the rest of the poem and in Eliot's thought more generally. The quotations can be read in two ways: first, as individual lines to be interpreted in relation to their original sources; and, second, as a whole, for they take part in a dynamic process in Eliot's poem that requires analysis in its own right.

Although they are drawn from various languages, literary traditions, and cultural contexts, Eliot's quotations each describe a middle ground between unity and dissolution, portraying the suffering inherent in establishing self-control in a disintegrating or degenerate world:

> London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
>
> *Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*
>
> *Quando fiam uti chelidon*—O swallow swallow
>
> *Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*
>
> These fragments I have shored against my ruins
>
> Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
>
> Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
>
> Shantih shantih shantih (426-33)

The nursery rhyme of London Bridge, with its "falling down," suggests that the world is given to decay and entropy. It reflects the imminent destruction of the external world. Perhaps deriving a sense of destruction from the experience of the Great War, and anticipating the Second World War, Eliot insists on a spiritual rather than worldly

redemption, for the world is increasingly pushed to the brink of utter destruction. The repetition of "falling down" signifies the persistence of such collapse over time. And yet the musicality of the line, the sing-song melody from the familiar nursery rhyme, adds an ambiguous levity to what is otherwise a chilling process of ruination. The sense of destruction is filtered through the music of nursery rhyme, displacing the objective to the subjective. A degraded world cannot be denied, but it must be perceived through aesthetic experience. In a way, Eliot's use of this line exemplifies his notion of a poetry that brings together disparate ideas into a sensible moment, "when an idea, or what is only ordinarily apprehensible as an intellectual statement, is translated in sensible form; so that the world of sense is actually enlarged" (*Varieties* 53-54). Eliot makes sensational through musicality the idea of simultaneous life and death, melody and entropy, internal and external.

The same ambiguity of destruction and redemption appears in the line taken from Dante: "*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*," translated as "Then he hid himself in the fire that refines them." Fire is usually understood to devour, but Dante, and Eliot after him, recognizes not its destructive power but its refining capability. It burns away the degraded exterior and transforms the remainder into a refined purity. The fire therefore does not destroy, nor is it a punishment; it is instead a transformation, a crucible of reformation. It is also distinguished from the burning of desire treated in "The Fire Sermon," described as "Burning burning burning burning" (308). Rather than a fire from which one seeks deliverance, the refining fire ensures deliverance. In his 1927 essay on Dante, Eliot explains the nature of this fire:

> In [the *Purgatorio*] the Lustful are purged in flame, yet we see clearly how the flame of purgatory differs from that of hell. In hell, the torment issues from the very nature of the damned themselves, expresses their essence; they writhe in the torment of their own perpetually perverted nature. In purgatory the torment of flame is deliberately and consciously accepted by the penitent [. . .]. The souls in purgatory suffer because they *wish to suffer*, for purgation. ("Dante" 220)

Eliot suggests that one cannot be pure except through suffering and that we must desire this suffering. He insists that we experience degradation in the modern world so that we might emerge "souls [prepared] for blessedness" (220). Renunciation of physical desire, as we saw in *After Strange Gods*, is what makes us human. It raises us above the level of animals and prepares us for spiritual transformation.

The means for achieving this blessedness, for Eliot, come through the poetic process. His quotation from *Pervigilium Veneris*, "*Quando fiam uti chelidon*," ("When shall I be the like the swallow?"), is one of many references the story of Philomela, but this time it emphasizes the voice rather than the sexual barbarism of rape. Eliot is interested in the muse that gives voice to the voiceless and transforms physical sexuality into poetic experience. Poetry is a form of sensation; song transcends the experience of a corrupted world. Earlier in the poem, Eliot refers to the "inviolable voice" (101), suggesting that the voice cannot be violated by sexual desires that enflame the body. The swallow exists outside the actions of rude desire. It is important to note, however, that Eliot's speaker does not imagine he is the swallow but rather wonders when he shall become like the swallow. The speaker is caught between his wish to escape the degraded

world and his realization that he has yet to make that escape. He resides in a purgatory of wishing, like Arnaut Daniel in Dante's scene alluded to in the preceding line (427).

In the next line, Eliot again references the subject's status between the world and a self-reflexive removal from it: "*Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*," translated as "The Prince of Aquitainia whose tower has been torn down." The poem from which it is taken, Gérard de Nerval's sonnet "El Desdichado," is a mystical and symbolic meditation on the experience of melancholy. The speaker is disconsolate, surrounded by a dead and darkened celestial sphere and plagued by memories of earlier peace and beauty:

> I am the Tenebrous one, —the Widower, —the Disconsolate,
> The Prince of Aquitania whose tower has been torn down:
> My only *Star* is dead, —and my constellated lute
> Bears the *Black Sun* of *Melancholia*.
>
> In the night of the Tomb, You who consoled me,
> Give me back Posilipo and the Italian sea,
> The *flower* so dear to my disconsolate heart,
> And the arbor where the Vine Branch intertwines with the Rose. (qtd. in Knapp 246-51)

Nerval's poem, like Eliot's, mixes memory and desire, imagining not only a lost garden of fruitfulness but the inevitable destruction of the tower that attempts to rise above the postlapsarian world. The line that Eliot selects shows the speaker at a point in which his defenses have collapsed. He is a "Widower," without a sexual partner but still in a sensual world. The speaker wonders whether he is "Amor or Phoebus?. . .Lusignan or

Biron?" (251), characters driven by sexual desire but unable to achieve their aims. His "forehead is still red from the Queen's kiss" (252), suggesting that he is marked by sexual desire. The closing of the sonnet, however, transforms this sexual tension into the possibility of aesthetic expression:

> And twice I crossed the Acheron, a victor:
>
> Intoning in turn on Orpheus' lyre
>
> The sighs of the Saint and the cries of the Fairy. (253-54)

Orpheus' lyre signals the music of poetry and the sublimation of desire into creativity. This music echoes the song of the swallow in the preceding line (428) as well as the transformative musicality of in the London Bridge nursery rhyme. Eliot was perhaps drawn to Nerval's poem for its vision of a refining process that can convert desire into new experience. Nerval also imagines the crossing of Acheron, between life and death and back again, that anticipates Eliot's interest in the state between life and death, as well as the purgatory between hell and paradise. Eliot's allusion to the ruined tower suggests a broken structure but not a destroyed human being. Instead, the subject is exposed to the tensions of a depraved world and given an opportunity to transfigure them into new song, "[i]ntoning in turn on Orpheus' lyre."

For Eliot, the preceding fragments join to form a unity, a music of poetic experience. He announces the purpose of the foregoing quotations quite clearly: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (430). Though Winters and others have complained that the ending quotations are too disparate, too abstruse, or in too many languages, Eliot appreciates the sound and rhythm of words as a particular form of meaning. In a lecture on Matthew Arnold, Eliot refers to what he calls the auditory

imagination: “the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end” (*Use of Poetry* 118-19). Eliot suggests that the musicality of verse allows access to a “primitive” level of thought from the “vanished mind” of the past that we nevertheless inherit. This anthropological motive also “[seeks] the beginning and the end,” a holistic and unifying view of human history. Eliot’s rhythmic auditory imagination might be heard to operate more readily where the foreign language produces more music for most readers than meaning. In fact, Eliot valorizes the meaning within sound, which occurs through intensity rather than semantics:

> The chief use of the “meaning” of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be [. . .] to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet [. . . .] But the minds of all poets do not work that way; some of them, assuming that there are other minds like their own, become impatient of this “meaning” which seems superfluous, and perceive possibilities of intensity through its elimination. (*Use of Poetry* 151).

In other words, asking the ending of *The Waste Land* to make sense only at the level of semantics when Eliot might be seeking to eliminate it is to misread the poem, to choose an approach not warranted by the text. Eliot’s poetic theory allows for the pleasure of sound to replace the demands of semantics, creating a reading process similar to that of the poet, who fuses feelings into a new experience:

> And what is the experience that the poet is so bursting to communicate? [. . .] The “experience” in question may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous,

> and ultimately so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed. "Communication" will not explain poetry. (138)

The string of quotations closing the poem is linguistically foreign but metrically familiar, ancient but modern, and may be too divergent to communicate in a traditional way. But, for Eliot, this is one of the powers of poetry, to create new experiences in which sense and feeling are unified. Each quotation subtly suggests a middle ground between sensual drives and the renunciation of desire. The poetic speaker admits the lines are fragments but also gives them a unified purpose; they support the self against possible ruin. The fragments paradoxically ensure a whole self. Eliot puts these quotations together in order to signify the process of experiencing poetry. That is, the quotations Eliot chooses are from those texts that have joined thought and feeling by enacting the refining power of purgatory. Each quotation registers that life is a form of suffering and that the transcendent self is made of the rejection of sexual desire.

Perhaps the most difficult of these final lines to understand in terms of the context of its original source is "Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe" (431). The chief emotion of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, from which the passage comes, is revenge. Hieronymo hates those who have murdered his son, and he sets himself to revenge the murder. Eliot's other final lines, by contrast, do not depict such violent passions. Hieronymo succumbs to his passions in a way that Eliot discourages throughout the poem, but Eliot includes the line to show how Hieronymo carries out his revenge by using art. Hieronymo does not pursue his true object of desire, which is his murdered son.

Consonant with the rest of Eliot's poem, the past is irrecoverable. Instead, he devises a method of expressing this desire in an artistic mode. In setting up his ruse, he explains his interest in "fruitless poetry": "When I was young, I gave my mind / And plied myself to fruitless poetry" (IV.1.71-72). The irony, of course, is that he uses his tragedy to author a new tragedy, bringing his plans to fruition. Poetry, in this case, is not fruitless. But it does not bring him his object of desire, his son. Instead, he diverts his energy into the play through which he carries out his revenge. He also escapes damning eternal judgment: the ghost of Andrea pronounces: "I'll lead Hieronymo where Orpheus plays, / Adding sweet pleasure to eternal days" (IV.5.23-24). He ends up transformed to an afterlife of pleasure that he could not attain in real life, and this afterlife takes place in the musical, artistic realm of Orpheus. On another level, the line from Kyd constitutes the interjection of another voice that contradicts the poetic speaker who tries to pull together the preceding fragments. The speaker is "mad againe" if he believes such a goal is possible. But, like Hieronymo, his drama has consequences. In both works, the subject moves beyond the present world and reaches some spiritual peace beyond.

Eliot finds terms for this spiritual peace in the Upanishads, classical Hindu sacred texts. *The Waste Land*'s penultimate line, "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.," recalls the three scenes Eliot outlines earlier in "What the Thunder Said." In each of these scenes, the subject yields desire to a power that controls it. In the original source, these are the lessons of Prajāpati, the creator god, and are revealed through the thunder's syllable "DA." In *The Waste Land*, these lessons reiterate the subject's distance from the world. In the first, the thunder explains that we must "give," something Eliot's subject has done irrevocably in the past:

> Datta: what have we given?
>
> My friend, blood shaking my heart
>
> The awful daring of a moment's surrender
>
> Which an age of prudence can never retract (401-04)

Eliot's subject looks back at a moment of emotional interaction and recognizes its importance in forming the self: "By this, and this only, we have existed" (405). James Miller, Jr. argues that this scene refers to a "suppressed" homosexual experience Eliot shared with Jean Verdenal (127-28), but this interpretation has been criticized by other Eliot scholars for its paucity of biographical evidence. The text does suggest, however, an intense physical experience. As discussed earlier, this passage of Eliot's echoes Byron's description of Don Juan's sexual encounter. A daring sensual moment provides the life-generating gift that, while it can never be negated, can also never be repeated or replicated. Sensual activity, for Eliot, is bereft of either present or future possibility. In fact, these three segments are split temporally into past, present, and future. "Datta" imagines an irrecoverable past when giving was possible, but the moment is always past. In his dissertation, Eliot describes memory as the continual creation of a new object in the present, never a recovery of an actual past moment:

> The idea [. . .] is not a glass through which we descry a past reality, but the idea of a past reality is itself the object, an object which is not past in the sense of a past object of experience, and which is not present in the sense of a present object. It may appear a paradoxical statement, but it is not altogether untrue to say that the object of a memory is the memory itself. (*Knowledge* 52)

In this way, the sensuality of giving cannot be conceptually reclaimed, for its memory is a new object that cannot contain the original moment. The speaker responds to the commandment to "give" by reflecting on a fulfilling, but necessarily earlier, moment of giving.

"Dayadhvam," or mercy, is used in the Upanishads to temper the impulse of demons to be cruel. Mercy, in this sense, means refraining from action in which one would otherwise be inclined to engage. Prajāpati asks the demons to reject their natural desires. Eliot's poem has a similar intent, but it focuses on acts of worldly or sensual experience:

> *Dayadhvam*: I have heard the key
>
> Turn in the door once and turn once only
>
> We think of the key, each in his prison
>
> Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
>
> Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
>
> Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus. (411-16)

Eliot describes a self-imposed prison of human isolation and loneliness. The subject's thought of the key, or the thought of freedom, paradoxically ensures that one remains in prison. In his notes to the poem, he cites F. H. Bradley in order to suggest the difficulties of human communication: "My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle." Bradley argues that one's experience of the physical world is just as individual as his inner thoughts and thus cannot be communicated. By linking the self-imposed prison to

the epistemological challenges described by Bradley, Eliot insists that the experience of the senses cannot be shared and thus isolates the modern individual.

By using "Damyata," or control, Eliot imagines a future moment in which one might be able to gain control of the self:

> *Damyata*: The boat responded
>
> Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
>
> The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
>
> Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
>
> To controlling hands. (418-22)

For Eliot, desire must be controlled in order to avoid the barren and fruitless outcomes seen throughout the poem. The boat, Eliot's symbol of control, rides upon the water. The subject is between the realms of air and sea, not prone to the dangers of either; the image portrays an escape from the risk of drowning described earlier in the poem. The subject controls himself, but the passage also suggests that he yields control to an external force. In light of Eliot's later conversion to Anglicanism, this surrender is significant to those critics attentive to biographical facts, but it is important to realize in either case that the subject must relinquish personal desire.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot conceives of a symbolic process through which desire finds expression, not in actions taken in the world nor through sensual satisfaction but through its redirection. The poem is a reorganization of desire, withdrawing it from the external world and instead allowing for its manifestation through the practice of poetry. Poetry has a genuine and affirmative project. In his essay "The Frontiers of Criticism," Eliot argues that "to understand a poem it is also necessary [. . .] that we should endeavor

to grasp what poetry is aiming to be" (122). A poem, for Eliot, is the possibility of action, a thing with "aims." Eliot's view of poetry, therefore, is teleological rather than inert. *The Waste Land*, from this perspective, has potential energy rather than a static content that it communicates. The poem's energy is realized when the reader encounters the poem:

> I suspect, in fact, that a good deal of the value of an interpretation is – that it should be my own interpretation. There are many things, perhaps, to know about this poem, or that, many facts about which scholars can instruct me which will help me avoid definite *mis*-understanding; but a valid interpretation, I believe, must be at the same time an interpretation of my own feelings when I read it. (127)

The energies in which the poem traffics are, to some degree, the reader's feelings. But more importantly, the text elicits the reader's feelings. In some ways, this is basic Aristotelian criticism: tragedies elicit the fear and pity of their audiences, and texts makes these emotions possible.

However, Eliot proceeds beyond Aristotle by claiming for poetry an important relation to the poet's emotion. Though he famously espoused a theory of "impersonal" poetry, he nevertheless evinces a poetic practice based on psychological energy. In "The Frontiers of Criticism," he quotes from Carl Jung's essay "On Psychic Energy" to explain how poems operate: "The energic viewpoint on the other hand is in essence final; the event is traced from effect to cause on the assumption that energy forms the essential basis of changes in phenomena" (qtd. in "Frontiers" 122). Jung's theory allows Eliot to focus on the effect of poetry as an expression of energy. Eliot quotes Shakespeare's "Full fathom five they father lies" and Shelley's "To the Moon" ("Art thou pale for weariness /

Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth") as examples of poetry that he understands "without explanation" (129). His reason for claiming to understand these lines is based on the emotional energy they make possible: "My best reason, perhaps, for believing that I am not deluded in thinking that I understand such poetry [. . .] is that these two poems give me as keen a thrill when I repeat them to-day as they did fifty years ago" (129). Such poems allow Eliot an aesthetic experience that approaches—but stands in place of—the sensual. It is noteworthy that these two passages are concerned with unbridgeable distances, such as the vast emptiness between the moon and the earth: two objects that can never come together. Like Donne's bracelet and bone or Dante's nearly embracing shades—but also like the irrecoverable pasts of Marie and the Hyacinth girl, the image of typist alone in her room and the clerk in the unlit stair, the image of rock and no water, and the refining fire of purgatory—Eliot raises the impossibility of consummation to an aesthetic experience in its own right.

Notes

[1] Quotations from *The Waste Land* are from *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* unless otherwise noted and will be cited by line number parenthetically in my text. These are lines 402-06.

[2] Critics often approach Eliot's urban content as material for biographical analysis or simply to point to the physical landmarks that appear in the poem. A provocative exception is Hugh Kenner, who sees Eliot's process of composition as emphasizing "the urban apocalypse, the great City dissolved into a desert" (46). One aspect of Kenner's

dissolution is the "unreal automation of Love," which he suggestively associates with Plato's concept of ideal forms but does not develop further.

[3] Robert Canary provides an admirable survey of the range of interpretations of Tiresias and the question of his importance to the poem. He quite correctly dismisses as overburdened those studies that attempt to read the entire poem through Tiresias's perspective, but in doing so he rejects an important question: Why does Eliot choose Tiresias? Canary responds to an essay by Michael Hancher by pointing out that Hancher fails to explain why Tiresias's perspective must guide the entire poem: "This connection of Tiresias with the problems of solipsism and skepticism may help explain Tiresias' presence in the poem and [Eliot's] note, but does not, as Hancher seems to assume, require that Tiresias be the protagonist" (99). Canary is not convinced that Hancher provides a good enough rationale for Tiresias as an overarching narrator or protagonist, but he doesn't fully investigate other claims about Tiresias. While Hancher's essay surely has its shortcomings, Canary does not offer a competing explanation. Instead, he turns from the question in order to praise a number of essays that dismiss Tiresias entirely. It is as if he finds the whole question of Tiresias misguided, a red herring. This strategy does little to help elucidate, at the very least, the scene in which Tiresias appears, and why Eliot places such emphasis upon him.

[4] Some critics maintain that Tiresias engages in prurient sexual behavior by watching the sexual encounter. Sharon Stockton, for instance, argues that "Tiresias remains voyeuristically apart from those he watches, enabling a flirtatious association with rape that remains essentially private and powerfully sovereign" (378). This view

overlooks the fact that Tiresias cannot, in fact, see, nor does he seem to gain either a sense of enjoyment or any noticeable power.

CHAPTER III

THE ECSTASY OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IN H.D.'S *TRILOGY*

In *End to Torment*, her memoir of her complex relationship with Ezra Pound, H.D. recounts her birth as an imagist poet:

> "But Dryad," (in the Museum tea room), "this is poetry." He slashed with a pencil. "Cut this out, shorten this line. 'Hermes of the Ways' is a good title. I'll send this to Harriet Monroe of *Poetry*. Have you a copy? Yes? Then we can send this, or I'll type it when I get back. Will this do?" And he scrawled "H.D. Imagiste" at the bottom of the page. (18)

Looking at H.D.'s writing, Pound saw a confluence of poetic visions, recognized the similarities between his emerging poetic theory and her stark presentation of natural images. Their respective projects are related in rejecting the link between desire and the world. I argue that modernists organize desire around the self, containing rather than releasing it. This general tendency, however, manifests in various forms throughout the modernist era. In Pound's imagism, for instance, the subject is able to metamorphose external objects in order to freeze desire. H.D.'s imagist works differ from Pound's in that the self is destroyed by the world: the processes of nature, such as night, wind, or winter, abolish the subject. Paradoxically, however, H.D.'s subject desires this destruction, finding within it the potential for transformation. In this chapter, I will show that H.D.'s poetry develops from these Imagist lyrics of the end of desire into longer poems that transform desire into spiritual energy. The external world is still destructive, but the later H.D. conceives of a resilient and transformative subject who can reach spiritual heights.

H.D.’s imagist poems, like Pound’s, are clear and concise. They often present images of natural objects such as flowers or fruit without ornament or excessive comment. Yet it must be observed that she typically focuses on the destructive force of nature or its inevitable decay rather than its capacity for growth and renewal. Flowers, leaves, or fruit are left to the processes of a natural world that ultimately destroys them. “Evening,” for example, describes the passing of day into night with special attention to shadows and the effect of darkness on flowers:

> The cornel-buds are still white,
> but shadows dart
> from the cornel-roots—
> black creeps from root to root,
> each leaf
> cuts another leaf on the grass,
> shadow seeks shadow,
> then both leaf
> and leaf-shadow are lost.[1]

In this poem, the natural world promises destruction. Nature is the movement of shadow over its objects, the creeping of utter blackness; each day proceeds into an evening in which the drama of shadows results in a necessary loss. The first four quoted lines end with the “t” sound, concluding each line in harsh closure. Adjacent stresses such as “bláck créeps” and “éach léaf” create emphatic, spondee-like punctuations, and the inevitability of cutting is made clear by the fact that “each leaf,” as a line of poetry, is itself cut short even in this short-lined context. The sharpness of H.D.’s presentation

partly relies on the savagery of nature, its ability to annihilate. “Night,” another poem that dramatizes such natural obliteration, finalizes the transformation of the flower:

> O night,
>
> you take the petals
>
> of the roses in your hand,
>
> but leave the stark core
>
> of the rose
>
> to perish on the branch. (15-20)

Again the flower is subject to the destructive force of nature, which is unforgiving in its cycles. The personified nature refrains from delivering a killing stroke, but this paradoxically heightens the poem’s sinister effect by leaving the “stárk córe” (another example of consecutive stresses) to perish, inevitably, by an unseen but irresistible force.

Both of these poems proceed as direct description, neither naming nor developing a poetic speaker. The human is thoroughly absent. One way to compensate for this reduced human role is to read the flowers as metaphors for people, in which case the certain destruction coming to the objects in nature is also destined for human beings. The poems become dramatizations of a human experience, a recognition of mortality. When a speaker is present, he or she usually expresses these finalities. This metaphorical reading is especially available in “Mid-day,” a companion piece to “Evening” and “Night.” Here, H.D. delivers the natural image through an overt poetic speaker:

> A slight wind shakes the seed-pods—
>
> my thoughts are spent
>
> as the black seeds.

My thoughts tear me,

I dread their fever.

I am scattered in its whirl.

I am scattered like

the hot shrivelled seeds. (5-12)

In this case, the struggles of the human speaker and the seeds are meshed together, sharing a similar fate. The subject is governed by the vicissitudes of nature. The wind shakes loose the seeds, and the speaker observes that the process is similar to the way her thoughts are lost to an inhospitable environment. The inevitability of destruction ties together nature and the speaker.

This poem is less Imagistic than the other two precisely because the speaker's concerns are so plain and obtrusive. One recalls T. E. Hulme's complaint about romantic poetry: "I object to the sloppiness which doesn't consider that a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about something or other. I always think in this connection with the last line of a poem of John Webster's which ends with a request I cordially endorse: 'End your moan and come away'" ("Romanticism" 126). This is part of Hulme's larger argument about romantic poetry's tendency to reach for the infinite rather than recognize, as classical poets do, that the self is inevitably finite. In fact, Hulme constructs a theory of modern poetics based on the notion that writers in the early twentieth century were beginning to reject romanticism in favor of a more limited concept of the self. In "Evening" and "Night," H.D. refuses to recruit nature to access the infinite; instead, nature itself establishes the boundaries of the natural object. Hulme suggests that such writing promotes a "dry hardness" inimical to the romantic attitude (126). "Mid-day"

threatens to lose its hardness and dryness because it plunges into the subjective infinitude suggested by the speaker's complaints. But the poem is perhaps saved, from Hulme's perspective, by its narrative conclusion: the subject ultimately perishes as a hard, dry, and finite seed among the rocks. H.D.'s speaker is not infinite but must find a context for herself in the world. Though there is a great poplar at the end, against which the speaker contrasts the perishing seed, she does not possess an endless power to exceed her finite circumstances.

Hulme's declaration that "the great aim [of poetry] is accurate, precise and definite description" (132) encourages an understanding of the world as comprised of concrete and authentic objects. This conception then forbids an expansive, infinite subjective spirit. Objects are impermeable in Hulme's theory. Imagist poetry focuses on the dramatic actions of these discrete objects. H.D.'s "Storm" relates the violence of the wind as it devastates the landscape:

> You crash over the trees,
> you crack the live branch—
> the branch is white,
> the green crushed,
> each leaf is rent like split wood. (1-5)

The poem describes the action of the event rather than characterizing it by using nouns; rather than using words such as "rain," "lightning," or "thunder," H.D. addresses the storm directly in the second-person "you" and follows its actions. She presents the storm in its "crash" and "crack," concise and immediate actions rather than things overburdened with the infinite. The poem is stark and restrained in its metaphysical overtones,

especially in contrast to a romantic poem such as Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." In Shelley's ode the self is necessarily implicated in every aspect of the wind, and in fact the poem is essentially an exercise in finding the subject in the natural world and vice versa:

> Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
> What if my leaves are falling like its own!
> The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
>
> Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
> Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one! (57-62)

Shelley infuses the wind with a spiritual energy that transcends mere mechanical action. The poet seeks to make its power coextensive with his own and conceives of himself as a fellow spirit of nature. Because the poem is driven by this wish, it ends by invoking the spring that will follow: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (70). The poet aspires not just to be the leaf or the wind but wishes to be infused with the spirit of nature.

The implications of Hulme's theory highlight an important difference between the underlying principles of romantic and modernist poetry: the romantic poets conceive of the infinite, but the poetry itself reveals their striving for it rather than its ultimate realization. Shelley's poem, for instance, is a prayer rather than a description of transformation. The poem expresses a plea, a wish that a putative spirit infinite in scope might be released by a kindred natural spirit. But this release never precisely occurs. Shelley spends much of the poem imploring the wind to hear his appeal but never

actualizes the spirit in himself. This is not meant to diminish Shelley's poem or romanticism in general, nor should it undercut the importance of infinitude in our conception of romanticisim. It is, rather, a crucial step in recognizing what is important about infinitude for romanticism: it sets the direction of desire; it organizes desire. The structure of subjectivity, the conception of self, is not boundaryless; it is the circumscribed in search of infinitude. Romanticism is not infinitude but rather the urge for it.

If one reads romantic poetry in terms of this desire, the complementary question for modernism becomes: how does modern poetry respond to the desire for infinitude? Hulme is correct to suggest that modernism is cognizant of limits upon the self, but he writes as if this limitation somehow abolishes the wish for infinitude. In other words, he attempts to correct what he sees as the excesses of romanticism, but his negative reigning in is not balanced by a positive project for modernism. The intent is merely to constrict. He writes, for instance, of "the concentrated state of mind, the grip over oneself which is necessary in the actual expression of what one sees" ("Romanticism" 133). But he does not describe the impulse underlying this grip. According to Hulme, concentrated effort limits the subject. This is an important point because Hulme is not arguing that we are naturally disposed to anti-romantic, limiting tendencies. He argues instead that we must be more disciplined against what is a natural impulse for infinitude. In other words, he contends that romantics had insufficient means or methods for counteracting expansive desire. Modernism, from this perspective, is the imposition of a new discipline.

H.D.'s "Oread" provides a possible reorganization of the desire for infinitude by imagining a self-canceling union with nature:

Whirl up, sea—

whirl your pointed pines,

splash your great pines

on our rocks,

hurl your green over us,

cover us with your pools of fir. (1-6)

The poem is striking in many ways and is justly famous for its concentrated and evocative power. But critics often respond to it in purely formal ways, using it to exemplify Imagist techniques. “Oread” provides an intriguing and complex notion of epistemology by mixing two natural objects so completely as to merge them in human perception and in this fusion creates a less familiar meaning: the wood nymph, or Oread, is swept up and merged with the oceanic forest. The ocean threatens to dissolve the speaker, to cover and obscure her. However, the dissolution does not take place within the poem. The covering, dissolving, or merging has not yet occurred. Much like Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” the poem reads like a prayer and for the same reason reveals something about the desire underlying and informing the poem. Rather than wishing to be carried along on the wind, and thereby take on some of the power of nature, H.D.’s speaker wishes to be covered or perhaps dissolved by the oceanic forces of the world. Hulme points out that “the romantic attitude seems to crystallise in verse round metaphors of flight” (120), and Shelley’s speaker is indeed held aloft by this notion of flight. H.D., however, describes a dream of burial or dissolution. Again driven by verbs deployed in short imperative clauses, the poem demands action and imagines a coastline that brings together sea, forest, and rocks. But this is a grinding boundary, making

possible the disintegration that the speaker desires. The poem is not simply the passive presentation of nature's destruction, as in "Evening," "Night," and "Storm." It is, rather, a complex interplay of the subject, the powerfully destructive natural world, and the subject's desire for dissolution. The speaker wishes to be covered, to enter the oceanic forest, to become undifferentiated. We have returned to the romanticism of Shelley's west wind, but what distinguishes the two poems is the nature of the subject's infinitude. Shelley's speaker would be infinitely realized, while H.D.'s subject would be infinitely dispersed; the one is infinitely alive, while the other is infinitely dead.

H.D. creates an intense paradox in this poem, however; it is a poem about death that is ardently alive. "Oread" is a stunning poem for the clarity of the speaker's desire to give up desire. The poem points beyond the negative, beyond the fact of dissolution. Though any positive content is missing, the breathless passion of the invocation prompts us to agree with Jacob Korg that "[n]early every line of Hilda Doolittle's poetry seems to be spoken in reverential tones as part of a pagan rite" (135). There is a hint of union within the dissolution. In her later poetry, by contrast, H.D. insists on the subject's finite hardness, its inevitable persistence in the face of destruction rather than its dissolution into the infinitude of death.

H.D. announces the development of this concept of finitude in 1919 in her "Notes on Thought and Vision": "Three states or manifestations of life: body, mind, over-mind. Aim of men and women of highest development is equilibrium, balance, growth of the three at once" (17). With this statement, H.D. reveals a concern with the body and growth. While destruction will continue to play an important role in her poetic practice, it is subsumed in her theorizing by the overriding concept of growth. Whereas the early

poems portray disembodied desire, her later works develop a concern for the body. What marks H.D.'s unique concept of the body, however, is its potential connectivity to the objects of the world. It pulls mind, world, and desire together. Her metaphor for this is the jellyfish, with its long tentacles that join the body to the world. Here she posits a "love-region" of the body: "The love-region is excited by the appearance or beauty of the loved one, its energy not dissipated in physical relation, takes on its character of mind, becomes this womb-brain or love-brain that I have visualised as a jelly-fish *in* the body" (22). From this perspective, thought does not begin in the mind. Instead, thought is produced by the "love-region" of the body when it interacts with an object in the outside world. The mind is dependent upon excitations from without, and these excitations are specifically sensual.

But H.D. openly struggles with the jellyfish metaphor. Later she posits that "the body, I suppose, like a lump of coal, fulfills its highest function when it is being consumed" (47). So, although the body gives rise to thought and vision, it does so as part of a transformation. From H.D.'s perspective, the body does not communicate these excitations; instead, it gives itself up to them, transforming substance to energy. This creative transformation is "the process whereby the heat of the physical body is transmuted to this other, this different form, concentrated, ethereal, which we refer to in common speech as spirit" (48). In this sense, creativity is not an intellectual pursuit as much as it is a conversion of the body's energy to a vitality that H.D. describes as spiritual. And in the same sense, subjectivity is not defined by a soft, amorphous body but by the energy it creates through transformation. She describes it as a form of concentration:

> I imagine it has often been said that the body is like an oyster and the soul or spirit, a pearl. But today I saw for myself that the jelly-fish over my head had become concentrated. I saw that the state of mind I had before symbolised as a jelly-fish was just as well symbolised differently. That is, all the spiritual energy seemed concentrated in the middle of my forehead, inside my skull, and it was small and giving out a very soft light, but not scattered light, light concentrated in itself as the light of a pearl would be. (51)

In substituting metaphors, H.D. exchanges expansion for contraction. She sees the essential part of the self as intensely concentrated, a tight and circumscribed unity from which its power emerges. She places this finite and limited pearl within the skull, itself a hard exterior that anticipates her structural concept of subjectivity in the *Trilogy* poems.

Before discussing exteriors and subjectivity in *Trilogy*, however, it is worth gaining from "Notes on Thought and Vision" a sense of the dynamism that H.D. associates with self-conception. Structure without dynamism provides only a one-sided perspective of the human condition. For H.D. the contraction and inwardness that mark subjectivity do not necessarily isolate the self from the outside world. Rather, an intense and minute contemplation of objects can lead to a special kind of self-completion. She tells the story of Lo-fu, a poet who meditates upon a fruit tree. He sees it first as a whole object, a complete and distinct thing. As he examines it closer, focusing on a leaf, he begins to recognize in it the wider world: "And when he knew the skeleton of that leaf, the rivers, as it were, furrowing that continent, his mind was content. But it had only begun its search. Between each river there lay a fair green field—many, many little fields each with an individuality, each with some definite feature setting it apart from every

other little plot" (44). The skeleton of the leaf is analogous to the rivers running over the earth and the small patches of green represent the fields. The features of the physical world are, for H.D., replicated in one of nature's smallest accomplishments, the leaf. In one sense, this shift between orders of magnitude signals a union of the natural world; it smooths over a potential unlikeness, small- versus large-scale, by providing a conceptual unity. The complexity of the world is thus diminished; the rough edges of difference become aligned, and the tension of dissonance abates in meditative comprehension.

Along with this type of realization, however, comes the idea of divergence or separation that shapes H.D.'s concept of the self. She continues the story of Lo-fu: "Then he went inside and in his little cool room out of the sun he closed his eyes. He saw that branch but more clearly, more vividly than ever. That branch was his mistress now, his love" (44). For H.D., the poet paradoxically becomes closer to and more invested in the world by removing himself from it. He goes inside, thereby creating a boundary, a line that demarcates inside and outside. This self, this "inside," is finite in a way that the romantic subject is not, for it exists as a contraction, separation, and isolation rather than merging with the objects it encounters. Nature still provides the impetus for spiritual growth and self-understanding, but, in H.D.'s narrative, sensual perception, such as the sublimity so frequently described in romantic poetry, is secondary to the poet's mental reflection apart from physical stimulus. This separation, and the boundary it establishes, defines a discrete self that engages in a distinct manner of intercourse with the world. Passions are separated from their objects. The subject is denied material access: "Here, in his little room, the world had ceased to exist" (44-45). Interaction with the world, then, is no longer tactile or sensual but conceptual. Desire maintains boundaries rather than

merging subjects with objects. Like Pound in his early imagist poems, H.D. redirects desire from the world to the self. Also like Pound, she shifts to metaphors of birth and self-definition rather than romanticized mergings with nature or the infinitude elicited by natural sublimity. Modernists consistently forge the self in terms of boundaries rather than mergings, and the world must be in some sense denied in order to make this happen. For H.D., the self is a construct that emerges from its structural divergence from the world.

H.D., who takes such care to describe the objects and processes of nature, in fact uses these descriptions to circumscribe the self. She completes the story of Lo-fu by abolishing the leaf as leaf and constructing a distinct and complete self divorced from the world:

> To him that apple branch, *outside in the orchard*, existed as an approach to something else. As the body of a man's mistress might be said to exist as the means of approach to something else, that is as a means or instrument of feeling or happiness, so the branch in the orchard existed to Lo-fu as the means of attaining happiness, as a means of completing himself, as a means of approach to ecstasy. (45 emphasis added)

An object comes under intense scrutiny, and the poet's mind is moved by it toward a greater understanding but only by retreating from the sensual world and entering the sensuality created in the mind. This is a desire for unity rather than object-desire in the traditional sense, unless the object is defined as the self, a finite unity marked by the possibility of ecstasy within its own concentrated field, a hermetic isolation that eludes

the physical world. “Notes on Thought and Vision” imagines that self-creation admits ecstasies emerging from the mind rather than through physical contact with the world.

That the world might be sensually denied in order to achieve a self of concentrated unity, however, underlies H.D.’s theoretical exploration of subjectivity and the creative act. The challenge in her *Trilogy* poems is to consider the notion of finitude and unity against the backdrop of a historical situation that does not admit such ideal conceptions. In *Trilogy*, written in response to the bombing of London during the Second World War, H.D. contemplates the construction and maintenance of this finite self in the face of physical dangers that threaten its sanctity. The world is no longer Lo-fu’s apple blossom but rather a rubble of destroyed objects. The poems utilize images of reduction and persistence to construct a unified and finite self. The rigid body survives in a demolished world. She finds that the skeleton, the rigid center of a human body, the symbol of death and persistence, gives rise to greater intensities of spiritual feeling than any other. From the destruction of London during the Blitz in *The Walls Do Not Fall* to the consecration of Christ’s birth at the close of *The Flowering of the Rod*, H.D’s *Trilogy* follows the transformation of desire from the reality of destruction to the possibility of spiritual rebirth.

H.D. opens *The Walls Do Not Fall* by comparing Karnak, the ancient Egyptian temple complex, with London during the Second World War. Each place has been ravaged, one by time and the other by war:

> there, as here, ruin opens
>
> the tomb, the temple; enter,

there as here, there are no doors:

the shrine lies open to the sky,

the rain falls, here, there

sand drifts; eternity endures. (I.1.10-16)

H.D. calls attention to the validity of her poetic superimposition of Karnak and London. She equates "here" and "there" so forcefully, in fact, that it disrupts (by over-emphasis) the normal working of metaphorical language. Rather than appreciating the poet's comparison of two objects or the surprising commonalities of two sets of particulars, the subject of the comparison becomes comparability itself. The devastated buildings in both Karnak and London exemplify the principle that destruction comes to all things. The comparison urges one to consider the nature of destruction, not as the ruin of particular places but as a continuous and irresistible force. The intensity of H.D.'s act of comparison distances the subject from the natural world in a way similar to Lo-fu's retreat indoors. The contemplative poet cordons off the external and considers how the self might be conceived or completed distinct from such a world.

The first realization about the nature of the self in a world of destruction is that the self is paradoxically resilient and open. Buildings are destroyed but never fully decimated. The walls do not fall, though roofs and doors lie in rubble. This means that the act of destruction is more a transformation than an erasure. H.D.'s project in many ways is to explore the possibilities of this transformation. Destruction changes the possible manifestations and actions of the self. She suggests that the most significant of these new attributes is openness: "ruin *opens* / the tomb" and "the shrine lies *open*." But

it is important to note that this is not mere openness to the elements; it is not an invitation to greater commerce with the physical world. It is rather the perceptiveness to a spiritual force that transcends the mundane:

> ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof
> leaves the sealed room
> open to the air,
>
> so, through our desolation,
> thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us
> through gloom:
>
> unaware, Spirit announces the Presence (I.1.16-22)

The devastation, the fallen roofs and unhinged doors, make possible a subsequent inspiration and bring us closer to "Spirit." These opening stanzas are filled with assonance (such as those in "ruin," "roof," "room," "through," and "gloom") rather than the hard consonants one might expect in a destruction narrative. Instead of the harsh stops of guttural k's or g's, the flowing vowel sounds convey space, continuity, and motion, especially as they are accompanied by so many words that end in consonants like m and n that linger rather than end abruptly. In the face of destruction, H.D. insists on movement and growth.

Through her visual imagery and sound effects, H.D. suggests a two-fold spatial character to the subject. First, the subject is transformed rather than destroyed by the violence of World War Two. Though reduced in some ways, the subject retains a hard

and essential core. Second, this transformation opens up a vertical direction in which the self moves toward spiritual fulfillment. In the first, the essential core of the body is akin to the concentration of the pearl in “Notes on Thought and Vision.” The body is reduced to the structural “walls” that uphold it:

> the bone-frame was made for
> no such shock knit within terror,
> yet the skeleton stood up to it:
>
> the flesh? it was melted away,
> the heart burnt out, dead ember,
> tendons, muscles shattered, outer husk dismembered,
>
> yet the frame held:
> we passed the flame: we wonder
> what saved us? what for? (I.1.43-51)

The violence of war metaphorically melts away the flesh, but the skeletal frame remains. Persistence exists alongside the destruction. Like the temples at Karnak and the London buildings torn down by bombs, the body is, for H.D., a structure that signifies persistence and openness, but she celebrates the rigid skeleton rather than the soft and fleshy body. The heart is like the flesh; both are soft and susceptible to the destructive heat of the world. In this environment the heart is an “ember,” which H.D. then incorporates into the word “dismemberment.” The heart is paradoxically implicated in its own discorporation. H.D. concentrates the notion of finitude down to the “bone-frame.” The rhythmic phrase

“téndons, múscles, sháttered” chisels away the exterior, leaving the skeleton. But for H.D. the skeleton signals the persistence of the self and the source of renewal and growth. Though merely bones, we are nevertheless “saved” as such. She asks “what saved us?” and the answer relies on a rigid, internal, and finite self.

In section two, H.D. points out that “Good was smug and fat” (I.2.4) while “Evil was active in the land” (I.2.1), suggesting that the “good” is in need of a destructive renewal. H.D. pursues a similar point in *Tribute to Freud*, which she composed contemporaneously with the *Trilogy* poems. Here, the destroyed body suggests the process of getting underneath the ego to the unconscious within. The process of psychoanalysis must first shatter the self: “[The patient] must clear away his own rubbish, before his particular stream, his personal life, could run clear of obstruction into the great river of humanity, hence to the sea of super-human perfection, the ‘Absolute,’ as Socrates or Plato called it” (*Tribute* 84). In her descriptions of destruction and her understanding of the psychoanalytic process, H.D. imagines breaking down and clearing away an inessential exterior. From this perspective, the clearing away of the self is a form of revelation, allowing one to become open to the “Absolute.” The metaphors of psychoanalysis, such as the conscious and the unconscious that underlies it (or manifest content and the latent content that underlies it), are presented here in terms of the body: the flesh, heart, and muscles cover the “bone-frame” underlying it. As in her earlier poetry, H.D. insists on the inevitability of destruction, but she also recognizes that one must desire this destruction as a way of uncovering the self.

H.D. insists, however, that desire for destruction alone does not make spiritual development possible. Instead, one must recognize what outlasts such a destruction of the

self. She works to obliterate the inessential and recover the potential within that which remains. In doing so, she repeatedly employs a hard-soft binary, valuing the hard as opposed to the soft. In the first section, for example, she describes a wall relief found at the temple site:

> still the Luxor bee, chick and hare
> pursue unalterable purpose
>
> in green, rose-red, lapis;
> they continue to prophesy
> from the stone papyrus (I.1.5-9)

Because it has been carved into the stone, the wall relief lasts through the centuries. In a time of destruction, H.D. values the ability of this artwork to endure. The individual bee, chick, and hare have passed away, but the stone retains their unalterable essence. The hard and unchanging are more lasting and meaningful than the soft and mutable. The artistic endeavor is ultimately tied to this chiseling search for essentials and is, at the same time, an aspect of the essential itself. Despite the extreme distance in time between the modern visitor to Karnak and the faded Egyptian civilization that constructed the shrine, striving is understandable across time. Art is capable of portraying the truths of experience, which are true precisely because they persist through time. The striving of the animals and their unalterable purpose are captured by the striving of artists to represent them, and this creative urge energizes us even in the face of destruction and is related to the inspiration offered from above.

It is also noteworthy that H.D. is inspired by Egyptian art, which is known for its hard and abstract appearance. H.D.'s valuation of the hard over the soft recalls Hulme's insistence that the primary features of modern art must be hardness, sharpness, and angularity. Hulme's observations are not meant to chart the developments of art history but rather to understand within artistic production one's manner of relating to the world. Hulme argues that the general attitude underlying culture and art since the Renaissance had been marked by aesthetic empathy, naturalism, and organicism until the early twentieth century, when it tended toward abstraction, geometric shapes, and hardness. Drawing upon the work of Wilhelm Worringer, Hulme explains that the inclination toward abstraction and hard geometrical shapes, such as might be seen in H.D.'s skeleton, arises from the artist's unsettled and uncertain relationship with the world: "In art this state of mind results in a desire to create a certain abstract geometrical shape, which, being durable and permanent shall be a refuge from the flux and impermanence of outside nature" ("Modern Art" 86). The abstract object does not imitate the external object; rather, it has been set in relief, crystallized, put in stasis. Worringer describes the process as "taking the individual thing of the external world out of its arbitrariness and seeming fortuitousness, of eternalising it by approximation to abstract forms and, in this manner, of finding a point of tranquillity and a refuge from appearances" (16). In both of these explanations, the artist's preference for different forms is related not to the imitation of nature but to the difficult experience of being in the flux and uncertainty of the world.

Hulme's adoption of this idea acknowledges that the twentieth century was a time of such uncertainty and anxiety and suggests that its general attitude therefore turns to abstract art. That is, he suggests that modern artists seek satisfaction in abstraction due to

an apprehensive relation with the world. Egyptian art, which H.D. sees on the walls of the Karnak temple, represents this abstract perspective. For H.D., the wall relief symbolizes, in its hardness and abstractness, the possibility of enduring in a disintegrating world. The possibility proceeds along two axes: first, H.D. turns this perspective inward, contemplating a new conception of the self, its structure hard and abstract rather than soft and organic; second, H.D. posits that the artistic endeavor itself emerges from this desire for abstraction.

H.D.'s notion of the self centers on the creation of one's hard exterior and the discovery of one's unalterable purpose. In section four, H.D. utilizes a sea-shell metaphor to describe this self-creation:

> There is a spell, for instance,
> in every sea-shell:
>
> continuous, the sea-thrust
> is powerless against coral,
>
> bone, stone, marble
> hewn from within by that craftsman,
>
> the shell-fish. (I.4.1-7)

In order to survive against the eroding waves, one must have a strong exterior. The necessary hardness is reinforced by the interior rhyme "bone, stone," with its strong, one-syllable repeated vowel, and even in the consonance of "coral" and "marble." The self

must close and present a hard exterior if it is to survive the “invasion of the limitless, / ocean-weight” (I.4.25-26). The self is defined by its limits. But H.D.’s ontological vision is not entirely physical. She ends this section, which urges us to “be firm” (I.4.38) and “be indigestible” (I.4.42), with a move beyond the material self: “living within, / you beget, self-out-of-self, // selfless, / that pearl-of-great-price” (I.4.43-46). If one is reduced to the physical essentials, the spiritual realm, that which exceeds the self, is suddenly available. For H.D., creation and the finite self are intimately related.

Starting in section six, H.D. shifts to a worm/butterfly metaphor in order to represent this limited self as a means to achieve life, growth, and transformation. Section six is, in a sense, an adventure narrative in which the worm, the figure of nascent subjectivity, narrowly escapes the physical dangers of the world: “persistence: I escaped, spider-snare, / bird-claw, scavenger bird-beak” (I.6.3-4). Nature does not promote growth but is that from which one must seek protection. H.D. intensifies her presentation of these dangers with a string of compound words made of harsh consecutive stresses to describe nature: “grass-blade,” “storm-wind,” “rose-thorn,” and “rain-swept” join “bird-claw” and “bird-beak” to suggest the jagged processes of nature. Against these dangers, H.D. offers the cocoon as the image of the contrast between inside and outside; in the cocoon, the self is separated from nature: “for I know how the Lord God / is about to manifest, when I, // the industrious worm, / spin my own shroud” (I.6.33-36). The shroud represents spatial distance and protection from the world, encasing the worm in a hard exterior. Whereas the romantic poets imagine a union of the self within the processes of nature, H.D. conceives of the self as arising from the resistance to nature.

Unlike H.D.'s imagist poems of dissolution in nature, *Trilogy* cocoons the self away from nature. She extends the worm/butterfly metaphor through the next several sections, and in these she articulates her vision of this transformation. The image gets part of its power, paradoxically, from the fact that the cocoon is itself a natural process. The transformation that H.D. imagines and toward which she works in *Trilogy* ultimately finds some authority in the natural world. But her method also draws upon the supernatural. Section seven compares the horns of gods and goddesses to the antennae of butterflies and the crest of the cobra:

> Gods, goddesses
> wear the winged head-dress
>
> of horns, as the butterfly
> antennae,
>
> or the erect king-cobra crest
> to show how the worm turns. (I.7.1-6)

This comparison overlays the personal transformation with a religious or spiritual meaning. Gods and goddesses exceed human capabilities. Through this comparison, the butterfly seems similarly endowed with supernatural powers. The body of the worm was too earth-bound to achieve the power or wisdom of the gods. The butterfly is more able to assume such power, but H.D. suggests that it is through their antennae rather than their wings that butterflies become remarkable. This transformation is not inevitable, however; H.D. distinguishes between "those who have done their worm-cycle" (I.8.23) and those

who have not and cannot understand the insights gained by such a transformation. Poets, the "bearers of the secret wisdom" (I.8.9), go through this metamorphosis. Poets are the elect, but those who remain unmetamorphosized are not able to value the wisdom of poets and the importance of their role in a time of war:

> So we reveal our status
> with twin-horns, disk, erect serpent,
>
> though these or the double-plume or lotus
> are, you now tell us, trivial
>
> intellectual adornment;
> poets are useless (I.8.1-6)

The poet, as a worm-transformed-to-butterfly, is receptive to a higher and more ancient awareness through the "adornment" of its antennae.

H.D. characterizes this awareness and wisdom in various ways, but in these early sections it primarily takes the form of the word. For H.D., the word acts as a vehicle for thoughts to enter the world of objects. She rejects the idea that words are non-utilitarian and argues that we must understand words in order to see what they conceal (I.8.16-18). Words have a revelatory power, and they endure. Repeating her interest in what outlasts destruction, she points out that "the stylus, / the palette, the pen, the quill endure" (I.9.2-3). Alongside the structure of the lasting self, exemplified by hard exteriors, H.D. suggests that words are a crucial source of transformative power. She lists the items and instruments of writing (books, folio, manuscript, parchment) and investigates the

underlying word at the heart of writing. The most important aspect of the word is that it is generative. The word is prior to the objects and actions it makes possible: *"in the beginning / was the Word"* (I.10.15-16). For H.D., words bring forth things:

> Without thought, invention,
> you would not have been, O Sword,
>
> without idea and the Word's mediation,
> you would have remained
>
> unmanifest in the dim dimension
> where thought dwells,
>
> and beyond thought and idea,
> their begetter,
>
> Dream,
> Vision. (I.11.1-10)

For H.D., words mediate thought and its material inventions. She addresses the sword that symbolizes the violence of war and insists that the pen is mightier than the sword, primarily because the sword relies on the constructive power of words. But H.D. moves beyond the cliché of pen and sword by positing an even earlier impetus to human action: dream and vision. Each of these progressions, from sword to word to dream, moves farther from the realm of objects and toward psychological meaning. Concepts are the

root of all of human endeavor, and they come from the realm of dream. The power of dream exceeds the mundane world, which is only dream's manifestation. The challenge H.D. confronts in *The Walls Do Not Fall* is the violence and destruction of war, symbolized by the Sword she addresses here. Her discursus on vision in these lines reveals the manifestation of violence as a natural outcome of her dynamic ontological framework. That is, the structure of her argument does not undercut violence so much as trace it back to the human dream; the human impulse seems, therefore, a violent vision. The Sword enacts a prior dream of violence. In fact, the "word" that mediates the dream is contained in the word "Sword."

H.D.'s challenge, then, is to imagine how words might purify dream and vision. Words take on three characteristics in H.D.'s conception. First, she associates words with the gods, who have a special valuation in her work:

> for gods have been smashed before
>
> and idols and their speech is stored
> in man's very speech,
>
> in the trivial or
> the real dream [. . .] (I.8.24-28)

This suggests that language is wrapped up in the secret of the gods, that it has spiritual powers beyond human measure. Speech of the gods has been broken and spread into human speech. Second, words are "magic, indelibly stamped / on the atmosphere somewhere, // forever (I.10.9-11). The words written by the poet transcend the

degradations of time: “we take them with us // beyond death” (I.10.4-5). Words, though they may manifest as the Sword, paradoxically outlast the Sword because they are endlessly generative, marked by recurrence and immortality. Finally, the words speak louder than destruction: “though there was whirr and roar in the high air / there was a Voice louder” (I.12.13-14). The voice, the possibility of speaking, exceeds the power of violence. Language, as the power to create anew, transcends any particular instantiation. In all these examples, H.D. substitutes the immaterial, or spiritual, for the objective fact, as well as substituting the creative for the created.

Through these early sections, H.D. has carefully developed two positive and transformative ideas, exemplified by the shrouded worm and the creative word. But she points out that the shrouded subject needs to find a way to complete the transformation or it risks stasis. The world threatens to intrude on and disrupt the potential remaking. H.D. suggests that moments of disunity may allow us to move outside ourselves through the world:

> Yet we, the latter-day twice-born,
> have our bad moments when
>
> dragging the forlorn
> husk of self after us,
>
> we are forced to confess to
> malaise and embarrassment;

we pull at this dead shell,

struggle but we must wait

till the new Sun dries off

the old-body humours;

awkwardly, we drag this stale

old will, old volition, old habit

about with us (I.14.1-13).

The husk of self is empty of the dynamism of contemplation or the creative language of the gods. The body is too much an object because it is without the creative will. Its sluggish materiality and tension against itself suggest it is no longer the concentration of self but rather a division of self. It becomes that against which one acts. It is an old self, trudging along with its ossified will, volition, and habit.

In this sense, H.D. raises the problem of a concentrated subject that loses its ability to transcend its material self. In the face of this problem, she develops a rite that enacts creative and spiritual power. The shrouded subject is not just meant to be protected from the world; it is meant to transcend it. More important than the concentrated subject is the elevating, spiritual force at work in the world. H.D. introduces this force in a number of guises, drawing upon her occult erudition, but the primary fact of this force is that *it appears*: “Ra, Osiris, *Amen* appeared / in a spacious, bare meeting-house” (I.16.1-2). The problems of the separated husk of self described in sections 14 and 15 receive a

sudden answer in the arrival of Amen, indicating the desire to worship and to be reborn in the act of worshipping:

> for we must go forward,
>
> we are at the cross-roads,
> the tide is turning;
>
> it uncovers pebbles and shells,
> beautiful yet static, empty
>
> old thought, old convention (I.17.2-7)

H.D. contrasts forward movement with the stasis of the pebbles and shells at the crossroads. These discrete objects are beautiful, but they lack the dynamism she values. They are symbols of selves that must be left behind. Again, the closing consonance in "pebbles" and "shells" suggest that these static objects are closed to spiritual possibilities. Even "beautiful" follows the form of the closing "l" sound; beauty is insufficient to achieve the type of transformation toward which H.D. drives. These shells, if they remain empty, become old. This passage also invokes the clichés "at the cross-roads" and "the tide is turning," phrases that suggest an important moment of decision, a time when things might change direction, but ironically they are old and hackneyed phrases. H.D. transforms the clichés by melding them together, by bringing the worshipper to the shore, where the road meets the tide. At this juncture, the exhausted selves can be regenerated with the "new" fire and the "new" sun:

let us go down to the sea,

gather dry sea-weed,
heap drift-wood,

let us light a new fire
and in the fragrance

of burnt salt and sea-incense
chant new paeans to the new Sun

of regeneration;
we have always worshipped Him,

we have always said,
forever and ever, Amen. (I.17.2-18)

This ceremony brings together all of the elements: earth, sea, fire, and the air into which all things burn. It is a rite of transformation in which material is converted to energy and rises to the sky, creating "fragrance" and "incense." The sibilance of these two words evokes the hissing sound that accompanies fire. Fire, fragrance, and scent also suggest immateriality, signifying a move from the mundane to the spiritual. To these expanding and elevating scents, H.D. adds the "chant of paeans," a reference to the power of words that contain the remnants of the gods. These words travel to "the new Sun," which can

also be read as the *son* of God, referring to the "Christos-image" of section 18. Like the bombs of the earlier sections, the fire is not destructive but rather transformative; in this case it allows "regeneration" or renewal. The pebbles and shells, and indeed all the material objects of the world, burn up into the prayer that ends "Amen." On one level, H.D. employs a standard Christian idiom, "*forever and ever, Amen,*" in order to draw upon traditional sacred words that sanctify a Christian prayer. In this sense, "Amen" marks the closing of a spiritual communication. However, she also works against the Christian "amen" by overlaying it with the Egyptian god Amen, calling attention to an even more ancient tradition. What becomes eternal, then, is not a particular spiritual tradition but the desire for worship. She alludes to the Biblical phrase "let there be light," but she calls for us to "light a new fire," instead. H.D. resists a particular instance of religious observation and instead uncovers the eternal wish for transformation.

H.D. insists upon this human impulse for spiritual rebirth and its important relationship to how one conceives of the self. Before the activation of spiritual desire, the self is either old and decrepit or broken. The urge for completion occurs through openness to the possibility of transcendence. But again H.D. refuses the romantic image of the self awash in the natural world. Instead, she returns to the discrete image she suggested earlier of the unified self:

> Splintered the crystal of identity,
> shattered the vessel of integrity,
>
> till the Lord *Amen*,
> paw-er of the ground,

bearer of the curled horns,

bellows from the horizon:

here am I, Amen-Ra (I.21.1-7)

H.D. begins the first two lines by describing a state of disunity, but then she balances each of these lines with what the subject seeks: the splintered seeks identity; the shattered seeks integrity. This structure also has a temporal element. One is first splintered and shattered then unified in a future identity and integrity.

The catalyst for this transformation is the appearance of Amen-Ra: “here am I.” For H.D., however, the “here” is more important than the “I” that indicates Amen-Ra. She begins with the shattered self and then builds to a sudden appearance. “Paw-er,” “bearer,” and “bellows” begin with p’s or b’s that burst into sound. H.D. emphasizes action over being, or more appropriately, associates being with the necessity of action. Amen’s variability also serves to stress the action of being rather than the identity of being. Through these few sections, he is Ra, Osiris, Amen, the Sun, Christos, the Holy Ghost, and Aries the Ram. Rather than establishing a cohesive mythological figure that bestows selfhood upon the subject, H.D. deemphasizes the meaningfulness of Amen’s particulars and instead stresses the dynamic role he plays. He is something we say: “Amen.” He is the expression of our desire for him. In other words, he is the reflection of our wanting. “Amen” is a performative speech act, constituting subjectivity in the expression of desire.

Though Amen reflects our own wish for selfhood, H.D. shows how radical and, in fact, painful such a transformation proves to be. In sections 25 through 29 she introduces an image in which the heart is invaded by a seed:

> *Amen*,
> only just now,
>
> my heart-shell
> breaks open,
>
> though long ago, the phoenix,
> your *bennu* bird
>
> dropped a grain,
> as of scalding wax (I.25.1-8)

Earlier in the poem Amen had simply appeared and galvanized the speaker's spiritual desire. The word was used as a closing to the prayer. But here, H.D. begins with "Amen," now the first word in a transformative process. The eternal Amen assumes a temporal dimension, "only just now." H.D. signals the material process needed to access the ideal or absolute realm. First, "heart" is joined into a compound word "heart-shell," suggesting a hardness not typically associated with the soft musculature of the heart. Second, the phoenix contains both its beginning and its end, birth and death. Finally, the grain, which also brings life, is compared to "scalding wax" that burns rather than grows. The transformation is driven by the heart, but a heart that is concentrated and stark rather than

overtly emotional: “the ultimate grain, // lodged in the heart-core, / has taken its nourishment” (I.25.14-16). The spiritual desire that underlies Amen’s appearance at first suggests infinitude but not the expansive infinitude contemplated by the English romantics. Instead, H.D. describes a hard and hermetic emotional realm:

> O Heart, small urn
> of porphyry, agate or cornelian,
>
> how imperceptibly the grain fell
> between a heart-beat of pleasure
>
> and a heart-beat of pain;
> I do not know how it came
>
> nor now long it had lain there,
> nor can I say
>
> how it escaped tempest
> of passion and malice (I.28.1-10)

The heart is made of hard substances that survive the heat and pressure of emotion. The grain of spiritual desire falls between pleasure and pain and is therefore not an instantiation of either. It transcends the vagaries of emotional excess, escaping the dangers of “passion and malice.” It must be hard and essential like the walls that endure the bombs that fall from the sky. Both the seed and the heart are simultaneously enclosed

and explosive. For H.D. this is a new organ, unlike the soft romantic heart. It is, instead, a hard core breaking into spiritual growth. H.D. is careful to stress that spiritual transformation is an act of the heart rather than the mind. She conceives of two aspects of the mind, neither of which makes them capable of spiritual transformation. The more easily dispatched is the scientific mind, operating, as H.D. argues, by "sterile logic, trivial reason" (I.30.15). But she also counsels against a mind open to occult knowledge. The danger here is that ideas external to the mind invade and direct it. The mind reels in the face of this intrusion:

> [. . .] instrusion of strained
> inappropriate allusion,
>
> illusion of lost-gods, daemons;
> gambler with eternity,
>
> initiate of the secret wisdom,
> bride of the kingdom,
>
> *reversion of old values,*
> *oneness lost, madness.* (I.31.21-28)

H.D. warns against the sort of mind that seeks a "secret wisdom" from external sources, that patches together meanings through "inappropriate allusion." She distrusts earlier ways of attributing symbolic value to the universe. In subscribing to prior traditions, one

becomes the "bride of the kingdom," bound to a powerful but self-legitimating system. For H.D., this surely leads to "madness."

In contrast to pursuing these external means, H.D. proposes an individual path that navigates through the world:

> has its peculiar ego-centric
>
> personal approach
> to the external realities,
>
> and differs from any other
> in minute particulars,
>
> as the vein-paths on any leaf
> differ from those of every other leaf (I.38.19-26)

The spiritual path, according to H.D., must be travelled individually. Each person's journey is a "personal approach." She figures fulfillment as a unique and discrete object: "as every snow-flake / has its particular star, coral or prism shape" (I.38.27-28). The motion of the spiritual journey is, in some ways, circular, traveling about the body in an orbit that creates the discrete self, "ego-centric." The spiritually attuned mind creates itself. This is, for H.D. the activity of spiritual desire:

> Let us substitute
> enchantment for sentiment

re-dedicate our gifts

to spiritual realism,

scrape a palette,

point pen or brush,

prepare papyrus or parchment,

offer incense to Thoth (I.35.1-8)

The creative act of pen or brush carries out spiritual rather than earthly desire. H.D. insists that we recover enchantment, the recognition that objects are more than just their mundane manifestations.

Beyond a concern with surface reality, H.D. suggests a realm of the spiritually real. The poet is not merely in nature and does not grasp at the objects of the world but instead seeks to offer a vision attuned to pattern and form in the world. She describes this movement toward the ideal in her consideration of Sappho:

> Not roses, but an island, a country, a continent, a planet, a world of emotion, differing entirely from any present day imaginable world of emotion; a world of emotion that could only be imagined by the greatest of her own countrymen in the greatest period of that country's glamour, who themselves confessed her beyond their reach, beyond their song, not a woman, not a goddess even, but a song or the spirit of a song. (*The Wise Sappho* 58-59)

H.D. is not primarily interested in Sappho as a historical personage; she argues, instead, that Sappho is the abstract, underlying "spirit of a song." In the same way that Sappho

was "beyond the reach" of her contemporaries, she cannot be a material fact for twentieth century readers. Instead, H.D. pursues an imaginative path through associations derived from her contemplation of Sappho, leading to a formal, visionary construct. The poet gains access to another stage of meaning by tracing the embodied self back to a rigid, formal level. Sappho's poems offer warmth to help fire the process of transformation: "as if the brittle crescent-moon gave heat to us, or some splendid scintillating star turned warm suddenly in our hand like a jewel" (57-58). This is not an offer of wisdom but rather the heat needed to enter into the world of emotion that recognizes desire.

H.D. argues that such transformative possibility also lies within words. Words are, of course, references to things, but they are also masks for spiritual meanings that might be uncovered:

> [. . .] I feel
> the meaning that words hide;
>
> they are anagrams, cryptograms,
> little boxes, conditioned
>
> to hatch butterflies . . ." (I.39.5-9).

Words, which earlier had the power of gods, are now puzzles underneath which the self forms and is released, translated into butterflies. H.D.'s ellipsis suggests transformation, a new and undiscovered state, because it is followed by what might be called an empty line. The preceding 37 sections are in couplets, creating the expectation, almost a yearning, for a companion line that, in this case, does not follow. Instead, H.D. ends with

hatching butterflies, an ellipsis, and a white space that lead into the next section outlining her interpretive method. The path begins with her analysis of the name Osiris in section 40:

> For example:
>
> Osiris equates O-sir-is or O-Sire-is;
>
> Osiris,
>
> the star Sirius,
>
> relates resurrection myth
>
> and resurrection reality (I.40.1-6)

H.D. sees Osiris as a box, which she opens to find the words “sir” and “Sire.” Both of these words intimate authority. The fact that she finds them here authorizes her method. “Sir” relies on patriarchal social structure, and “Sire” implies political authority, but H.D. transfers these associations to “Sirius,” the star that exceeds such terrestrial powers. Susan Stanford Friedman explains that “[t]o find ‘Sirius’ hidden in the name of the god is to reveal not only his connection with yearly regeneration or resurrection, but also with the mother goddess Isis, his opposite” (225). H.D. explores these rich and layered mythological meanings at the same time she elicits morphological possibilities, allowing her to move from “myth” to a new form of “reality.” Her poetic project is to merge possible meanings, constructing new myths that, as the poem progresses, incorporate the subject, giving it a conceptual body symbolized by the benediction of divine birth.

H.D. brings *The Walls Do Not Fall* to a close by returning to images of destroyed structures, a landscape ruined by war. Unlike at the beginning, however, H.D. is now interested less in the walls that remain than the path that leads through such destruction: "our bodies blunder // through doors twisted on hinges" (I.43.8-9). This change in representation, from destroyed objects to the ways we might navigate around them, signals a change to come in the remaining two poems comprising *Trilogy*. In a sense, one might say that the butterfly has emerged and must interpret the world it finds, where "even the air // is independable, / thick where it should be fine // and tenuous / where wings separate and open" (I.43.16-20). H.D. now begins a narrative in which the subject is born with a new-found capacity for spiritual growth. Rather than a collection of objects, the world is now a "thin air" through which one moves only in order to approach transcendence (I.43.13). The remainder of *Trilogy* is a spiritual journey:

> we are voyagers, discoverers
> of the not-known
>
> the unrecorded;
> we have no map;
>
> possibly we will reach haven,
> heaven. (I.43.27-32)

H.D. leaves behind the material world and inhabits a negative space, the *not* known, the *un*-recorded. She inverts the romantic immersion in the natural world by positing a pure escape into a space of spiritual dynamics. Once again, she utilizes the Christian tradition

by referencing heaven, but it is a crucial aspect of her poetic vision that she must point to the imperfection of any received religious tradition. She writes "haven" before "heaven," not just to explain heaven as a haven but to generalize the spiritual impulse. Heaven is an instance of a haven, but it is only realized in religious tradition when it fulfills the meanings of "haven." H.D.'s poetry employs the religious symbol to understand desire and imagination.

H.D.'s imagery in *The Walls Do Not Fall* focuses on the hard, essential self that is exposed through destruction and the spiritual openness that results. The remainder of *Trilogy* seeks a religious imagery that transforms this openness into a redemptive vision. What distinguishes these latter two parts from the first is a new reluctance to include natural objects as the foundation for her poetic symbols. In fact, such natural objects were spare even in *The Walls Do Not Fall*, and it is perhaps a shortcoming of the analysis above to have addressed them so single-mindedly. While that first section includes London and the remains of Karnak, the shell-fish, the worm and butterfly, and the fire ritual along the strand as means to consider the self within the modern world, it is also densely layered with various occult references. The intensity of this occult side of H.D.'s writing increases with *Tribute to the Angels* and *The Flowering of the Rod*. H.D.'s occult poetics emerge from a history of poetry made up of diverse attempts to order the chaotic world. For H.D., classical and romantic modes did not recognize the subject's role in organizing desire.

The classical view might best be exemplified by Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, which conceives of a divinely organized universe:

> All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
>
> All Chance, Direction, which though canst not see;
>
> All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
>
> All partial Evil, universal Good:
>
> And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
>
> One truth is clear, 'Whatever IS, is RIGHT.' (I.289-94)

Though this section is often quoted in order to chastise Pope for holding conservative views, my purpose here is to point out how simple this view makes it to access meaning in the world. His only requirement is that one "Submit—In this, or any other sphere," in order to be "Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear" (I.285-86). To submit to a preexisting order is to guarantee oneself a place within that order. Romantic poets, by contrast, reject the passivity required of such a system. Instead, they grant subjects access to a realm of order based on the powers of nature. In a sense, the romantic subject is a replica of nature furnished with a soul that exercises the immensity of nature's capacity. An example could be drawn from any number of romantic poems, but Wordsworth's opening to *The Prelude* provides a compelling example of the subject as a reflection of nature's power:

> O there is blessing in this gentle breeze
>
> A visitant that, while he fans my cheek,
>
> Doth seem half-conscious of the joy he brings
>
> From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
>
> Whate'er his mission, the soft breeze can come
>
> To none more grateful than to me [. . .]

[. . .]

For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven

Was blowing on my body, felt, within,

A correspondent breeze, that gently moved

With quickening virtue [. . .] (1-6; 33-36)

The romantic subject in the natural world recognizes an affinity between himself and the dominion of nature. Wordsworth uses the image of the breeze upon the body to sketch the correspondences between nature and the human being. The human universe shares in the power and liberty of the natural universe. Wordsworth's romantic subject recognizes this analogous relationship and seeks transcendence by enacting the potency of nature in a human realm.

Despite this liberty, however, one might argue that romantic subjects are further away from attaining an ordered universe. Rather than simply submitting to the chaos that Pope assures us is only apparent, the romantic subject must seek out meaning and order in a natural world that was rapidly diminishing in the face of industrialization. There are gaps, as it were, in the transcendence offered by the romantic recourse to the natural world. Most famously, of course, Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" reveals the urban contrast to the natural world:

These beauteous forms,

Through a long distance, have not been to me

As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din

Of towns and cities, I have owed to them

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;

And passing even into my purer mind,

With tranquil restoration [. . .] (22-30)

The romantic subject is built upon the memory of a sublime natural world while surrounded by the actual "din / Of towns and cities." A full restoration of the subject only occurs when refreshed by increasingly occasional visits to nature. More often romantic odes turn to elegies as the wish to experience nature's power and order exceeds the actuality of that experience. And, again, the romantic poets often describe a wish to assume nature's power rather than a description of how such power is realized. Romantic poetry offers a model of transcendence, but the intensity of the poet's desire for it often overshadows the absence of its actuality.

Modernist poetry generally denies the subject these forms of order. Instead, it takes the subject out of both the chaotic-but-ordered world of Pope and the sublime natural world of Wordsworth. Instead of nature or the Christian God impressing the mind with its sources of power or order, modernists assign the power to create order to the human mind, and they investigate the forms this power takes when ordering the world. In H.D.'s work, the world itself is impoverished in a way that invalidates those earlier paradigms. The bombs demolish parts of London, making it not merely chaotic but irreversibly disordered. Nature itself has also been destroyed or is unrecoverable in H.D.'s *Trilogy*. In *Tribute to the Angels*, H.D. comes upon a half-destroyed tree, which symbolizes the possibility of renewal, but the tree is not able to sustain the hope she placed in it. Instead, she relies on the mysticism of angels to bear the weight of

symbolizing transformation and rebirth. In other words, the natural symbol does not suffice. The poet, and by extension the subject, is too far removed from the natural world for it to be a model of transcendence. Instead, modernists construct new meaning systems, often by organizing the detritus of prior meaning systems. This is especially true of H.D. Meaning is available in traditions of the past, but one cannot merely adopt a tradition wholesale. Instead, it must be remade. Tradition is a source of mystery and experience rather than a guide to all that's right and true. For H.D., religious tradition is not meant to be passively received but more appropriately conceived of as an intellectual and creative effort.

H.D.'s metaphor for this creative process is alchemy. She opens *Tribute to the Angels* by invoking Hermes Trismegistus, the "patron of alchemists" (II.1.2). He represents esoteric knowledge, of course, but he also acts as H.D.'s muse of transformation. Rather than calling upon him to transmit knowledge, H.D. asks him to "steal then, O orator, / plunder, O poet" (II.1.7-8) in an effort to

> melt down and integrate,
>
> re-invoke, re-create
> opal, onyx, obsidian,
>
> now scattered in the shards
> men tread upon (II.1.16-20)

H.D. describes two levels to the alchemical process. First, the joining of the actual material of the world that has been torn asunder by war. Even the remains of a destroyed

world might be brought together in a way that transcends its pieces. H.D. lists opal, onyx, and obsidian, hard materials created by heat, intensity, and pressure. Though the world is in shards, H.D. imagines its possible union. Hermes, her patron of alchemy, symbolizes the transformation from the shards of destruction to the unity of the precious stones. Second, H.D. also insists that Hermes represents the transformation of language. She picks up the alchemical metaphor in section eight when the crucible distills the essence of mar into the religious and generative figure of the Mother through the play of language:

> Now polish the crucible
> and in the bowl distill
>
> a word most bitter, *marah*,
> a word bitterer still, *mar*,
>
> sea, brine, breaker, seducer,
> giver of life, giver of tears;
>
> now polish the crucible
> and set the jet of flame
>
> under, till *marah-mar*
> are melted, fuse and join
>
> and change and alter,

mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,

Star of the Sea,

Mother. (II.8.1-14)

The alchemical process yields new knowledge by melting down language and finding a more essential substance. But language participates in this transformation. This section begins with bitterness and ends with the Mother as a symbol of fecundity and generation. Friedman comments that "[i]n the crucible of poetry, heated by the fire of war, H.D. distilled the words associated with sea water and bitterness to restore the origins of life, the Mother, to her pre-Judeo-Christian essence" (247). Language is melted, fused, joined, charged, and altered, a string of permutations that insists on a whole new valuation based on the origins of life from the ashes and bitterness of death. This process is the symbolic antithesis of the destruction that propels *The Walls Do Not Fall*. The earlier poem began with the sense of fragmentation characteristic of modernist texts, but H.D. strives to rebuild and recreate the world as whole and meaningful. The final move from Mary to Mother generalizes the historical and religious Mary to the ultimate creative capability of Mother.

Section nine distills this material one step further, concluding with a "jewel / in the heart of the bowl" (II.9.1-2), this new, unified, hard, discrete, and living object "with a pulse uncooled that beats yet" (II.13.5). The jewel is that concentrated symbol of the transformed subject, the pearl of H.D.'s poetic theory. The alchemy H.D. describes begins with language, moves to the holy and generative Mother, and ends as a jewel representing the subject as the process of transformation. It is important for H.D. that one

conceive of this jewel as a process rather than an object that ultimately might be apprehended. She gradually describes the jewel's ineffability, the difficulty of defining or describing its qualities, rather than the object itself. She suggests that "it lives, it breathes, / it gives off—fragrance" (II.13.7-8). Later she attempts to describe the process as music, but then clarifies "O, what I meant / by music when I said music, was— // music sets up ladders, / it makes us invisible" (II.22.17-20). The alchemical process simultaneously reduces and creates the self. But this is not something that language can explain. For H.D., the struggle is not to put the alchemical process back into language but simply to experience the process itself: "I do not want to name it, / I want to watch its faint // heart-beat, pulse-beat / as it quivers" (II.14.7-10). She works to translate the experience by imitating the heartbeat in the falling duple rhythms "héart-beat, púlse-beat," so noticeable after the rising iambics that precede them: "I dó not wánt to náme it, / I wánt to wátch its fáint." The jewel never becomes an object of desire in a traditional sense. It is valued instead because it symbolizes the process of transformation and includes the one who experiences it:

> I want to minimize thought,
>
> concentrate on it
> till I shrink,
>
> dematerialize
> and am drawn into it. (II.14.12-16)

The jewel represents integration into an Absolute after dematerializing the self. H.D. replaces object-desire with the experience of spiritual release. Rather than conceiving of a transcendence available to the romantic subject in sublime nature, H.D. sees the act of transformation in the occult process of alchemy.

Alongside the alchemical narrative runs an invocation of the angels that gives the poem its name. The first angel is Azrael, associated with death, which pervades the bombed-out landscape in the wake of the bombing of London. But H.D. is less interested in death than she is in the context within which death might have meaning. She elaborates this interest in a complex mythical structure:

> Raphael, Gabriel, Azrael,
> three of seven—what is War
>
> to Birth, to Change, to Death?
> yet he, red-fire is one of seven fires,
>
> judgement and will of God,
> God's very breath—Uriel. (II.5.11-16)

Birth, change, and death (represented by Raphael, Gabriel, and Azrael) only make sense for H.D. when tempered by the judgment of God, represented by Uriel. Uriel is the fire of God, the fire that carries out the alchemical process, the fire that creates and moves the dynamic subject. Speaking of the people of London, H.D. describes the fire that inhabits those who survive

> but with unbroken will,

with unbowed head, watched

and though unaware, worshipped

and knew not that they worshipped

and that they were

that which they worshipped,

had they known the fire

of strength, endurance, anger

in their hearts,

was part of that same fire

that in a candle on a candle-stick

or in a star,

is known as one of seven,

is named among the seven Angels,

Uriel. (II.6.14-28)

Through her elaborate mythology, H.D. conceives of subjectivity as equivalent to divinity itself. God's breath suggests of human strength but not because it has been given to us by

God. Instead, the subject passes through the fire of destruction and is part of the divine fire. Like the alchemical process, the fire of Uriel produces and refines what it touches rather than destroying it.

After Uriel comes Anneal, “one to contrast the other” (II.17.2). The two form a joint fire that represents spring, rebirth, and the potential for growth. H.D. symbolizes this new fire in the form of the half-burned, “charred tree before us” (II.19.12). Rather than an object from the natural world that inspires a sense of transcendence, as in romantic poetry, the tree is an emblematic object; the tree suffers the savage acts of humankind and paradoxically symbolizes human resilience. These fires reform the subject, who becomes, from this perspective, both the damage and the potential of human activity: “We are part of it; / we admit the transubstantiation” (II.23.1-2). Through this transubstantiation, H.D. achieves the union of nature and humankind in the symbol of the charred tree. The human and the divine fold together in death and life:

> it was a sign,
>
> it was *the Angel which redeemed me*,
> it was the Holy Ghost—
>
> a half-burnt-out apple-tree
> blossoming;
>
> this is the flowering of the rood,
> this is the flowering of the wood,

where Anneal, we pause to give

thanks that we rise again from death and live. (II.23.10-18)

Each subject sustains some damage and rises from that diminished state. The judgment of God destroys and redeems us at the same time. This section ends with a line repeated three times over the 43 sections: “we pause to give / thanks that we rise again from death and live.”[2] H.D. repeatedly joins transcendence to death this way, but she does so through a melodious, rhythmic line and the reassuring structure of a refrain. The subject, for H.D., is something always rising from the potential of death, a flowering against the necessity of destruction. The rood, the cross upon which Christ was crucified, gives rise to a new and meaningful doctrine by which to understand the world. The wood, the tree half-destroyed in war, gives rise to flowers. Both of these examples show the passing of an earlier mode of life, paralleling the butterfly metaphor she used earlier, so that a higher form can emerge.

H.D. conceives of ideal forms of human possibility that mirror George Santayana’s conception of the function of poetry. Santayana distinguishes between two basic desires attributed to humankind: one level for the base things that attend our lives in the world, the sensuous things that divert us from a more enlightened possibility; a second is for a greater outcome, which Santayana conceives of as excellence, an ideal, or a moral understanding. In “The Poetry of Barbarism,” he offers a moral perspective on the work of Walt Whitman and Robert Browning. The former poet is arrested at the level of the worldly and sensual, while the latter advances a meager step to the experience of subjective emotions. Santayana argues that the world, for Whitman, “has no inside; it is a

phantasmagoria of continuous visions, vivid, impressive, but monotonous and hard to distinguish in memory, like the waves of the sea or the decorations of some barbarous temple, sublime only by the infinite aggregation of parts" (180). There is no underlying ideal that structures this sensual material. By contrast, Browning crafts soliloquies from the perspective of poetic speakers "in the moment of intensest passion" (211), but the reader is left without an ideal to shape a moral vision. Santayana criticizes romanticism's conception of human nature as essentially good, along the same lines as Hulme later: "Here is the root of all romanticism: the man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then the possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress" (Hulme, "Romanticism" 116). Hulme and Santayana each demand that experience must be disciplined in order to clarify or elevate it above everyday sensual impressions, but Hulme's sense of discipline is based on the clear perception of real objects, while Santayana's involves an ideal extracted from the real. Santayana's sense of discipline provides insight into H.D.'s attempt to construct new spiritual symbols. Santayana defines aesthetic discipline as the search for an example of perfection:

> Discipline is indispensable to art. Work from which these qualities are absent must be barbaric; it can have no ideal form and must appeal to us only through the sensuousness and profusion of its materials. We are invited by it to lapse into a miscellaneous appreciativeness, into a subservience to every detached impression. And yet, if we would only reflect even on these disordered beauties, we should see that the principle by which they delight us is a principle by which an ideal, an image of perfection, is inevitably evoked. We can have no pleasure or pain, nor

any preference whatsoever, without implicitly setting up a standard of excellence, an ideal of what would satisfy us there. ("Barbarism" 209-10).

For Santayana, the artist's task is to raise moral consciousness above the merely sensuous, to organize the material of the world into a meaningful whole, to construct an ideal. Santayana's remark takes an important step beyond merely a call for ideals; he insists that this ideal is not imposed but is, rather, desired. Art, properly conceived, satisfies a higher desire, a craving for "new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature" ("Poetry and Religion" 270). One of the defining features of modernist poetry is the drive to create rather than merely reference moral visions. Santayana himself recognized this desire retroactively in the historical development of Christian dogma: "The idea of Christ himself had to be constructed by the imagination in response to moral demands [. . . .] The facts were nothing until they became symbols; and nothing could turn them into symbols except an eager imagination on the watch for all that might embody its dreams" ("Dogma" 92-93). Santayana argues that Christ and the crucifixion were meaningful only because they satisfied a deep moral need.

H.D. focuses this symbolic desire, finding in the symbol of the burned-out tree an ideal that parallels the crucifixion. Her allusion to the death of Christ establishes a standard of excellence that satisfies this higher desire, placing it in the context of a moral system. The survivors of war "ríse agáin from déath and líve," that rhythmic mantra that unites *Tribute to the Angels*. The task in reading the rest of the poem is to understand how her symbols create an ideal that satisfies the moral needs of the modernist subject. One of these symbols is the Lady who inhabits the rest of *Tribute to the Angels*. H.D. introduces her in an ambiguous territory between presence and absence:

> when the Lady knocked;
>
> I was talking casually
> with friends in the other room,
>
> when we saw the outer hall
> grow lighter—then we saw where the door was,
>
> there was no door
> (this was a dream, of course),
>
> and she was standing there,
> actually, at the turn of the stair. (II.25.6-14)

It is uncertain whether the Lady is there or not, and in this way H.D. is able to situate her in the same symbolic space as Christ in Santayana's essay. That is, she is the manifestation of the poet's "eager imagination" and structures H.D.'s notion of purity and perfection. This is not epistemological confusion as much as it is an attempt to seek out the level on which such a process works. This level is concisely enacted in the word "actually," to exist in act, as opposed to merely existing in a conceptual or abstract way. The Lady as spiritual symbol acts upon the poet. H.D. repeats the word two lines later, "she is actually standing there" (II.26.2), in order to emphasize this higher level of interaction.

The act that occurs in H.D.'s poem is a transformation of the subject in light of the transformation of the symbol. H.D. first describes the Lady as she is already known. She reminds us "We have seen her / the world over" (II.29.1-2). She describes the religious images of Mary throughout history, repeating the phrase "We have seen her" over and over. And yet, for H.D., this perpetuity of always-having-seen the Lady prevents us from seeing her "actually." After this extended litany of guises, she insists "none of these / suggest her as I saw her" (II.31.1-2). The Lady cannot be what we have seen of her in the other representations; she cannot be what one receives from a religious tradition; she must be conceived, recreated, rather than received. All these images go into the crucible, and the white heat of human experience transforms them.

H.D. selects one of the images of the Lady that emphasizes whiteness: "*Maria von dem Schnee*, / Our Lady of the Snow" (II.31.11-12). The Lady's whiteness symbolizes her ideal purity and perfection but also, for H.D., the overwhelming fact of unity and potential. Whiteness represents the blankness of the page, the fresh beginning upon which the writer or artist creates. H.D. presents this moral vision with the image of a book in which the new can be written:

> So she must have been pleased with us,
> who did not forgo our heritage
>
> at the grave-edge;
> she must have been pleased
>
> with the straggling company of the brush and quill

who did not deny their birthright;

she must have been pleased with us,

for she looked so kindly at us

under her drift of veils,

and she carried a book (II.35.1-10)

H.D. celebrates creativity, the effort of “brush and quill.” The “struggling company” of artists views the destroyed world yet sees the possibility of creation. H.D. further emphasizes the proximity of death and new life by rhyming “heritage” and “grave-edge”; at the edge of death, one assumes the powerful birthright of art as well as alchemical transformation.

The first important new creation to emerge is the transformed image of the Lady herself. Friedman argues that “[r]evisionist alchemy is necessary, indeed so central, to the poet’s quest because centuries of religious tradition have so systematically repressed or denigrated the female form” (253). H.D. reforms the image of woman found in the frozen paintings of the Virgin Mary and the damning story of Eve’s sin. Instead, she is the whiteness of all possibility:

She carries a book but it is not

the tome of ancient wisdom,

the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages

of the unwritten volume of the new. (II.38.9-12)

This metaphor of the blank pages requires the subject's activity to create meaning. Her use of occult material does not reveal a reliance on an ancient and mysterious wisdom but instead arises from the transformation of those materials into active and contemporary symbols. The Lady is not the gift of an ancient tradition but is the union of all possibility into a creative transformation. This is the subject's transformation, which H.D. explicitly references in her return to the butterfly image: "she is Psyche, the butterfly / out of the cocoon" (II.38.19-20).

H.D. closes *Tribute to the Angels* by joining together all of her metaphors, starting with the color white as the union of all colors:

> And the point in the spectrum
> where all lights become one,
>
> is white and white is not no-colour,
> as we were told as children,
>
> but all-colour;
> where the flames mingle
>
> and the wings meet, when we gain
> the arc of perfection,
>
> we are satisfied [. . .] (II.43.1-9)

H.D. succeeds in creating an ideal that satisfies a higher need, that fashions an iconography giving structure to our moral desire, that restores the flowering of life after the destruction of war, and that reclaims the image of woman from the reductive or debased depths of prior traditions.

If *The Walls Do Not Fall* describes the subject's hard, skeletal exterior and *Tribute to the Angels* recognizes the bombed-out tree as a symbol of life growing out of death, the third section, *The Flowering of the Rod*, considers that resurrection. Like the other poems, it grows out of H.D.'s reflection on the violence of modern war, but here she attempts to distance herself from that history:

> leave the smouldering cities below
> (we have done all we could),
>
> we have given until we have no more to give;
> alas, it was pity, rather than love, we gave;
>
> now having given all, let us leave all;
> above all, let us leave pity
>
> and mount higher
> to love—resurrection (III.1.23-30)

Some commentators respond to this section, and *Trilogy* more generally, in term of its immediate social and political contexts, reading *The Flowering of the Rod* as an effort to

distance the book from war and the city. Vincent Quinn, for example, criticizes H.D. for focusing on solitary spiritual enlightenment at the expense of a more communitarian impulse. He describes a social dynamic in which the poet turns away from the world: "Convinced of the omnipresence of a benevolent Spirit, she plans to turn her back on human affairs and to devote herself to achieving a transcendental union with God" (123-24). For Quinn, this turning toward religious or occult interests is ultimately barren, an abdication of one's moral obligation to reflect upon the repercussions of war. Carolyn Forché also allows a hint of her disapprobation to emerge through her commendation; she suggests that H.D. struggles "with the insurmountable difficulty of writing her way toward restoration while conceiving a poetic form that would somehow display the ruin" (264). Quinn and Forché wish for a poetics of witness that runs counter to H.D.'s vision of spiritual realism and redemption.

H.D. does not turn away from the war but rather insists that we "mount higher," rising above it. This spatial distinction is important because elevation here evokes growth or development rather than departure. The image suggests moving above or beyond the war, a development that occurs because of (rather than in spite of) the war. Rather than a denial or dismissal of war, H.D. insists on a complex dynamic between the subject and the social environment. Specifically, she describes the act of giving that occurs as she walks through London witnessing the destruction. This interaction between self and society finds the subject giving "until we have no more to give." The subject is depleted, reduced to the hard and resistant core portrayed in *The Walls Do Not Fall*. But when she sees the half bombed-out tree and recognizes it as the image of renewal in the city, she is finally able to approach resurrection.

H.D. stresses the letter “v,” which appears in all but one of these lines, in order to symbolize transformation, both by its shape and its historical signification. The words “leave,” “have,” “given,” “gave,” and “love” repeat and contrast each other, creating a number of provocative tensions. In particular, “give” and “gave” oppose each other, but they do so in a temporal rather than semantic way. “Give” comes first, followed by “gave.” The poem advances beyond, or after, the war. The letter “v” itself embodies transformation, a vertical movement between point and pair, between unity and dispersion. The singularity of the bottom rises to the growth and expansion of the top. The letter “v” in this context also suggests victory, as in VE day, the end of hostilities in Europe. Considering these spatial, temporal, and historical distinctions, *Trilogy* is less a war poem than a survivor’s poem, a poem about what follows, exceeds, or transcends war. In *Trilogy*, a dynamic transformation occurs, taking the subject through destruction, symbolic renewal, and into a future in which one is free to “mount higher.”

The space into which the subject rises, however, is particularly ambiguous. H.D. describes two possible outcomes, either a destination one can reach or an ever-receding, impossible goal. On one hand, the flight of the “first wild-goose” is a journey to a promised land, “to the Carolinas or to Florida” (III.3.19). On the other hand, it signals a hopeless attempt to return to an unreachable place:

> [. . .] like those migratory flocks
>
> who still (they say) hover
> over the lost island, Atlantis;

seeking what we once knew,

we know ultimately we will find

happiness; *to-day shalt thou be*

with me in Paradise (III.3.20-26)

Atlantis, the lost island, can never be regained and represents a mythical goal. H.D. portrays this search in terms of perpetually deferred desire, the impossibility of satisfaction. She initially values this tragic journey that has no end save drowning. From this perspective, the culmination of spiritual growth is the maintenance of a permanent distance between desire and its goal. H.D. describes this as a "desperate urge":

but who knows the desperate urge

of those others—actual or perhaps now

mythical birds—who seek but find no rest

till they drop from the highest point of the spiral

or fall from the innermost centre of the ever-narrowing circle?

for they remember, they remember, as they sway and hover,

what once was—they remember, they remember—

they will not swerve—they have known bliss,

the fruit that satisfies—they have come back—

what if they islands are lost? (III.5.12-21)

The birds remember a prior bliss and seek without fulfillment a resumption of that bliss. H.D. employs contrasting spatial metaphors to heighten the tension of impossibility. The birds drop from the "highest point" but also fall from their "innermost centre." One gets the sense that this journey, with its impossible destination, is the transcendence of the self, the paradoxical realization and shedding of the self. Despite the heroic effort, however, they cannot succeed. They fall from the sky before reaching their destination, and H.D. equates this to "certain ecstasy // for theirs is the hunger / for Paradise" (III.5.26-28). Ecstasy is not the achievement of an object of desire but is rather the ultimate deferral or impossibility of achieving an object of desire.

H.D. values this tragic journey, but she nonetheless counsels against it. Though she "would rather drown, remembering" (III.6.1), she reverses course, explaining that "resurrection is a bee-line, // straight to the horde and plunder, / the treasure, the store-room" (III.7.2-4). Resurrection and ecstasy are, in this sense, opposite outcomes. Resurrection is a step back into life after transformative experience while ecstasy is an unsatisfied hunger. She insists that "resurrection is remuneration" (III.7.6), a reward for coming back to life rather than surrendering to death, even as noble and heroic a death as seeking Paradise. Section 8 rejoices in the return to life, consisting largely of "I am" statements, starting with "I am so happy" (III.8.1). This is one of the most direct and untroubled lines in the poem, marked by a distinctive frankness about her rebirth:

No poetic phantasy

but a biological reality,

a fact: I am an entity

like bird, insect, plant

or sea-plant cell;

I live; I am alive;

take care, do not know me,

deny me, do not recognize me,

shun me; for this reality

is infectious—ecstasy (III.9.1-10)

H.D. revises her earlier definition of ecstasy. Rather than the high spiral to an unrecoverable bliss, ecstasy is now the simple act of living, now recast as resurrection, the return to life. It is biology, not phantasy. It goes right down to the cellular level, as in the sea-plant cell that concisely exemplifies the subject. She continues the biological metaphor by pointing out that "this reality" of pure life, is "infectious"; it can spread organically through the population. She eschews fantastic language and instead employs biological terms. The image of the cell reiterates H.D.'s focus on the discrete and limited subject, recalling Hulme's rejection of romanticism's expansive or infinite subject. Again, however, H.D. uses this finite subject in a constructive way: it is not enough to limit the subject; one must conceive of the spiritual growth resulting from such limits.

The purity of this image, shorn of “poetic phantasy,” allows for a new growth that may spread and institute a new “reality.”

As in *Tribute to the Angels*, this new reality constructs a new and positive image of women. The remainder of *The Flowering of the Rod*, from section 12 to 43, tells an extended narrative of Mary Magdalene and Kaspar, one of the three Magi drawn to Bethlehem to give gifts to the newborn Jesus. This narrative at first appears to disrupt the more emphatically lyrical elements of the rest of *Trilogy*, which moved freely between different symbolic foci. H.D. offers a consistent frame of reference in these thirty sections, all retelling a familiar New Testament story. On closer examination, however, this narrative is made of a complex layering of images as well as a challenging temporal tension that purifies the image of women and places value on the power to renew and anoint human life.

H.D. builds an extended narrative that it is iterative rather than linear in order to suggest the possibility of a spiritual awakening. She presents certain occurrences several times, emphasizing events such as Mary Magdalene’s fallen scarf by repeating them with important variations. The first time Mary’s scarf falls, Kaspar considers it unseemly:

> [. . .] he had known many women—
>
> it was her hair—un-maidenly—
>
> It was hardly decent of her to stand there,
>
> unveiled, in the house of a stranger. (III.15.15-18)

With this first unveiling, Kaspar perceives Mary’s impertinence and inappropriateness. He is outraged. H.D. conveys Kaspar’s shock and distaste with the word “un-maidenly.”

H.D.'s hyphen suggests that there is no word for unbecoming behavior in a woman; the "un-" must be affixed to it to make the inelegant word. But she questions the notion of what is unmaidenly by replaying the unveiling in such a way that Kaspar reorients his perspective.

> she was discretion itself
> in her dark robe and head-dress;
>
> Kaspar did not recognize her
> until her scarf slipped to the floor,
>
> and then, not only did he recognise Mary
> as they stars had told [. . .]
>
> [. . .]
>
> but when he saw the light on her hair
> like moonlight on a lost river,
>
> Kaspar
> remembered. (III.27.9-14; 17-20)

The unveiling becomes an opportunity to recognize reality, a chance to see beneath the obfuscations of cultural attitudes. Dropping the veil allows Kaspar to see the "light on her hair" and the "moonlight." In this new light, Kaspar is able to see the transformation of

Woman. H.D. reprises the biblical tale of Mary Magdalene as the woman purified of demons by Jesus: "*in her were forgiven* / *the sins of the seven* / *daemons cast out of her*" (III.28.3-5). Despite the many aspersions that history would later cast on the character of Mary Magdalene, such as that she was a prostitute, this reference to daemons is the only negative description in the text of the Bible. Whatever the nature of her sins, Mary Magdalene is, for H.D., a symbol of purity and redemption and, by extension, is a figure for divine revelation. The light in her hair is a circlet of jewels that transforms Kaspar:

> he saw as in a mirror, clearly, O very clearly,
> a circlet of square-cut stones on the head of a lady,
>
> and what he saw made his heart so glad
> that it was as if he suffered,
>
> his heart laboured so
> with his ecstasy. (III.28.34-39)

H.D employs the language of sexual desire to refer to Kaspar's spiritual vision. The lady is adorned with jewels that set off a physical reaction that paradoxically makes him "glad" and makes him "suffer." Ecstasy is new vision, like the infectious reality of section 9. H.D. suggests that Kaspar's vision of Mary Magdalene's crown offers a pure, reclaimed view of humankind. It was not beauty but "discovery that exalted him / for he knew the old tradition, the old, old legend" (III.29.3-4). H.D. insists that physical desire must be translated to spiritual desire, and beauty must yield to discovery. For H.D., the value of discovery is to understand "the whole scope and plan // of our and his

civilization on this, / his and our earth, before Adam" (III.31.22-24). In short, this vision would allow us to see and perhaps reclaim the world God intended. That H.D. characterizes this as "before Adam" suggests that men (and perhaps *patriarchy*, more systemically) perverted the original intent of creation. For H.D., one of the primary perversions was the blame heaped upon women through Eve and Lilith. The spiritual vision of *The Flowering of the Rod* purifies the image of woman by introducing Kaspar to an ancient pre-history:

> *Lilith born before Eve*
>
> *and one born before Lilith,*
>
> *and Eve; we three are forgiven,*
>
> *we are three of the seven*
>
> *daemons cast out of her*. (III.33.21-25)

The seven demons that Jesus purges from Mary Magdalene are the misbegotten female figures of Judeo-Christian tradition. For H.D., the true spirit of religion is freedom from cultural constructions that demonize one's gender. She emphasizes the importance of this purification of history by setting aside the couplet form used through most of the poem in favor of one italicized block of text suggesting a heightened, immediate revelation. H.D.'s also dislocates temporal flow; her retelling of the Magi's visit to the newborn Christ includes Mary Magdalene, who was the first to see Jesus after his resurrection. Here, she witnesses the birth as well as the rebirth. H.D. overlays the two events in order to stress the continuity of beginnings.

The final section of H.D.'s epic presents the birth of Jesus as a recurrence of his resurrection or rebirth and argues for possibility and potential in the smallest things.

But she spoke so he looked at her,

she was shy and simple and young;

she said, Sir, it is a most beautiful fragrance,

as of all flowering things together;

but Kaspar knew the seal of the jar was unbroken.

he did not know whether she knew

the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh

she held in her arms. (III.43.1-8)

After focusing on Mary Magdalene throughout the poem, H.D. introduces Mary, the mother of Jesus. She again employs a temporal reversal, replacing the later Mary at the poem's close with the earlier Mary. After the spiritual journey, H.D. ends with a "shy and simple and young" Mary, one who brings new life into the world. The bundle she holds is not Jesus, however, but rather a "bundle of myrrh." She holds a new power to anoint and consecrate, a fragrance of "all flowering things together." The image of the bundle of myrrh overlays the image of the newly born Jesus, who becomes, in concentrated form, all flowering things. The most powerful image, because it is the ultimate and unifying image, is myrrh, the condensed symbol of growth, synonymous with a human and divine child. The human subject is like this child: human and divine, discrete and expansive. Unlike H.D.'s imagist poetry, which focused on the inevitable death of all things in nature, *Trilogy* culminates in an image of limitless potential for life. The long poem form

allows H.D. to offer a more sustained examination of human experience than was available in the short imagist lyric. She only begins with destruction and develops, through the succeeding books, the symbolic transformation of humanity. H.D. uses the long form to accumulate images and build toward a transformative conclusion. Coming as it does in a time of total war, H.D.'s poem embodies a redemptive vision of humanity that first reduces and then purifies the subject.

Notes

[1] Quotations from H.D.'s poetry are from *Collected Poems, 1912-1944* unless otherwise noted and will be cited by line number parenthetically in my text. These are lines 11-19 of "Evening." Quotations from *Trilogy* will be cited using a Roman numeral for the book followed by a period, then an Arabic numeral for the section, and finally Arabic numerals for the line numbers.

[2] The others are II.7.11-12 and II.43.25-26.

CHAPTER IV

"IF YOU SHOULD DIP YOUR HAND IN":

DESIRE AND THE DIVIDED SUBJECT IN THE POETRY OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

The preceding chapters provide a view of modernism based on the way subjects organize desire, arguing that modernists typically freeze or separate desire from the external world, creating an isolated and protected self. In different ways, Pound, Stevens, Eliot, and H.D. withhold desire from the world and redirect it into aesthetic or spiritual experience. These poets differ from the romantics, who employ a concept of the subject as infinite rather than discrete and isolated. Elizabeth Bishop, however, begins to conceive of a self who is imbricated in the world and cannot fully commit the rejection enacted by Eliot and H.D. Bishop's subject is not transcendent as in the romantic model, nor is she enclosed in the self-protective imaginative or symbolic realm of her immediate predecessors. Instead, she constructs an immanent subject, one who is awash in the world, dissolved and disseminated among external objects. Desire, from Bishop's perspective, cannot be withheld but must be released into the natural world yet without assuming the sublime powers of nature.

In Bishop, the impulse to withhold desire from the external world is strong, but she is conscious of the world's inescapability. From Bishop's perspective, desire marks the world rather than creating or rejecting it. Bishop's construction of the subject is unlike that of Stevens, Eliot, and H.D., but rather than a radical break, it is a hairline fracture, a small yet crucial difference. Bishop does not reject the poetic achievements of these earlier poets.[1] Instead, she rejects the underlying assumption about how the subject is formed and the way desire integrates with the world. On one hand, the earlier

generation of American poets such as Pound, Eliot, and H.D. reveal (in emotionally significant ways) just what the subject is giving up by sublimating desire. Tiresias is the exemplary figure of the agony inherent in retracting desire from the world. H.D.'s poetic speaker who roams the streets of London and sees ancient Karnak overlaying it is another. The gulf between their capacity for feeling and the world from which they seek refuge intensifies each poem's emotional range. At the same time, however, there were poets who shared these concerns but found more certain ways to maintain a gulf between self and world. John Crowe Ransom is the paradigmatic poet of the tendency to construct cool and formal solutions to desire. Ransom often presents death as a satisfactory conclusion to the heat of desire. "Here Lies a Lady," for instance, offers death as an end to the "fever and chills" of the title character:

> Here lies a lady of beauty and high degree,
>
> Of chills and fever she died, of fever and chills,
>
> The delight of her husband, and aunt, an infant of three
>
> And medicos marveling sweetly on her ills. (141)

The "lady" of the poem is caught between "chills and fever," the two extremes of desire and restriction. Ultimately, the tension concludes in death: "we bade God rest her soul." Also, the speaker is distanced from these concerns because he is not the one at risk. He is separated by an ironic distance from the subject plagued by fever and chills. Ransom's end-stopped rhymes, regular meter, and strict quatrains contribute to the poem's easy quiescence. The poem shares with "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," "Janet Waking," and "Dead Boy" an answer to the question of whether to consummate or

sublimate desire: death intervenes before a more complicated balance needs to be constructed.[2]

Against the offer of death, Bishop insists that the subject is immanent, always moving through the world. Her poetry, therefore, is more concerned with the role of objects. She has long been recognized as a great observer. Randall Jarrell, for instance, famously wrote that "all her poems have written underneath *I have seen it*" (qtd. in Travisano 19). But frequently Bishop is interested in conflict or tension rather than objective observation. That is, although the world offers material—many objects, each with innumerable details—Bishop focuses on objects that reflect human passions and their conflict with the world. In a 1952 review of Wallace Fowlie's *Pantomime*, for instance, she complains that Fowlie's reminiscences are too smooth and ideal. She contrasts Fowlie's account of his first ride in one of Boston's swan boats with her own:

> My own first ride on a swan boat occurred at the age of three and is chiefly memorable for the fact that one of the live swans paddling around us bit my mother's finger when she offered it a peanut. I remember the hole in the black kid glove and a drop of blood. I do not want to set myself up as a model of facing the sterner realities of swan boat rides in order to discredit Mr. Fowlie's idealization,—but there is remarkably little of blood, sweat, or tears in Mr. Fowlie's book. (*Poems* 692)

Bishop cites this experience for its dramatic human interest and the failure of Fowlie's book to approach the struggle inherent in these dramas. Fowlie's narrative is not untrue; it is, for Bishop, an uninteresting sort of true. It does not match her view of the purpose of art. Although she says she does not wish to "discredit" Fowlie, she still refers to his text

in terms of accuracy or factuality: “It would be unfair to infer any lack of conflict in Mr. Fowlie himself; he is human and it must be there. However it is fair to criticize that lack as the chief literary fault of the book. These twelve episodic, carefully edited chapters from the life of a scholar and teacher are interesting and often amusing, but one wants more of the facts” (692). Without conflict, we are missing “the facts.” Accuracy, from this perspective, is not a clinical list of true but mundane things. Literary truth requires an examination of the struggle and discord of human experience. The real is not opposed to the *inaccurate* but rather to the *ideal*. Bishop’s aesthetic perspective approaches the “blood, sweat, or tears” of things.

The friction that Bishop searches out and develops in her poetry runs counter to the modernist tendency to isolate the self from sensual contact with the world and redirect the desiring energies into aesthetic production. In Bishop, the world intrudes. If Pound’s poetic images of static leaves represent modernism’s reorganization of desire toward the self, Bishop’s “The Weed” provides its antithesis. Rather than presenting a self-authorizing subject who separates herself from the world, the poem shows desire breaking the subject and releasing a subsequent flow into the world. The poem begins with a subject protected in a calm purgatory:

> I dreamed that dead, and meditating,
> I lay upon a grave, or bed,
> (at least, some cold and close-built bower).
> In the cold heart, its final thought
> stood frozen, drawn immense and clear,
> stiff and idle as I was there;

and we remained unchanged together

for a year, a minute, an hour.[3]

Death is, in the beginning of this poem, a refuge for desire. The heart, as the signifier of desire, is cold, "its final thought / stood frozen." Bishop imagines the heart as the frozen center of the dead body, its final thought "immense and clear, / stiff and idle." Body and mind "remained unchanged together." The speaker is self-contained in the stillness of death; body, thought, and desire are motionless in one unchanging moment. Although the subject does not resonate with spiritual transcendence that one might expect in Eliot or H.D., it is nevertheless in an ideal state.

For Bishop, however, the isolated and discrete subject is just a starting point for the important transformation to come. Bishop disrupts the transcendent image of unity with an unexplainable but undeniable occurrence:

Suddenly there was a motion,

as startling, there, to every sense

as an explosion. Then it dropped

to insistent, cautious creeping

in the region of the heart,

prodding me from desperate sleep.

Bishop offers no explanation for the sudden motion that discomposes the speaker, and without an apparent cause, the motion seems external, an event outside the subject's control. Bishop does not provide Pound's will to power or H.D.'s protected shell-fish subject. And yet, the disturbing movement is internal, "in the region of the heart." Bishop

mixes the internal and external so that each is implicated in the other. Desire cannot be turned away, and internal desire will always seek the external world:

> The rooted heart began to change
> (not beat) and then it split apart
> and from it broke a flood of water.
> Two rivers glanced off from the sides,
> one to the right, one to the left,
> two rushing, half-clear streams,
> (the ribs made of them two cascades)
> which assuredly, smooth as glass,
> went off through the fine black grains of earth.

The weed, as Bishop's new figure for the efflorescence of desire, overtakes the heart, the traditional symbol for desire, and breaks it apart. Water emerges, representing the flow and dynamism of a new subjectivity. Bishop's symbol is water rather than blood because blood is too much our own and not enough an object of the external world. Here, subjects are no longer safe or at rest; instead, they inevitably pass into the external world. The water represents the merging of self and world; it cascades through the body and runs into the "fine black grains of earth." The poem's form, a long stream of lines uninterrupted by stanza breaks, reinforces this sense of movement. The unified and objective self gives way to a flowing, dynamic interaction with the world.

"The Weed" is not, however, a joyous breakthrough narrative; it is far from a simple celebration of desire's release into the world. At times, the poem reads like a Gothic horror story. While the poem offers a new vision of the self, it develops a palpable

apprehension toward this new formulation. For instance, the poem has a Gothic setting in "some cold and close-built bower," a scene of constriction and claustrophobia. Also, the second parenthetical phrase insists that "(All this was in the dark)." The weed's sudden motion is internal to the self but cannot be explained by the speaker, nor can her senses capture the events with any certainty. Drops of the flooding water fall in her eyes, and "in that black place" she cannot be sure what she sees. Deprived of her senses and very literally coming apart, the subject is haunted by the weed. The unified subject is relegated to parentheses: the parenthetical statements throughout the poem represent the voice of a subject engaged in the attempt to retain unity at all costs. Even the water, for instance, might be hoped to contain the self:

> (As if a river should carry all
> the scenes that it had once reflected
> shut in its waters, and not floating
> on momentary surfaces.)

The parenthetical voice of the subject speaks of continuity and temporal integrity despite the passing of the self. Parentheses themselves graphically contain and unify a thought, but in a larger sense they disrupt the flow of thought where they are wedged. In this way Bishop intensifies conflicting forms of subjectivity—the stable and the flowing.

The poem closes with the weed, which has developed the power of speech, offering a grim promise: "'I grow' it said, / 'but to divide your heart again.'" The poem does not present a new vision of subjectivity; it places competing visions in terrifying conflict. On one hand, a new, flowing, decentered self emerges from stasis, but it is haunted by the legacy of a self-authorizing, willful subject. The speaker is a stranger to

herself. Bishop's poem carefully develops tension between the inevitability of dissolution and the liminal remains of unified subjectivity. Desire, in this context, is potentially free and flowing, or it is fused under the authority of the subject. "The Weed" captures a middle ground in which the subject is caught up in a struggle concerning her own origins.

For Bishop, conflict and division are fundamental and ontological aspects of being. Rather than a Prufrock who conceives of himself as unified but afflicted by evidence of fragmentation, Bishop's speaker imagines a dispersed subject still plagued by thoughts of unity. "The Gentleman of Shalott" is perhaps the clearest expression of Bishop's conception of desire and division. The poem's protagonist recognizes himself as a person made up of one half body and one half mirrored reflection:

> Which eye's his eye?
> Which limb lies
> next the mirror?
> For neither is clearer
> nor a different color
> than the other,
> nor meets a stranger
> in this arrangement
> of leg and leg and
> arm and so on. (7-8)

The primary aspect of being in the world, the poem suggests, is the sense that we are not fully real. The protagonist feels that a part of himself is unreal, but he cannot distinguish which, "[f]or neither is clearer" than the other. Subjectivity is the illusion of being whole.

Bishop's gentleman of Shalott recognizes the rift at the center of being; he is essentially a disjunction. The man doubts the wholeness of his own body and recognizes the inadmissibility of his own senses. He cannot, in fact, tell exactly what is his true self and what is mere reflection. The poem destabilizes any sense of idealized unity and undercuts the very notion of a "true" self. In Bishop's poem, the mirror is now an essential part of the protagonist's subjectivity:

> To his mind
> it's the indication
> of a mirrored reflection
> somewhere along the line
> of what we call the spine.

The spine, the structural center of the body, is built upon the uncertainty of a mere "indication"; objects are not solid and incontrovertible but are built around a "reflection." The assonance of "mind," "line," and "spine" pulls these words together to emphasize the construction of selfhood (mind and body) around the less definite, less certain words contained between them: "indication" and "reflection." Furthermore, the physical integrity of the self is put under the conceptual authority of the mind, but it is a mind plagued by uncertainty. The spine, now made up of indications and reflections, is presented "To his mind." The first stanza ends with the mind's tentative determinations. The next stanza depends on the mind's effort to make sense of the interaction with the mirror but ends by doubting its ability to succeed. It is unclear whether the glass stretches "down his middle / or rather down the edge." If the mirror reflects half his body, then his

middle *is* his edge. Rather than a “middle” or an internal core of being, the man is all edge and thus everywhere exposed.

For Bishop, split subjectivity involves the conflict of the two desires evident in “The Weed”: the need for wholeness and the opposing desire for dissolution and dissemination into the world. In Bishop’s work, this latter need is not a positive desire as much as it is a reaction to the exigencies of the world. It is the need to recognize the demands made by reality. Indeed, Bishop’s poetic vision is troubled by the idea that external reality overmasters us. The gentleman of Shalott must accept the state of affairs:

> [. . .] The uncertainty
> he says he
> finds exhilarating. He loves
> that sense of constant re-adjustment.
> He wishes to be quoted as saying at present:
> “Half is enough.”

The subject creates himself by paradoxically conceding his own divisibility and diminishment: half is enough. Bishop exposes the irony of the man’s resolution by leaving a gap between his statements and his wishes. He “says” he finds the uncertainty exhilarating, and he “wishes to be quoted” that he is satisfied. Also, by expecting to be quoted, the speaker detaches his feelings from his words as well as his future self from his present self. The detachment is formalized in the separate line “he says he,” which is itself a mirror, with the subject reflected by his act of speaking—which is actually only a wish to be quoted. His subjectivity emerges from his wish rather than his reality. Bishop’s rhymes also undercut the plausibility that he is content, for “uncertainty”

rhymes with “he,” aligning the self with uncertainty. She also admits the insufficiency of his response in the poem’s form. The poem is subtlely unresolved when the final stanza is fourteen lines long, one line shorter than each of the first two stanzas, lightly hinting that the poem, like the subject, is partial, incomplete, and unfulfilled. The longing for completion is not realized but rather is released into a missing fifteenth line as a figure for the future into which the man carefully hobbles. The poem is striking for how intensely it imagines the problem of split subjectivity and how thoroughly it defers the question of desire. Bishop’s most emphatic point is that there is a world to which we are necessarily, and perhaps terribly, subject. This concession separates Bishop from the poets who preceded her. Pound, Stevens, Eliot, and H.D. imagine themselves achieving ideal spaces, whether hermetic, linguistic, or spiritual. Even at their most painful or uncertain, they attempt to shore up the fragments they discover. Bishop’s “The Gentleman of Shalott,” by contrast, recounts his resignation to the fact that the problem of split subjectivity cannot be solved; it can only be accommodated as the new reality.

Bishop’s poem seems almost to anticipate Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage: Bishop’s subject recognizes that he is the result of a process much like the formation of subjectivity Lacan described. Lacan argues that the infant’s act of seeing himself in a mirror is a foundational moment that establishes subjectivity based on an identification with the object in the mirror. In Lacan’s theory, the child understands himself as the apparently whole and self-sufficient being in the mirror. The visual image of the self, the imago, unifies what is otherwise a disparate and chaotic collection of drives, capabilities, and frustrations. For Lacan, this act of identification is essentially a

misrecognition. The "I" the child forms in that moment becomes an Ideal-I always discordant with the actual self:

> this form [in the mirror] situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality. (*Écrits* 2)

The child's assumption of wholeness and self-sufficiency is an ideal that provides the foundation for his self-conception, but this ideal diverges from the real situation. Lacan argues that the imago is fictional because the child is unable to control his body or its functions. Subjects are constructed in the moment they are presented with the image of their wholeness and mastery, but he contends that we only approach this ideal asymptotically, always leaving a rift between physical insufficiency and the image of sufficiency that is necessarily fictional. This rift remains at the center of being, founding subjects as inevitably alienated.

Pound's self-authorizing subject, Eliot's sublimating purgatorial subject, and H.D.'s cocooned worm are all attempts to retain unity by withdrawing desire from the chaotic world and investing it in the self and its symbolic creations; this attempt to retain unity is akin to Lacan's imago. By contrast, Bishop's subject consciously recognizes the falsity of the imago. In "The Weed" and "The Gentleman of Shalott," the subject cannot marshal its desire into a stable and quiescent unity. Rather than a discrete imago, Bishop's subject is immanent, either flowing over the earth or shuffling off into the

world. Bishop develops tension between contrasting spatial metaphors. She often substitutes back-and-forth horizontal movement, which signifies the immanent subject, for stasis or vertical movement. "The Man-Moth," for example, offers a narrative tension between the unified and dispersed models of the self by presenting the subject's struggle for vertical movement and the need to settle for horizontal movement. These axes represent, on the one hand, the spiritual transcendence of Eliot and H.D., who ascend out of the sensuous world, and, on the other, the new immanent subject who moves horizontally through the socially articulated environment.

The first half of the poem describes the man-moth's attempt to reach the moon, that is, to achieve a vertical movement of transcendence:

> But when the Man-Moth
> pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,
> the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges
> from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks
> and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
> He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
> proving the sky quite useless for protection.
> He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.
>
> Up the facades,
> his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him,
> he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
> to push his small head through that round clean opening

> and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light. (10-12)

For a poet well known for her accurate and evocative descriptions, Bishop leaves her protagonist a shadowy figure. She renders him in terms of his actions as well as his essential dividedness. He is, after all, a man-moth, a subject of split identity, the conjunction of two types of being, human and insect. The only visual description of him early in the poem focuses more on his shadow than his identifiable features. He is quite like the shadow he drags with him. Without clear qualities of his own, he is reduced to his desire to escape. He does not try to reach the moon because it is an object he can touch or a new place he can exist; he believes it is an opening in the sky, through which he hopes to be "forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light." His attempt to reach whatever exists beyond the sky represents the desire to achieve a place beyond the world where the subject transcends the sullied and debased external world. But this is not a very liberating release, being forced through as though from a tube. In fact, the proverbial moth to a flame suggests a desperate compulsion to suicide. However, the place beyond the moon would protect the man-moth from the world. Like Eliot's notion of poetic experience in lieu of sensual desire, or H.D.'s concept of a spiritually uplifting process of symbolization, Bishop imagines for the man-moth a means of withholding desire from a corrupted world. In the poem's narrative, a realm of subjectivity isolated from the world is illusory, and so the man-moth inevitably fails to escape the world. Unable to attain transcendent sublimation, the man-moth is forced back into the world of degraded objects, into horizontal movement.

The second half of the poem follows the man-moth's fall by examining his movement in (and discomfort with) the world:

Then he returns

to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,

he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains

fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.

The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way

and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,

without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort.

He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards.

Each night he must

be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams.

Without the ability to attain a transcendent realm, the man-moth moves not just horizontally but backwards on the subway. Though artificial and repetitious, the external world cannot be rejected. The new subject must continue moving, though the man-moth has trouble committing to this mode of movement: he backs into a new and necessary form of subjectivity. He thus also looks backwards, as if toward past unity.

Bishop insists on the heavy emotional toll exacted on the subject confronting a transition from unity to dispersion, vertical to horizontal. The man-moth, in fact, continues to be suicidal; he must fight the urge to touch the third rail: "He has to keep / his hands in his pockets." The contradiction between these two modes of subjectivity, and the ambivalent struggle between them, finds its final symbol in the image of the man-moth's tear:

If you catch him,

> hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,
>
> an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
>
> as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
>
> one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.
>
> Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention
>
> he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,
>
> cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

The man-moth drinks his tear as if emotional pain is a sustaining purity. The drive toward transcendence represented by his attempt to reach the moon cannot provide deliverance; instead, life is guaranteed only by the emotional price he pays. His pain of being in the world sustains him. Despite the apparent sadness of the horizontal and immersed life, it is the necessary complement to the compulsion toward the vertical. And though he moves back and forth, traveling backward throughout the city, he still gains a measure of unity in his "only possession," the solitary tear. Through the expression of his persistent desire to reach the moon and its inevitable failure, he can at least be unified by his pain.

"The Weed," "The Gentleman of Shalott," and "The Man-Moth" can be grouped among Bishop's "fable" poems. These poems eschew a realistic setting, full of the common objects of the real world, for a reduced environment meant only to give enough detail for a symbolic narrative. Thomas J. Travisano marks three stages in Bishop's poetic development that begins with these imaginative fable poems and moves toward more personal and realistic material:

> Her early phase shows her as a reluctant master of the symbolist's private world, a world that renounces history for the ambiguous pleasures of enclosure. Her

> middle phase reflected years of travel and observation, through which isolation might be at least temporarily bridged. It [. . .] [combines] the precision and conciseness of imagism with a liberating dimension of temporal development. Her last phase reverses the earliest, engaging with personal and private history. The yearning for enclosure is still powerful, but it is controlled by a calm and expansive vision. (7)

Travisano's term "enclosure" correlates to the tendency I have described early in the century to protect the self by retracting desire from the objects of the world. But he overlooks the fact that even Bishop's early poems imagine releases from such enclosures. Travisano maintains, for instance, that the gentleman of Shalott has "mastered the art of evading experience by inventing an absorbing game; his delusion gives him an excuse to watch himself" (29). "The Gentleman of Shalott," however, does not describe the evasion of experience but rather creates an unsettling image of experience in the modern world after one ceases to subscribe to the unified imago. Anne Stevenson also dismisses some of Bishop's early poems for their apparent playfulness. She calls "The Gentleman of Shalott" a "play on the bilateral symmetry of human anatomy" and "a spoof on Tennysonian Romanticism and a satire on modern man's preoccupation with split personality" (64). Stevenson's view of the poem as a "play," a "spoof," and a "satire" denies its serious statement of Bishop's concept of subjectivity in the modern world. However, Stevenson relents later in her study when she points out that "Bishop becomes so preoccupied with the nature of experience and with the complexity of the questions experience provokes that, in the end, she can answer them only provisionally" (112). In this sense, Stevenson recognizes that even the fable poems, or the "enclosure" poems,

examine important questions about subjectivity and desire. In fact, I argue that they only seem provisional because they are delicately balanced between the unified subject and the emerging immanent subject. They are not “provisional” for Bishop any more than a bird jumping off a branch before flapping its wings is “falling”; instead, they are pivotal, representing a transition from the unified imago that retains and willfully directs its desire away from the world to a dissolved subject who flows into the world.

Viewing Bishop’s early work in terms of the transition to an externally exposed subject allows for a reading of her later work that reveals a remarkably consistent concern with one’s interactions in a world that cannot be dismissed. Though her materials change, she remains focused on the problem of interacting with the world after the breakdown of the unified subject. In a late poem such as “The End of March,” for instance, the emphasis on horizontal movement in her earlier work recurs. The poem recounts a walk along the beach. The speaker wants “to get as far as my proto-dream-house / my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box,” which is reminiscent of the man-moth’s desire to reach the moon (167-69). In both cases, the subject would be outside the world, moving toward a self-canceling place. The man-moth would be dissolved into the universe; the speaker of “The End of March,” if she can attain the small abandoned house, would do nothing:

> I’d like to retire there and do nothing,
> or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
> look through binoculars, read boring books,
> old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
> talk to myself, and, foggy days,
> watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.

Bishop signals the refuge of literature, the sublimation of desire into “boring books” and “useless notes.” The image echoes the opening section of *The Waste Land*, whose speaker puts behind him the sledding in the mountains for the dull security of “reading much of the night.” But from this reserved and protected place, the speaker would “watch the droplets slipping,” an image reminiscent of the man-moth’s tear, the sustaining but painful product of emotional pain. Like the moon, however, the tiny house is impossible:

> And a light to read by—perfect! But—impossible.
> And that day the wind was much too cold
> even to get that far,
> and of course the house was boarded up.

Bishop suggests that the protected and unified subject, represented by the boarded-up imago, is unattainable. Instead, the world intervenes as the cold wind forces them to turn back. Rather than achieving a motionless and protected space, the speaker must continue moving horizontally through the world.

Bishop also rejects an elevating transcendence through the symbol of the kite string. As the speaker and an unnamed friend walk along the beach the two come upon

> lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
> looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
> over and over. Finally, they did end:
> a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
> rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
> falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost. . . .
> A kite string?—But no kite.

The string represents the "endless" horizontal path upon which the immanent subject moves, looping back and forth from water to beach. Rather than a string that leads to a transcendent kite high above the complicated world, the string loops along the coastline and does, in fact, end in a clotted mass. This "man-size" collection of string symbolizes Bishop's concept of the subject: a string of horizontality awash in the tides of a world that sends it in and out, back and forth, without a transcendent possibility. Bishop's subject has no hope of encompassing the sensual world in its view and no ability to withdraw itself. Bishop ends the poem by imagining a power that ensures the human subject's participation in the world. The sun is deified as a "lion sun" with the power to affect objects: "—a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide, / making those big, majestic paw-prints, / who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with." The lion bats down the kite that might have risen above the world, symbolizing the difficulty of transcending immersion in the world or escaping the everyday reality of our surroundings. The end of the dream to reach the protected house is followed by the end of the dream of transcendence, concluding with a cold and necessary immanence.

Throughout her work, Bishop portrays the intrusion of nature into human experience rather than calling for a purer, more direct experience of nature. She marvels at nature's tendency to interrupt what would otherwise be a thoroughly human experience. In "View of the Capitol from The Library of Congress," for example, the music of the Air Force band playing in Washington, DC cannot make its way to her untrammeled by nature:

> On the east steps the Air Force Band
>
> in uniforms of Air Force blue

is playing hard and loud, but—queer—

the music doesn't quite come through.

It comes in snatches, dim then keen,

then mute, and yet there is no breeze.

The giant trees stand in between.

I think the trees must intervene. (52-53)

Human activity is muted by the environment in which it must act. The world is something one must fight through. Bishop contrasts human and natural worlds, finding that the latter thwarts rather than facilitates human transcendence. Thus, she contradicts the romantic view in which nature is a source of human strength, but she also refuses the modernist strategy in which the subject's creative authority might construct a symbolic realm that achieves sublimation. Instead, Bishop puts the two forces into tense conflict; they complicate each other in a way that cannot be transcended. Without either a view of nature as a force that can elevate human endeavors or a view in which human control surmounts nature, Bishop can only politely request space for expression:

Great shades, edge over,

give the music room.

The gathered brasses want to go

boom—boom.

The yearning of the brass band is a playful image, especially in the ironic distance between the "Air Force" and the obvious lack of force the band can project through the air. But the threatening "boom" is serious. The boom is not the consummation of desire

in the external world; it represents the lingering wish for desire's authority over the world. Bishop's subject, now immanent, cannot relinquish the desire for separation and protection. Therefore, the external world often appears as looming, dangerous, or hostile.

The intrusion of nature is a persistent theme in Bishop's work, often playing out in the extreme ways her poetic speakers perceive their physical surroundings. For instance, an unpublished poem titled "Rainy Day, Rio," transforms natural objects into invasive and threatening intruders:

> Mountains should really not protrude
>
> In city streets and brandish trees
>
> At skyscrapers, nor should the seas
>
> Roar at the business-man. So rude
>
> Of Nature not to go away
>
> But hang around the wondrous bay. (247)

The features of nature take on exaggerated form, disquieting the speaker. Though the image of mountains brandishing the trees is playful, it reveals Bishop's significant departure from romantic nature imagery, which often refers to nature as harmonious and transporting. She also diverges from an earlier modernist view of nature: Pound's nature is flat and limp, Eliot's urban imagery leaves nature ruined and wasted, and H.D.'s natural processes are often deadly. Wallace Stevens' sensibility is perhaps closest to Bishop's in terms of the imagination's ability to transform nature, and one can picture Stevens using the image of a mountain brandishing trees. But notwithstanding that Bishop has often been compared to Stevens, there is a crucial difference: whereas Bishop's subject must react to nature, Stevens' subject inverts the relationship so that

nature is secondary. In “Anecdote of the Jar,” for instance, the jar placed on the hill tames nature:

> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
>
> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled around, no longer wild. (*Collected Poems* 76)

The jar is a figure for the human imagination, and the world only emerges through it. It takes “dominion everywhere.” Stevens contends that the world is made through the imagination, and his poetry is a catalog of its manifestations. In his later poems, Stevens carries out his argument in more overtly philosophical discourse, dispensing with the need to portray the world at all. He subordinates the external world to a theory of language—a human system of representation—that brings things into being:

> Thus the theory of description matters most.
> It is the theory of the world for those
>
> For whom the word is the making of the world,
> The buzzing world and lisping firmament.
>
> It is a world of words to the end of it,
> In which nothing solid is its solid self. (301)

Stevens contrasts word and world, privileging the former as endlessly productive. The world of objects does not intrude or impose; it emerges in the malleable forms extruded

through the human mind. For Stevens, description without place is a power of the imagination, which he calls "the power of the mind over the possibility of things" ("Imagination as Value" 726). Bishop makes no such argument for the power of language. Instead, language and imagination must contend with a world that invades the human realm.

For Bishop, imagination is a means for reacting to a world that cannot be denied or created. This is true even in the poems about sleep and dreams where the imagination is thought to have free reign by various literary movements, including surrealism. Especially in her early poems, Bishop was influenced by the startling relationships created by surrealist writers. Many of her early poems explore the strange state of sleep, employing dream-like imagery to defamiliarize the natural world. However, in these poems, dreams do not distance one from meaning and causality; instead, they provoke danger, discomfort, and anxiety. The speaker of "The Unbeliever," for instance, sleeps on the top of a mast and thinks: "I must not fall. / The spangled sea below wants me to fall. / It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all" (17). He remains frozen in a nightmare, frightfully balanced high above the sea. Sleep is not a protected state or a realm where the subject is the artificer of the world that Stevens imagines. Rather than an imaginative power that creates or transforms reality, Bishop's dreams merely turn "ninety dark degrees":

> As we lie down to sleep the world turns half away
> through ninety dark degrees;
> the bureau lies on the wall
> and thoughts that were recumbent in the day

rise as others fall,

stand up and make a forest of thick-set trees. ("Sleeping Sanding Up" 22-23)

Sleep allows a different perspective, at right angles from our waking lives, but turning away does not leave reality behind. In fact, the underlying thoughts of daytime are intensified and rise up at night. The dream, however, is not a source of fresh, valid insights about these thoughts that unleash the unconscious as it is for surrealists. Instead, daytime thoughts stand up at night as obstacles around which dreams must move to reach destinations they cannot find. Dreams cannot construct their worlds, they can only try to smash through them:

> The armored cars of dreams, contrived to let us do
> so many a dangerous thing,
> are chugging at its edge
> all camouflaged, and ready to go through
> the swiftest streams, or up a ledge
> of crumbling shale, while plates and trappings ring.

The dream world threatens to crumble, while the dream itself, an armored car, jolts and rings out. The dream is in peril, either because the armored car may come apart or because the "ringing" is an alarm that wakes the sleeper. In either case, the dream is no longer a radical, striking flash of knowledge; it is a loss of focus or direction. Richard Mullen points out that Bishop's artistc method is unlike surrealism in that she "prefers to investigate natural displacement" that comes from closely observing the world and recognizing its peculiarities (78). Mullen suggests that Bishop exaggerates proportion, incongruity, contiguity, and sensuality in order to "accentuate the odd confrontation of

internal and external worlds" (79). In "Sleeping Standing Up," Bishop emphasizes the contrast between reality and dream, poking fun at the willfulness and insularity of dreams, which are just attempts to crash through the issues of being in the world. Bishop, therefore, warns us away from dreams as a refuge or a new world and instead insists on immanence, our necessary existence in the real world. The poem ends with a complex and ambivalent retelling of the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale:

—Through turret-slits we saw the crumbs or pebbles that lay
  below the riveted flanks
    on the green forest floor,
like those the clever children placed by day
    and followed to their door
  one night, at least; and in the ugly tanks

we tracked them all the night. Sometimes they disappeared,
  dissolving in the moss,
    sometimes we went too fast
and ground them underneath. How stupidly we steered
    until the night was past
  and never found out where the cottage was.

On one level the trail represents the desire for a safe and secluded cottage away from the world, and the poem is a journey through a dark land toward a final and protective rest. Therefore the poem achieves an emotional tenor of loss accomplished by the loss of the trail. Whether through over-excitement ("we went too fast / and ground them

underneath") or factors related to the instability of the dream world ("dissolving in the moss"), the failure to reach the cottage is the moving anti-climax of the poem.

On another level, however, the return to reality is the necessary resolution to the problem of dreams the poem addresses; although reality is an anti-climax, it is inevitable. Bishop critiques the self-authorizing, creative power of the human mind and works toward a poetic culmination that reintegrates the self back into the world. The poem operates on both of these levels, the desire for sleep and seclusion as well as the recognition of inexorable morning. The longing for the cottage represents the wish for withdrawal from the world, like the man-moth's moon, the tomb in "The Weed," or the dream-house in "The End of March." But, as it is in the other poems, withdrawal is given up for movement and immanence. The poem rejects dreams for their insularity, revealing how they tread over their own trails; the dream abrogates itself, and the dreamer must always awaken.

In other early poems, the speakers evaluate contrasting symbols of immanence and withdrawal and ultimately recognize the need to interact with the world. In "Cirque d'Hiver," for example, Bishop dismisses the toy dancer who twirls on the back of the toy horse. The dancer simply "turns and turns," while the horse "canters three steps, then he makes a bow, / canters again, bows on one knee, / canters, then clicks and stops, and looks at me" (23-24). The horse and dancer are described in terms of their movements, with the horse cantering horizontally forward while the dancer spins round and round on the horse's back. Although his progress is by fits and starts, the horse moves through the world while the dancer revolves upon her own center, a motion suggesting inwardness:

> The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.

> [The horse] is the more intelligent by far.
>
> Facing each other rather desperately—
>
> his eye is like a star—
>
> we stare and say, "Well, we have come this far."

The dancer's spinning movement is characterized as a continual turning of her back in a self-made oblivion. Bishop contends that the horse is "more intelligent" because he does not shrink from his external environment. Although, as in "The Weed," there is a certain amount of desperation in the full acceptance of the external world, the desire for reality has genuine force in Bishop's work. "Chemin de Fer" reiterates this desire. Bishop describes a hermit who shouts across his pond "Love should be put into action!" (7). But the poem ends as he waits for an echo to confirm his call. He is caught in the gap between wanting to enter the sensual world and needing to hang back from it. Bishop ultimately condemns the man, described as "the dirty hermit," who remains isolated by his pond, which is "like an old tear / holding onto its injuries / lucidly year after year." Like the man-moth, the hermit lives by his tears, surviving alongside the pond containing his emotions. He receives Bishop's censure because he rejects the world. He represents one who has achieved the lost cottage or the impossible dream-house, but he is locked in an emotionally barren stasis. The hermit may shout about love, but he continues to withhold it.

Bishop's poems are driven by two ideas. First, the subject is split and immanent. Second, and related to the first, the mind is not the ultimate authority in one's experience of the world. Bishop's perspective is anti-Cartesian, anti-subjectivist, and, in the end,

anti-transcendent. Her fundamental aesthetic principle is to express the imposition of the reality principle. Reality surrounds the subject, and there is no way to make it conform to her or his wishes. In Freudian terms, one must give up the pleasure principle in the face of reality. Although subjects naturally aim to satisfy their instincts, they contend with an external environment that frustrates their aims. The drama of this frustration is the cornerstone of Bishop's poetry. The poems discussed so far reveal how Bishop establishes these concerns. The next step in coming to an understanding of her work is to see what paths forward she makes available. She offers a series of responses along a continuum from bleak acceptance of the external reality to the subject's ability to represent the world. The observers in Bishop's most descriptive poems acquiesce to the external world. In these poems, the world dictates to the subject and can appear stark and uncharitable. On the other end of the spectrum, the subject understands the objects of the world through desire, the imagination's conception of how self and world interrelate. For Bishop, art has the power to put the subject's desire into a new mode. The power to represent the world becomes a means of communication, integration, and fellow feeling.

Bishop's descriptive poems such as "Cape Breton," "A Cold Spring," and "The Bight" dramatize the subject's acceptance of an objective environment. The poems are filled with careful observations of nature and feature speakers who note the details surrounding them. Bishop often deprecates her descriptive poems. When sending "Cape Breton" to *The New Yorker*, she writes "I don't know whether you could possibly be interested in another plain description from me, but I am sending it along" (*New Yorker* 38). A cursory reading of the poem supports the impression of it as "plain description," a graceful and glowing tribute to the world's strange beauty and presence.

Out on the high “bird islands,” Ciboux and Hertford,

the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand

with their backs to the mainland

in solemn, uneven lines along the cliff’s brown grass-frayed edge,

while the few sheep pastured there go “Baa, baa.” (48-50)

In many ways, the poem is a description of nature with no claims beyond its careful and patient attention to the natural environment. The poem provides accurate contextual details including place names that help develop a keen sense of location. The description is precise and minute, such as the specific “brown grass-frayed edge” of the cliff. But a parenthetical remark follows that disrupts the direct presentation of nature. Bishop often uses parentheses to complicate the foregoing surface meaning. In this case, the natural environment is suddenly invested with dangerous implications: “(Sometimes, frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede / and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.)” This disturbing observation exceeds objective description, first by temporally interjecting a fact that is not presently being observed, and second by its off-handed gruesomeness. The lively, vibrant, and innocent islands are suddenly dangerous; the activity of life is shaded with the possibility of death.[4]

For Bishop, the observer’s ability to perceive objects is a way to explore how the subject interacts with the external world:

The silken water is weaving and weaving,

disappearing under the mist equally in all directions,

lifted and penetrated now and then

by one shag’s dripping serpent-neck,

> and somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse,
>
> rapid but unurgent, of a motorboat.

The water is metaphorically “silken,” suggesting that it is not a unified and already-existing object; it is woven together to form her perception of the ocean. In other words, the speaker begins with threads and sees them woven together to form the sea. The viewer is surrounded by hints of the world and has only moments of cohesive totality; the mist is “lifted and penetrated now and then.” The viewer can only see the ocean when it drips off the rocks perceived as a “serpent-neck.” Perception involves the interplay of imagination and reality. The world “incorporates the pulse” of the human activities in it. This bit of “plain description” is incredibly complex in how it imbricates the subject into an autonomous world that cannot be perceived objectively. The poem reveals a synthesis of subjective impression and objective reality. After establishing the viewer as one who both perceives reality and shapes a response to it, Bishop describes the world that emerges. The primary feature of nature is its miserliness; it is reputed to have so much to offer, but the speaker cannot reach it. The poem evokes a sense of concealment:

> The road appears to have been abandoned.
>
> Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned,
>
> unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
>
> where we cannot see,
>
> where deep lakes are reputed to be,
>
> and disused trails and mountains of rock
>
> and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches.

The world can be described, but it only reveals lack and absence. The speaker searches the world carefully only to find things "abandoned," "disused," "closed," and "burnt." Its meaning is held back "where we cannot see." Though the speaker is inevitably forced to contend with the natural environment, she is not able to apprehend it. Bishop describes a world where everything is closed and "today no flag is flying." When the bus stops and the speaker watches a man carrying a baby get off, there is a momentary possibility of a human world rather than an unyielding and inadequate realm of nature, but he disappears into the distance toward a home she cannot see. Human contact is ephemeral and, like the serpent neck, more imagined than achieved. The poem's final verse paragraph begins with a return to the constant activity of the world: "The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts." Though it cannot be fully apprehended, and in fact seems to withhold so much, the world continues. At the same time, however, Bishop undercuts its presence by returning to the image of mist: "The thin mist follows / the white mutations of its dream; / an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks." The world is both undeniably real and somehow made of mist. The subject must travel through a domain of nature that refuses to coalesce. Though the "dark brooks" may be objective facts of nature, the viewer perceives the "ancient chill" in them, perceiving an imagined world within a real world both dark and unsustaining.

Bishop's most pronounced example of the disparity between the real world and imaginative possibility is "Sandpiper," where the capacity to articulate a response to the world is missing. From the sandpiper's perspective, the entire world alternates between moments of clarity and moments of utter confusion:

> The roaring alongside he takes for granted

and that every so often the world is bound to shake.

He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,

in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet

of interrupting water comes and goes

and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.

He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes. (125-26)

The sandpiper tries to go about his business without paying attention to his environment; he only knows it will shake when the waves come in and the surf splashes into mist. And yet every move he makes is, in some sense, a response to his physical environment. The sea forces him to run, a desperate activity doubled in the first stanza and repeated later. He is frenzied in response to a world that roars, shakes, hisses, and interrupts. The bird, like the immanent subject, represents subjectivity that must move back and forth horizontally in a world he cannot deny or transcend. In this poem, however, the physical objects surrounding the subject are breaking down into ever smaller parts. The world of absence and concealment in "Cape Breton" begins to disintegrate in "Sandpiper," as the waves dissolve the world to tiny grains of sand:

[. . .] As he runs,

he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is

minute and vast and clear. The tide

is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.

His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,

looking for something, something, something.

Poor bird, he is obsessed!

The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,

mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

The grains are dragged away, pulling the world away from him, becoming a "mist" once again. His physical environment works against him to the point that it falls apart. The bird is driven by instinct to search; he is "focussed," "preoccupied," and "obsessed" in a harsh and incomprehensible world. He represents pure desire, the instinctual searching impulse, made more extreme by the fact that the speaker does not name the object of his desire. But the world's disintegration alternates with the fact that it is also "minute and vast and clear," creating an ambivalent relation to the world. In this clarity, the individual grains are revealed in all their variety and beauty. Even as the world dissolves, an aesthetic relation to it becomes available. The speaker's chief criticism of the sandpiper is that he does not consider this relation. For instance, he does not known whether the tide is higher or lower. The poem ends with a stark juxtaposition of the "poor" bird's obsession and the image of "rose and amethyst" grains of sand. In this sense, he disregards the world at the same time he demands something from it. The bird rejects the world while simultaneously pursuing his desire, too strong willed, too desiring to construct a more meaningful relation to his environment. The same dynamic, unrewarded birds too blindly driven, appears in "The Bight":

> The birds are outsize. Pelicans crash
>
> into this peculiar gas unnecessarily hard,
>
> it seems to me, like pickaxes,
>
> rarely coming up with anything to show for it,
>
> and going off with humorous elbowings. (46-47)

The pelicans desperately crash into the sea looking for food, "pickaxes" that cut into the sea for little reward. Bishop emphasizes the physical force of this crashing by speeding up their flight, using the word "unnecessarily," with its six syllables and slippery sibilance, leading to the abrupt closure of the "d" in the one-syllable, line-ending word "hard." After this impact, the language slows as the disoriented pelicans get caught in the clicking "k" sounds of "like pickaxes." The speaker watches the "humorous elbowings" of the birds as they fly off, their clumsiness a sign they are either too stunned by their hard impact with the water or that they are creatures ill-suited to their world. In either case, their meager rewards are not proportional to their painful efforts. They remain unsatisfied, though they are able to go on searching.

And yet, at the same time the poem recounts episodes of unsatisfied desire, it offers a more positive vision of persistent activity. Travisano sees the poem as evidence of Bishop's "tough, cheerful resignation to metaphysical uncertainty that allows her to see through all kinds of pretentions" (106). The image of the dredge at the end of the poem is often read as the simple activity of non-transcendent, grounded human life:

> Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
>
> and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
>
> All the untidy activity continues,

awful but cheerful.

According to Travisano, Bishop is interested in presenting objective descriptions of a world that may be lonely or unfulfilling but nevertheless is dynamic and participatory. In other words, Bishop refuses to add a transcendent meaning to the natural world as the romantics may have done. She presents the marl of a mundane beach rather than landscapes of sublimity or intellectual beauty. Travisano suggests that Bishop "savors a place rife with crude energy" (108). Laurel Kornhiser also emphasizes Bishop's unromanticized depiction: "Bishop resists drawing any spiritual inferences. Instead, like the 'Click. Click' of the dredge as it takes a bite of the bight 'and brings up a dripping jawful of marl,' the poem offers snapshots of what the poet sees. The images are absorbing, but [. . .] are not themselves absorbed and transcended" (230). These readings point to Bishop's valuation of the simple operations of the world, her recognition that, as fruitless as our actions sometimes are, they reveal themselves as inexorable.

Beyond the activity of the objective scene, however, Bishop suggests that the observer's imagined relation to the world plays an important role in how it is perceived, specifically by using similes that join objects to the speaker's feelings. For example, the blue of the water is like a blue flame, reflecting the dryness she perceives in the scene ("the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches"). The boats are like letters that correspond to the speaker's life:

> Some of the little white boats are still piled up
> against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,
> and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,
> like torn-open, unanswered letters.

The bight is littered with old correspondences.

For Bishop, it is not enough to observe and describe the world. The poet must recognized "correspondences" between the physical environment and human emotion that are as emotionally vexed as "correspondences"—letters—between people can be. Bishop articulates the link between a person and the world she observes. She briefly describes the experience along the bight that gave rise to the poem in a letter to Robert Lowell: "The water looks like blue gas—the harbor is always a mess, here, junky little boats all piled up, some hung with spongers and always a few half sunk or splintered up from the most recent hurricane. It reminds me a little of my desk" (*Words in Air* 23). What gives the poem its energy is the scene's connection to the observer. In a sense, all the objects she sees are "letters" that communicate in a human language, "correspondences" between *what* the observer sees and *how* the observers sees. Bishop's reference to the littered surface of her desk also points to the act of writing, the attempt to represent the objects of the world in terms of how we relate to them. The poem's subtitle, "*On my birthday*," organizes the scene from the meaningful perspective of a viewer on a special day, the anniversary of the moment one first came into the world. That these observations were not on her birthday but were recorded in her letter to Lowell the previous month emphasizes the importance of poetic accuracy and meaning rather than flat and factual information. As she insisted in her review of Fowlie's *Pantomime*, art must capture the conflict of the subject in the world.

This conflict often emerges in Bishop's work when she scrutinizes objects of representation themselves. A poem like "The Map," for example, portrays the speaker's act of interpreting a cartographic representation of the world, examining how subjects

perceive the external environment and make a place for themselves within it. For Bishop, representation is the act of recording the interest, desire, and interaction at work in the relationships of the world. For instance, the speaker ponders the reciprocity between land and sea as they come into contact:

> Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
> Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
> showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
> where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
> Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
> drawing it unperturbed around itself?
> Along the fine tan sandy shelf
> is the land tugging at the sea from under? (3)

The speaker sees the world as something more than a set of mechanistic processes that exclude or damage the subject. Instead, it is dynamic and depends on desire. The viewer imagines that the land and the sea are themselves engaged in an interplay. To perceive them is not to accept them as incontrovertible objects, immobile and quiescent, but to consider how they relate. Instead of the sea resting upon the land, the land might "lean down to lift the sea from under." The image of lifting replaces a passive relationship with an active one, emphasizing depth rather than surface: the land is "tugging" from under. From this perspective, surfaces merely conceal the activity going on underneath. Representation, for Bishop, involves recognizing and depicting our dynamic interaction with the world:

> [. . .] We can stroke these lovely bays

under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,

or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.

The names of seashore towns run out to sea,

the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains

—the printer here experiencing the same excitement

as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.

These peninsulas take the water between thumb and forefingers

like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

The represented landscape is made up of various examples of touching: the speaker imagines stroking the glass and wishing for the world to blossom; the printer of the map experiences excessive excitement, writing names all over the map, crossing boundaries, covering the landscape. The represented landscape unveils the subject's role in perceiving the external environment. Bishop explores how representations of the world involve the subject's perspective and emotion. The world as we see it is not just a collection of objects; it includes the subject's connection to them. Thus, she ends the poem with the contention: "More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors." In this poem, the historian is one who collects events, whereas the map-maker considers their relationships. Travisano points out that this single statement has been over-emphasized as the key to Bishop's poetic project because it comes down too heavily on the side of abstraction, whereas, he argues, "["The Map" is] poised ambivalently between the attractions of the abstracting, fiction-making functions of the map-maker and the more matter-of-fact observation and judgment of the historian" (40). In being positioned between these "attractions," however, Bishop actually constructs a dialectical process in

which abstraction and description merge in synthesis like the land and sea. The map-maker must try to delimit physical dimensions and interactions; but questions of touching, feeling, crossing, exceeding, and running out to sea are visible in the map-maker's art. Bishop seeks to understand how one's desire marks the world rather than to understand the world as it is.

Bishop's task differs from earlier poets such as Eliot because she makes space for the subject to interact with the world. Eliot, by contrast, substitutes poetic expression for immanence. By withholding desire from the world and creating expressions of divergence between self and world—that is, by creating purgatories—Eliot maintains that the subject may be refined; his subject suffers the fires of purgatory expressly for purgation. Bishop sympathizes with the balance between the contending forces at work in Eliot, but she ultimately believes that one cannot keep the world at a distance. Desire must go into the world where it will inevitably shape one's perception of external reality, which is expressed through representation. But, for Bishop, representation must embrace our interaction with the world rather than our separation from it. Large-scale attempts to impose order on the world are misguided because they overlook our necessary commerce with our environment. "Large Bad Picture" balances upon this question. The speaker's great-uncle paints a "big picture," suggesting the impulse to capture the world and place it under the artist's authority. Bishop develops tension between the profusion of chaos that makes up the natural world and the painter's attempt to order it:

> Receding for miles on either side
>
> into a flushed, still sky
>
> are overhanging pale blue cliffs

hundreds of feet high,

their bases fretted by little arches,
the entrances to caves
running in along the level of a bay
masked by perfect waves.

On the middle of that quiet floor
sits a fleet of small black ships,
square-rigged, sails furled, motionless,
their spars like burnt match-sticks.

And high above them, over the tall cliffs'
semi-translucent ranks,
are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds
hanging in n's in banks. (8-9)

The painter tries to represent a landscape that is full, complex, and variable. It recedes for "miles," the cliffs are "hundreds" of feet high, they are "fretted" by arches; there is a "fleet" of ships, and there are "hundreds" of birds. Against this abundance and variety, the artist arrays his energies to still or reduce the world. He paints a "still" sky, "perfect" waves, a "quiet" floor, "motionless" sails, and "ranks" of birds. These two forces, the rich profusion of the world and the desire to distance it through quiescent representation, act simultaneously, each of them contending and alternating. The two become wrapped in

one, a tense and conflicted standoff. The sixth stanza exposes the intensity of this struggle. The visual representation suddenly leaps into the auditory realm:

> One can hear their crying, crying,
> the only sound there is
> except for occasional sighing
> as a large aquatic animal breathes.

The speaker imagines two sounds emerging from the painting: crying and sighing, audible expressions of intense emotion. It is as if the painter's attempt to make the world motionless and perfect has created only a stiff mask, but the reality behind this mask protests. The speaker can hear the plaintive crying and recognize that the world is undeniable. Despite her great uncle's effort to freeze or suspend the world, she hears it protest.

In many ways, "Large Bad Picture" is an argument against representation. We see the painter's efforts through the lens of the poetic speaker, who sees behind the painter's desire for stillness. But the poem presents the speaker's perspective and not the painter's. It reveals the painter's desire for a sublimation and control we have come to associate with modernism, as well as the speaker's dismissal of the painter's vision. And yet, the poem ends on a particularly contemplative note that does not quite reject the painter:

> Apparently they have reached their destination.
> It would be hard to say what brought them there,
> commerce or contemplation.

We might say that the poem creates an ambivalent stasis between "commerce," the immanent subject who is relentlessly in the world, and "contemplation," the modernist

subject who attempts to retain a unified imago in the face of challenges that threaten to fragment it. The final image and the question it raises suggest that, at some level, the painting is not an utter failure. The painter's desire to capture the world comes into conflict with the world's ability to escape being captured. The poem considers the speaker's desire to comprehend the collision of these desires, which creates a narrative itself. Both the painter's narrative and the poet's end by achieving the same fine balance between commerce and contemplation. The act of representation, therefore, reveals or communicates desire. Like "The Map," "Large Bad Picture" is partly interested in how the act of portraying the world communicates desire. In a sense, Bishop explores representation as a way of being in the world rather than a way of rejecting it.

Bishop's late poem entitled "Poem" makes an even greater claim for the value of representation. Though the poem appears modest and minute, it reveals a capacity to communicate human emotion by portraying the natural environment. Here, the speaker considers another painting by her great-uncle. This time, however, she marvels at the power of painting to represent everyday objects he has painted "In the foreground / a water meadow with some tiny cows, / two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows" (164-66). Bishop is interested in how art transfers information from painter to viewer. Though they are just brushstrokes, the paint is able to suggest cows "confidently." But much of the responsibility for painting's dynamic capabilities rests on the viewer, whose mind must be open to the image. For instance, the speaker notices that "A specklike bird is flying to the left," but she is open to the possibility that she might be mistaken: "Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?" Representation is not something that an artist produces alone; it is an ongoing dynamic and collaborative act. Likewise, a viewer does not

passively accept the images as the painter conceives of them; she constructs or completes them. Desire enters the painting through the artist but also through the viewer. This becomes especially clear when the speaker recognizes the landscape:

> Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
> It's behind—I can almost remember the farmer's name.
> His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
> titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
> filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
> must be the Presbyterian church.

The speaker has a personal connection to the landscape the painter has represented, and so the viewer and painter share the experience of a certain place. But it is more accurate to say that they share the *representation* of a place. Bishop insists on calling attention to the painter's technique. The barn is not a barn but rather the painter's attempt to represent it: "titanium white, one dab." The steeple is the representation of a steeple accomplished by "filaments of brush-hairs." For Bishop, the painting cannot achieve the objective existence of what it represents; it is always paint that might call forth experience. She reiterates the power of art to transform external objects into human emotion. Representation is intersubjective, involving communication between people. The painter and the viewer communicate by representing and perceiving their external environment.

> Life and the memory of it cramped,
> dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
> dim, but how live, how touching in detail
> —the little that we get for free,

the little of our earthly trust. Not much.

About the size of our abidance

along with theirs: the munching cows,

the iris, crisp and shivering, the water

still standing from spring freshets,

the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Bishop sets up a spatial difference between "life," the unalloyed experience of the external world, and the "memory of it cramped, / dim, on a piece of Bristol board." Life is large and all-encompassing, while representations are necessarily small. But these small portrayals succeed where "large bad pictures" fail because they contain "the little of our earthly trust," involving the small and individual self rather than gesturing at an expansiveness that exceeds us. Her interest in maps and geography involves reducing the largeness of our world to a human scale, small but full of drama, memory, and desire.[5] In a sense, the world can only be experienced and valued through small representations that expose their techniques, allowing viewers into them, rather than large images of stillness that reject them; representation is where desire meets the world. It is, for Bishop, alive. Though subjects do not construct the world, they perceive space in it for themselves, allowing for our small abidance. The poem's title, "Poem," is itself small thing that makes a limited claim, and it also exposes itself as a representation

In light of Bishop's view of representation, a poem like "The Bight" is both an act of observation and communication, a representation of the natural world like the artist's painting in "Poem." The desire that Bishop puts into the world by describing her surroundings is an urge to communicate that matches the artist's. "The Bight," in

portraying a devastating world of “awful” activity, provides, in a few brushstrokes, a world we might recognize. Bishop paints a landscape where water evaporates to gas and pelicans crash without reward. Anyone who has suffered loneliness is meant to say, “Heavens, I know the place.” Like the interplay of her view with the painter’s in “Poem,” the speaker’s experience in “The Bight” relates to the reader’s. From Bishop’s perspective, this is what poetry does. In the poems about representation, Bishop suggests that desire enters the world, shaping the way we perceive it and ultimately allowing for the transfer of human emotion. It is fitting that the poem most concerned with how emotion is conveyed is titled “Poem,” for it reveals Bishop’s idea of what poetry does.

Bishop frequently gets at the same sense of “abidance” by portraying solitary animals in worlds that endanger them. “The Fish, “The Armadillo,” “Sandpiper,” and “The Moose” present animals that signify a natural immanence that manages to retain unity in the midst of dispersion. “The Moose” considers how the modern subject might conceive of itself in the world. Bishop presents two narratives, one through space and the other through time. The poem begins by describing the confluence of waters as a river empties into a bay. From these waters, a bus carrying the speaker makes its way west. The first fourteen stanzas describe the physical details of the bus, its path through the small towns, and the surrounding environment. These stanzas present the immanent subject moving through the world. The next seven stanzas develop a life story, a human historical narrative that parallels the physical trip. An old couple on the bus reviews the life events that have touched them:

> names being mentioned,
>
> things cleared up finally;

> what he said, what she said,
>
> who got pensioned;
>
> deaths, deaths and sicknesses
>
> the year he remarried;
>
> the year (something) happened.
>
> She died in childbirth.
>
> That was the son lost
>
> when the schooner foundered. (158-62)

The old man and woman hurtle through their history, a collection of events that are primarily losses, occasions in which things have been taken from them. Immanence is, in many cases, a history of bereavement. Things are "cleared up," but they resolve themselves into a string of "deaths, deaths and sicknesses." The final seven stanzas recount the sudden appearance of the moose, a figure that affords an opportunity to step outside the flow of human life, of horizontal travel through the world. All the riders on the bus are transported by the encounter with the moose in the middle of the road:

> Taking her time,
>
> she looks the bus over,
>
> grand, otherworldly.
>
> Why, why do we feel
>
> (we all feel) this sweet
>
> sensation of joy?

One possible reason for their joy is the moose's "otherworldliness," its massiveness and solidity, especially as it follows the list of losses that comprise life. In Bishop's work, the solitary animal is a symbol of immanence that allows subjects to imagine themselves whole within the sometimes dangerous world that threatens to dissolve them. Though the moose was endangered by the moving bus, it represents the ability to abide the degradations of the human world. When the bus pulls away, the moose is left behind at the intersection of two worlds:

> the moose can be seen
> on the moonlit macadam;
> then there's a dim
> smell of moose, an acrid
> smell of gasoline.

The moose represents a unified form of immanence, an unexplainable cohesiveness of feeling that can resist the divisions that plague the subject. It is "Towering, antlerless, / high as a church." Through its sheer size, it retains a solid, indivisible, and, indeed, sacred self. Bishop ends the poem with the smell of both moose and gasoline, a mixture of animal and human worlds. The intersection of these two realms provides the speaker a moment to consider how one might abide in the modern world. Bishop employs the same combination of worlds in "The Armadillo," whose titular creature must flee fire balloons released by humans: "Hastily, all alone, / the glistening armadillo left the scene, / rose-flecked, head down, tail down" (83-84). The armadillo glistens, reflecting the fires started by human beings. In his armor, he abides within the world. In "The Fish," the final image of "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow" is caused by the oil that has escaped the motor and

sloshes in the water at the bottom of the boat. Bishop brings the human subject, immanent, uncertain, and divided, into contact with whole and otherworldly animal who can withstand the world.

"At the Fishhouses" takes the intersection of the human and animal worlds as its primary concern, reflecting on the painful possibility of entering an immanent realm. The poem has three sections, the first focusing on the human realm, describing the fishhouses and the speaker's interaction with an old man who scales and cleans the fish. Bishop is interested in the paradoxical beauty that his scraping creates:

> The big fish tubs are completely lined
> with layers of beautiful herring scales
> and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
> with creamy iridescent coats of mail
> [. . . . .]
> There are sequins on his vest and on this thumb.
> He has scraped the scales, the principle beauty,
> from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
> the blade of which is almost worn away. (50-52)

The old fisherman signifies an ambivalent articulation to the world. Though he destroys the fish, he sustains a traditional way of life that the speaker notes with sadness is diminishing. For Bishop, the scales are not the disgusting detritus of a severe process; they are "sequins," flakes of beauty like the rose and amethyst grains of sand in the dissolved world of "Sandpiper." Still, this beauty only appears in points of light that he has scraped from the fish. Beauty is broken into little pieces. Bishop creates an emotional

tone of sadness, reinforced by images such as “melancholy” stains and “rusted” ironwork. Beauty and vitality are qualities that came before but have now declined, and life in the human world inevitably entails this decay.

The second stanza moves away from the human world and down to the water’s edge, the balance point between realms. The shoreline represents the boundary between land and sea as well as between human and animal. The stanza contains a number of conflicting directionalities that signal the speaker’s ambiguous relation to these two worlds:

> Down at the water’s edge, at the place
> where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
> descending into the water, thin silver
> tree trunks are laid horizontally
> across the gray stones, down and down
> at intervals of four or five feet.

In this brief stanza, the speaker notes the opposition of various movements: down, up, up, descending, horizontally, across, down, down. Bishop portrays the tension and contradiction inherent in the intersection of earth and sea, implying the difficulty of entering a new element. Rather than contrasting vertical and horizontal movement, Bishop combines them in a complex and contradictory trajectory, suggesting that life is a mixture of immanence and transcendence, dispersed and unified subjectivity, and desire and rejection. The speaker’s description of the calm but declining human realm gives way to her consideration of the painful but enthralling sea. If the human world represents paradoxical dissolution and beauty, the animal world of the sea represents the tension

between freezing darkness and the seal's playful curiosity. Bishop considers the complexity of communication between these realms:

> Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
>
> element bearable to no mortal,
>
> to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly
>
> I have seen here evening after evening.
>
> He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
>
> like me a believer in total immersion,
>
> so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
>
> I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

The seal is another solitary animal, but unlike the moose, he contemplates the speaker and therefore possesses some degree of agency or understanding. The seal is an ambiguous symbol, a reflection of the speaker's conflicted concerns. Bishop's biographer Brett C. Millier points out that the notes in Bishop's journals that became "At the Fishhouses" were marked with the notation "GM" for "Geographical Mirror," suggesting that they were "part of an attempt to find herself reflected in the land and sea" (182). In this way, the seal is a reflection of herself in an alien and unfamiliar world. Her interest in the seal is an exploration of a new subjectivity, a view of herself in a cold and watery realm rather than the human world. The seal inhabits a flowing world rather than a stable one. She remarks that the water is bearable to no mortal, and yet the seal paradoxically appears "evening after evening," suggesting that she repeats this juxtaposition of worlds again and again as if it is inevitable. It must be noted, however, that the seal considers her in return. In this way, the speaker views herself and her own motivations through the eyes

of a different type of subjectivity. They are drawn to each other because they think of what the opposite realm offers, though the seal, in particular, is skeptical. The speaker communicates by singing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which offers the stillness and protection of the Christian God, but the seal is dubious. Though they are both believers in "total immersion," this phrase has a double meaning. For the seal, it means the fluidity of "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear" water; for the speaker it is a reference to the Christian sacrament of baptism and purification. But each of these immersions has a dark side. In Bishop's early short story "The Baptism," the protagonist "believed ardently in the use of total immersion as practiced by the Baptists" and dies after eagerly getting baptized in a cold stream in early spring (*Poems* 166). Bishop suggests that this sort of immersion, representing the search for purity, is a tragedy leading to an unnecessary death.

The seal's immersion is just as ambivalent. On the one hand, it is an introduction to knowledge, but in order to attain it, one must survive an initiation of pain:

> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever, flowing and drawn, and since
> our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

The water suggests an imbricated life, "flowing, and flown," immersed in the knowledge distilled from the environment. The speaker cannot withdraw from the world. Bishop does not offer forms of transcendence that elevate the soul above the operations of our

everyday surroundings, nor is she convinced that one may reject the world and aesthetically imagine a place apart from it. In these ways, her poetry begins to differ from the forms of modernism developed by poets such as Pound, Eliot, and H.D. She emphasizes the immanent subject who, although yearning for some sort of protected and discrete self, is awash in the world. The purpose of poetry, from Bishop's perspective, is to portray the ways we interact with the things that surround us, from our frustration with a world of absence and concealment to the libidinal growth in representation. Bishop's poetry strikes a balance between the dissolution of the subject in the flows of external reality and the unification of a discrete and isolated self. In her poetry, she is chiefly concerned with what happens as we dip our hands into experience both flowing and flown, imagining a transformation from the fortress of the imago to the dissolved and flowing self.

One of the tensions of the poem, however, is that the speaker never enters the water. She is drawn to it but only describes its postulated, conditional, suppositional effects:

> If you should dip your hand in,
> your wrist would ache immediately,
> your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
> as if the water were a transmutation of fire
> that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.

The water would produce painfully intense sensations, both freezing and burning. To dip one's hand into this dark element, therefore, is a fearful proposition. The speaker holds back from such pain and yet desires the interaction rather than withdrawal. Bishop's

subject, though balanced between these two environments, is ready to imagine passing beyond the boundary.

Notes

[1] In fact, Bishop prides herself on appreciating Eliot's work despite her disagreement with his social values: "Politically I considered myself a socialist, but I disliked 'social conscious' writing. I stood up for T. S. Eliot when everybody else was talking about James T. Farrell" (qtd. in Brown 293).

[2] Another poem,"The Equilibrists," is more complicated than the others because it intensifies the desire between the two lovers. It tears them apart and leads them to their grave, but the desire itself never seems to perish. In this particular poem, Ransom imagines desire transcending death, and the poem does not approach the formal quiescence of the others.

[3] Quotations from Bishop's poetry are from *Poems, Prose, and Letters* unless otherwise noted and will be cited by page numbers parenthetically in my text. "The Weed" is on pages 15 and 16.

[4] Willard Spiegelman notes that "Cape Breton" is more than just factual observation, claiming, in fact, that the poem is "a glimpse into a heart of darkness" (161). His careful analysis of Bishop's word choices and images makes it clear that the poem advances beyond what Bishop calls "plain description" into loss and meaninglessness, but, for Spiegelman, the result is an epistemological breakdown: "Both the landscape and its meaning have been abandoned in a cinematic sleight-of-hand that calls into question the very grounds of our knowing" (163). Rather than enacting such abandonment,

however, the poem communicates the experience of abandonment, finding a resonant convergence of the natural world and the human feeling of loss.

[5] Commenting on “The Map,” Sybil P. Estess points out that “[t]he issue at stake is that the images on maps are by definition construction of the mind, as the mind attempts to plot the landscape in order to find its way” (221). Estess argues that Bishop moves from solid natural surroundings toward representations of them that have something at stake for the speaker, who must “find [her] way.” In other words, the world and its representation are not purely epistemological questions but are questions of motivation, desire, and self-interest.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This dissertation is built on the idea that poets explore and construct models of desire and subjectivity. In the preceding chapters, I have examined these models as they develop in the works of several modernist American poets. Despite significant variety among them, they share a general inclination to withdraw desire from the external world and redirect it toward the self. This development starts to recede in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, who conceives of the subject as inherently divided and imbricated in the world. Looking forward, it is possible to extend this perspective to analyze the poetry that follows modernism, which responds to a much different cultural and historical context. Specifically, post-World War II poets experienced a social environment characterized by modes of unity rather than fragmentation. On one level, this unity was driven by the common defense required by World War II. The shock of Pearl Harbor quickly galvanized into a desire to defeat the nation's enemies that lasted through the war and into the Cold War with the Soviet Union. On another level, the economic forces that had been stagnant during the 1930s sprang to life during World War Two, driving the production of war materiel, including the atomic bomb. This resurgent capitalism, in turn, fueled the hyper-consumerism that followed the war. Unlike industrial capitalism, which restricts desire in order to enforce modes of production, consumer capitalism operates by eliciting desire, directing it toward fetishized commodities and modes of consumption. Herbert Marcuse, Fredric Jameson, Guy Debord, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari chart the historical development of this reorganization of desire.[1] The seeming evaporation of authority and restriction obscures the emergence of more insidious forms

of control. In *One-Dimensional Man*, for instance, Marcuse points out that new forms of desire serve the interests of the prevailing social order: “This mobilization and administration of libido may account for much of the voluntary compliance, the absence of terror, the pre-established harmony between individual needs and socially-required desires, goals, and aspirations” (75). The harmony Marcuse describes was also ensured by the rise of broadcast television, which could project and idealize images of conformity at the same time it stimulated the desire for glamorized consumer products.

Postwar society is marked by the freedom to pursue satisfaction, but such pursuit is paradoxically accompanied by conformity, the movement in unison with everyone, as in a school of fish. In *From Modern to Contemporary*, James Breslin refers to the rise of a “new rear guard” of writers who relied on dense symbolism as well as rigid rhyming and stanza forms (23-53). Breslin’s study discusses the revolt against this staid and resolved poetry primarily in formal terms, but the formal breakthrough was accompanied by shifting models of desire and subjectivity. Poets in postwar America struggled against unity much as the modernists struggled against fragmentation, though the forms of this struggle are necessarily different. Allen Ginsberg, for instance, pushes for extremes of sensuality that offend the social order but at the same time reveals its underlying logic of authority. He inherits Walt Whitman’s sensualist perspective, especially when expressing sexual desire, but his frankness begins to reveal new challenges and present different resolutions. Ginsberg, like Whitman, gravitates toward all objects of the world, but he insists that this reality must include unpleasant and unfortunate things:

Here we’re overwhelmed

with such unpleasant detail

we dream again of Heaven.

For the world is a mountain

of shit: if it's going to

be moved at all, it's got

to be taken by handfuls. (50-51)

For Ginsberg, the world is a mountain, grand and majestic, but also, quite bluntly, a pile of shit. The figure of human excrement signifies throughout his work how broad and inclusive his model of desire is, how it admits everything, grasping the entire range of our surroundings. Though he is sometimes disgusted with what he finds, he nevertheless takes it with both hands.

Ginsberg's expansive desire, like Whitman's, moves out toward the world, but it is sensitive to forces that limit or restrict desire. The model of subjectivity that emerges from his concept of desire is characterized by a struggle against constriction. Ginsberg's subject is inevitably pushing for the freedom to contain multitudes, to expand further into the world. For this reason, Ginsberg's poetry is intrinsically political; his subjects are hemmed in by capitalism, restrictive social morals, and the abuses of government. The forces of social restriction are hostile, and the struggle leads to devastating consequences for those who fight against them. "Howl" is an angry lament for those lost in the struggle: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix" (126). For Ginsberg, the effort to pursue sensual satisfaction can lead to madness when the social

order is arrayed against it. Like Whitman, he constructs a dispersive model of the self, but desire for the world runs into forces that try to contain it. Ginsberg's speakers are shadowed by the FBI and threatened by the laws of a repressive state. In this environment, poets are those who "howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts" (128). Sexual organs are bared in order to interact with the world, but so, too, are manuscripts. Poets must expose their desire through language, though they live in a world where the social order could drag them off to mental institutions or prisons.

Ginsberg explicitly acknowledges his debt to Whitman by imagining the bearded old poet in "A Supermarket in California," an emblematic location of contemporary American culture for its gratuitous display of food in the land of stylized Hollywood cinematic landscapes. Whitman looks through rows and rows of products, attempting to touch and taste everything. But this is a supermarket rather than the natural world; therefore, it is driven by capitalist modes of production and consumption. Though Ginsberg visualizes himself walking with Whitman through the corridors, "tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier," they are nevertheless hemmed in by the fact that "[t]he doors close in an hour" (136). For Ginsberg, the opportunity to act on pure desire occurs on terms set by the overarching social order. His transgressive desire struggles perpetually against restrictive authority, resulting in a subject always more discrete and circumscribed than he wishes.

While Ginsberg pursues sensualist models of desire, Robert Lowell follows Dickinson in exploring the impossibility of satisfaction. Lowell constructs a model of desire in which the bonds that might join us to the world cannot be recovered. In

Lowell's poetry, these bonds exhibit two primary characteristics. First, the subject's relation to the world is almost entirely figured as a relation to people rather than objects. Lowell is not interested in the objects of the natural world except, perhaps, as symbols for human relationships. Furthermore, the bonds he considers are usually oedipal, either in terms of the mother-father-child dynamism or in terms of the transition from the oedipal family to romantic desire. Second, Lowell often situates the subject at a temporal point when it is impossible to recover or exercise the bonds to other people. In Lowell's poetry, speakers do not pursue objects of desire but, instead, desire moments when satisfaction was possible. The subject experiences desire as a gnawing and dissolving regret, whether in terms of parental or romantic relations. In the postwar context, paternal restriction is eroded; Lowell's subject loses the ability to connect with his father and wonders where he can turn for guidance. The paradigmatic poem of oedipal loss and resulting stasis and uncertainty is "Middle Age," in which Lowell contemplates the pressures of past and future:

> Now the midwinter grind
> is on me, New York
> drills through my nerves,
> as I walk
> the chewed-up streets.
>
> At forty-five,
> what next, what next?
> At every corner,

> I meet my Father,
>
> my age, still alive. (325)

Lowell's speaker is crushed between an unrecoverable past and an unknowable future, physically experiencing the dissolving grind that "drills" his nerves in the "chewed-up streets." He cannot recover the father he has lost, nor does he know how to proceed now that he has reached the same age as his father. He is caught in the "midwinter" of "middle age," a stasis between an irretrievable past and an uncertain future. Lowell's speaker recognizes the insufficiency of the present, trapping him within narrow temporal boundaries. The speaker first looks forward, asking "what next, what next?" Yet the repetition stresses his uncertainty and the fact that knowledge of the future is necessarily unavailable. The question is insistent rather than answerable, revealing how interminable the present is. The time that elapses between the first query and its repetition provides no answer; the speaker is left in a series of identical nows. The poem ends with the speaker's recognition that he must walk in the degraded present, the fallen New York rather than Mount Sion:

> You never climbed
>
> Mount Sion, yet left
>
> dinosaur
>
> death-steps on the crust,
>
> where I must walk.

Rather than connecting to the actual father who preceded him or the spiritual father from whom he asks forgiveness ("Father, forgive me / my injuries / as I forgive / those I / have injured!"), the speaker is caught repeating the question "what's next?" Despite the lack of

an answer, the final line insists that he must move. Though the speaker cannot reclaim the past, he must inevitably walk into the future. Critics such as Christian Sisack have attempted to claim subversive power for Lowell's poetics, arguing that Lowell's "marginalizations and shifting subjectivities can subvert the ability of the powerful to completely manage and discipline the subject of a confession" (279).[2] On the other hand, critics like Charles Altieri see Lowell as a poet who cannot find a way to embrace the complexities of contemporary American life. After the loss of modernism's urge to order and stability, Altieri argues, Lowell cannot find a means to express the varieties of experience authentically. For instance, Altieri calls Lowell's *Notebook* "a deliberate justification for and explanation of the condition of passive self-pity" (71). However, Lowell understands the loss of this organizing principle as a valid and, indeed, formative experience. Lowell's poetry dramatizes the fact that contemporary experience is made up of impossible desire and gnawing pauses. Lowell attests to our immobilization in a moment of time, the static and unsatisfying present. In "Water," the speaker laments a missed opportunity at romance while watching the sea upon the rocks that "kept tearing away / flake after flake" (321). The speaker sees slow dissolution in an undesired present. In "The Old Flame," the speaker contemplates a failed relationship that can never be rectified; a new couple moves into their old house and restores it, but the speaker is not able to return to his own past and correct his problems. In these and other poems, Lowell offers subjects who fruitlessly desire alternate moments of time in the hopes of recovering a family unit that no longer gives order to the world.

Like Lowell, John Ashbery focuses on the subject in the present moment, but for Ashbery the subject luxuriates in this moment rather than lamenting lost opportunities. In

"Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery dismisses the idea of a stable and unified self. He contends that "the soul is not a soul, / Has no secret, is small, and it fits / Its hallow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention" (475). In this way, Ashbery rejects the idea of a temporal unity across time, the sort of discrete and isolated subject conceived by Pound, Stevens, Eliot, and H.D. Instead, we are our own "moment of attention." For Ashbery, however, this is not a loss; he celebrates the dynamism and activity of the present. For example, he criticizes Parmigianino's portrait because it immobilizes the self. In the portrait, "[t]he soul has to stay where it is, / Even though restless" (474). Ashbery argues that the search for a temporally unified self is misguided because it is "[i]mpossible now / To restore those properties in the silver blur" (477). The present moment is always emerging and provides a truth that is not available to the past or future. He argues that the present is all encompassing: "Today has no margins, the event arrives / Flush with its edges" (484). The present is all we can ever inhabit. We are comprised of our own restlessness and activity rather than being a static and unified subject. In other words, Ashbery distinguishes between being and doing. The former suggests unity across time, but the latter must always occur in the present.

As the self dissolves into only the moment of experience for Ashbery, desire is diffused, neither directed to the self nor finding any other objects. Desire does not underlie the subject's creative powers, as it does in Pound, nor does it alight on sublime natural objects of experience as it does in Shelley. Instead, Ashbery constructs a model in which desire is unattached, atomized, and free of properties:

Love once
Tipped the scales but now is shadowed, invisible,

> Though mysteriously present, around somewhere.
>
> But we know it cannot be sandwiched
>
> Between two adjacent moments, that its windings
>
> Lead nowhere except to further tributaries
>
> And that these empty themselves into a vague
>
> Sense of something that can never be known. (482)

Love, for Ashbery, is not directed by a subject or isolated into an identifiable object. Instead, love is a general background; we are awash in the nebulous and indistinct possibility that satisfaction might occur. Love cannot be known, though it vaguely "seems likely that each of us / Knows what it is" (483). To act upon desire, however, is to "Push forward ignoring the apparent / Naïveté of the attempt" (483). To avoid this, Ashbery again returns to the model of the dispersed self separated from temporal unity rather than pursuing sensual interaction with objects: "But this confusion drains away as one / Is always cresting into one's present" (483). Ashbery's present is shorn of any particularity. It is not Ginsberg's present, which is marked by the intimate—even disgusting—contact with the objects of the world. Instead, it is a conceptual moment, "the present," empty. Ashbery's focus on purely conceptual content is a repudiation of the reality of his surroundings, such as the California supermarket of Ginsberg's 1950s. And in some ways it is also an extension of the underlying logic of postmodernism which seeks to separate events from their material causes and effects. Fredric Jameson diagnoses postmodernism by suggesting that the new emphasis on presentness rejects the history or teleology that characterized modernist texts: "the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might

focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming" (27). Ashbery's poetry exhibits the temporal disjunction Jameson describes except that the subsequent vividness is, rather, an intensity of vagueness. The subject who cannot be unified in time must also accept a directionless, indefinite desire.

Ashbery, however, subtly questions his model of desire, evincing a gentle longing for things that might outlast the present. Art itself is one such thing. Though it is an expression of the artist's present, it is also able to step outside of its moment and cause a reaction in the viewer:

> [. . .] This past
> Is now here: the painter's
> Reflected face, in which we linger, receiving
> Dreams and inspirations on an unassigned
> Frequency. (486)

The portrait is a physical object that can transcend the artist's present and communicate across time. Though Ashbery suggests that its brightness begins to diminish, it offers the subject an opportunity to renew itself. Like Bishop, Ashbery is still affected by a sense of past unity. The poem ends with the ambiguous image of the contemporary subject in the act of making himself while simultaneously falling apart:

> [. . .] One feels too confined,
> Sifting the April sunlight for clues,
> In the mere stillness of the ease of its
> Parameter. The hand holds no chalk

And each part of the whole falls off

And cannot know it knew, except

Here and there, in cold pockets

Of remembrance, whispers out of time. (487)

Ashbery suggests that we must not commit Parmigianino's error by trying to draw a stable and unified self. We cannot be the same self across time; he argues that "one" static being is "too confined" and that we exist in the flux of today only. But this urge toward unity, so prevalent in modernist poets and yet so challenged by their fragmenting social and historical circumstances, remains active in Ashbery's poetic vision, where the quiet voice of wholeness still speaks with compelling force. Despite Ashbery's rejection, the self-portrait in a convex mirror suggests an apt figure of postmodern poetry, containing a lasting wish for a stable self now distorted by an over-emphasis on the present. The mirror offers an image of the self, but it is only a representation, produced in a convex way that absurdly alters what it finds: selves that are shifting and contingent. For all their differences, Ginsberg, Lowell, and Ashbery share a postmodern model of subjectivity based on the flux of circumstances. Selves are temporary, existing through connections and disjunctions that form or deteriorate instantaneously. It is no coincidence that the postmodern movements these poets represent—the Beats, confessionalism, and the New York School—participate in new forms of desire unmoored from a concrete self. In the work of these poets, the recognition of an inexorable present overcomes the sense that we have discrete selves that can withhold desire from the world.

Notes

[1] See Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, and Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.

[2] Other critics who contend that Lowell politically destabilizes the prevailing social order include Steven Gould Axelrod and James Breslin.

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