

MARKS, BUTTONS AND NOTES:
PHENOMENOLOGY AND CREATIVE PRODUCTION IN
VIRGINIA WOOLF, GERTRUDE STEIN
AND WALLACE STEVENS

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is my own work and contains nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration with others, except as specified in the text and acknowledgements. Variations on sections of my work have previously appeared or will appear in published form. Specifically,

“Interrelation and Separation: Dialectical Tensions in Paul Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers* and Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” in *Across the Generations: Selected Papers From the Twelfth International Virginia Woolf Conference*, eds. Merry Pawlowsky and Eileen Barrett (CSU Bakersfield: Center for Virginia Woolf Studies), http://www.scub.edu/woolf_center/publications/

“‘Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct?’: Woolf’s ‘Gigantic Conversation,’” forthcoming in *Etudes britanniques contemporaines*, n° hors série, ed. C. Reynier, Univ. Montpellier 3, automne 2004.

“Through the Wrong End of the Telescope: Thresholds of Perception in Cornell, Ashbery and Merleau-Ponty,” forthcoming in the book in preparation *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, eds. Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the connection between phenomenology and creative production in selected works of twentieth-century Modernist writers Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens. Particular emphasis on philosopher Edmund Husserl's concept of phenomenological reduction and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's interpretation thereof creates an interpretive foundation from which to clarify the three writers' aesthetic inquiries. Alongside the phenomenological thought of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, I draw upon contemporary theorist Mieke Bal's theory of visual experience, which sheds new light on the phenomenological relation between seer and seen, creative subject and object, reader and text. This thesis is not a study of influence but an intertextual examination, which brings to light a kinship of method and concern between phenomenology and the three literary Modernists' concerns with creativity, arguing that the reduction offers a heretofore-overlooked clue to the nature of Modernist aesthetics at large.

Literary criticism has already approached the work of Modernist writers – that of Stevens in particular – through Husserlian phenomenology. In correlation with the well-established view that Modernist artists, due to the substantial changes taking place in the social sphere, shifted their attention inward, detaching the artist's creation from the plane of ordinary life, much of this scholarship has interpreted the method of reduction as a complete rejection or elimination of daily life, leaving the individual consciousness in an isolated and enclosed space.

This study both argues against this misunderstanding of the reduction and takes issue with the view of Modernist art as upholding the idea of a mind/world opposition. I clarify that the reduction seeks to return to the foundation for human perceptions and expressions prior to objective points of view and scientific notions. The turn to this “phenomenological standpoint” is not a turn away from objectivity but points to the fact that objective and factual meaning is constituted through conscious acts. The reduction, in other words, points to the necessary co-operation and interdependence of the external and the internal, the objective and the subjective. It is this aspect of the Modernist text that I bring to the fore. I show how the very different writings of Woolf, Stein and Stevens, through shifts of attitude comparable to reduction, promote not a separation of subject and object-world, but a grounding of objective thought in the pre-reflective intentional experience of the subject. Rather than cutting off the artist/artwork from the world, the perceiver from the perceived, their phenomenological writings aim to restore openness onto the world.

The thesis is divided into four chapters and a Postface. The first chapter explains why and how the thought of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Bal offer foundations for my examination. Chapters Two, Three and Four critically explore the kinship of method between phenomenology and the writings of Woolf, Stein, and Stevens, respectively. The Postface not only looks back and sums up the main points of the three chapters but also briefly opens onto the present and identifies similar phenomenological patterns in the work of contemporary poet John Ashbery and the artist Joseph Cornell, thereby underscoring my view that the reduction offers a significant clue to Modernist art at large.

ABBREVIATIONS

In referring to published works by Woolf, Stein, Stevens, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the following abbreviations are employed.

Works by Virginia Woolf:

- CD* *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life: Selected Essays*, vol. 2, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin Books, 1993).
- CE 2* *Collected Essays by Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966).
- Diary 1* *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977).
- Diary 3* *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980).
- HD* *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*. ed. J.W. Graham (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976).
- HH* *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1972).
- JR* *Jacob's Room* (1922; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- MB* *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1985).
- MD* *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- RO* *A Room of One's Own* (1928; London: Penguin Books, 1945).
- SS* *Selected Short Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 1993).
- L* *To the Lighthouse* (1927; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- W* *The Waves* (1931; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)
- WE* *A Woman's Essays: Selected Essays*, vol. 1, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

Woolf, Letters *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976)

Works by Gertrude Stein:

- ABT* *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933; London: Penguin Books, 1966).
- “CE” “Composition as Explanation,” in *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909-45*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 21-30.
- GP* *Geography and Plays*. ed. Cyrena N. Pondrom (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).
- “PG” “Poetry and Grammar” (1935), in *Look at Me Now*, 125-147.
- Picasso* *Picasso*. (1938; New York: Dover Publications, 1984)
- “PR” “Portraits and Repetitions” (1935), in *Look at Me Now*, 99-124.
- TB* *Tender Buttons* (1914; New York: Dover Publications 1997)
- “TI” “A Transatlantic Interview 1946,” with Robert Bartlett Haas, in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*. ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971), 11-37.

Works by Wallace Stevens:

- CP* *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. (1954; London: Faber and Faber, 1984).
- NA* *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951; London: Faber and Faber, 1960).
- OP* *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).
- Stevens, Letters* *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

Works by Edmund Husserl

- CM* *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1977).

- Crisis 1* *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).
- Crisis 2* *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
- Husserl Short* *Husserl's Shorter Works*, eds. Peter McCormick and Frederick A. Elliston (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
- Ideas* *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. R. Boyce Gibson (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1931).
- Works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty**
- "Doubt" "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Robert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9-25.
- PP* *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).
- Primacy* *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).
- Signs* *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
- VI* *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

PREFACE:

MARKS, BUTTONS AND NOTES AS TEXTUAL NAVELS

*Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but,
like art, the act of bringing truth into being*

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *PP* (xx)

[T]he text is an occasion for, not the cause of, meaning. . .

—Mieke Bal, “Dispersing the Image” (76)

The purpose of this study is to examine the connection between phenomenology and creative production in selected writings of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), in particular “The Mark on the Wall” (1917), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931), Gertrude Stein’s (1874-1946) *Tender Buttons* (1914), and selected poems of Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), focusing especially on “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1935) and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942). I use Edmund Husserl’s (1859-1938) phenomenological concept of *epoché* or reduction, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1907-61) interpretation thereof, as a tool to articulate more clearly the aesthetic inquiries of Woolf, Stein and Stevens, the affinities of which have been heretofore overlooked in literary criticism. I argue that the mode of operation of the *epoché* is the engine of the repetitive patterns at the core of the selected works,

which are all about creative production itself. Drawing upon theorist Mieke Bal's essay "Dispersing the Image: Vermeer Story,"¹ I move "beyond the word image opposition"² and read the works of Woolf, Stevens and Stein against a background of Paul Cézanne's art, which Merleau-Ponty, in his 1945 essay "Cézanne's Doubt," uses as an example of phenomenological work with paint. Bal's theory, which considers sight as semiotic and visual art as narrative, places emphasis on the relation between perception and language, the visual and the textual, which includes our roles as seers and readers. "[T]he text is an occasion for, not the cause of meaning," she stresses.³ I thus look at the repetitive nature of creative production in terms of writer as well as reader. Writer/Painter, reader/viewer and text/painting: each is an essential part of the work's making and re-making.

In terms of structure, the thesis is divided into four chapters and rounds off with a Postface. Chapter One critically explains why and how the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and Bal's visual theory serve as a framework for my examination. Chapters Two, Three and Four critically explore the kinship of method and concern between phenomenology and the work of Woolf, Stein, and Stevens, respectively. The Postface not only looks back upon my examinations of the three writers' works but also opens onto the present, begins again, and underlines my argument that the Husserlian concept of reduction is a clue to the nature of

¹ Mieke Bal, "Dispersing the Image: Vermeer Story," in *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001), 65-91.

² I have borrowed the phrase "beyond the word image opposition" from Mieke Bal's work *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word Image Opposition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³ Bal, "Dispersing the Image," 76.

Modernist aesthetics at large. In accordance with the fact that the reduction restores openness to the world, I end the thesis by offering a new “opening” which identifies phenomenological patterns of opening in the work of contemporary poet John Ashbery (1927) and the box constructions of Surrealist artist Joseph Cornell (1903-77).

The introductory chapter clarifies Husserl's speculations about reduction, spanning from *Ideas* (1913) to *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1954), and Merleau-Ponty's interpretations thereof in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), “Cézanne's Doubt” (1945) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). Blaming the political and historical disasters of the early twentieth century on Western man's naïve acceptance of common-sense beliefs and judgements about the world, Husserl insisted on returning to the grounds of philosophical inquiry by presenting a philosophical mode of operation: the *epoché* or phenomenological reduction. By enacting the *epoché*, the phenomenologist could “bracket” – suspend – common assumptions about the world, render a purity of consciousness accessible, and thus re-learn to see the world in its original but lost idea (*Ideas*, 107-114). For Merleau-Ponty, the roots of our familiar world are also found in primordial ideas, not of how phenomena appear to pure consciousness, as Husserl set out to show, but of how they appear to the embodied subject. Consciousness, he stresses, comes to birth in the body. Only by enacting the reduction, by “bracketing” what we, according to habit, believe to be real, can we “re-achiev[e] a direct and primitive contact with the world” (*PP*, vii). In Merleau-Ponty's essay “Cézanne's Doubt,” the method of reduction serves as a tool to

describe creative production in general, bringing to light the starting-point of the artist's creative process - that primary impulse of "wonder' in the face of the world" (*PP*, xiii).

Mieke Bal's metaphor of the "textual navel" helps us visualise the mode of operation of the phenomenological reduction, not only in terms of the artist's process of creation but also in terms of our roles as creative readers. Bal introduces the metaphor in the essay "Dispersing the Image," an unusual reading of Vermeer's painting *Woman Holding a Balance* (ca. 1664) relating to Bal's own fascination with a nail and a hole in the wall next to a painting *in* the painting. There is a link, Bal argues, between the light that falls near the navel of the woman in the painting and the light that falls on the wall, near the nail and the hole: "Vermeer's light directs our gaze to the place of the navel by way of the textual navel: the nail and the hole."⁴ Bal gives us her definition:

The navel. . . is a metaphor for an element, often a tiny detail, that hits the viewer, is processed by her or him, and textualizes the image on its own terms. Such details need not be bodily, but calling them "textual navels" keeps us aware of the bodiliness of looking.⁵

It is exactly the embodiment not only of "looking" but also of all sense experience that Merleau-Ponty stresses in his phenomenology of perception. The philosopher describes the genesis of perceptual experience by situating the Husserlian *epoché* directly within the physical world. The "bracketing" or suspension of habitual

⁴ Bal, "Dispersing the Image," p. 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

experience re-awakens in the perceiver a state of wonder and amazement in the face of the object. It is the “expressive operation of the body, begun by the smallest perception which is amplified into painting and art” (*Signs*, 70). Similarly, Bal’s navel is that fine visual detail in the object which “hits the viewer,” re-awakens a sense of wonder, and activates him/her to re-discover, reflect on, and participate in the art work’s coming into being:

The work no longer stands alone: the viewer must now acknowledge that she makes it work; the surface is no longer still but tells a story of its and her making . . . In attracting attention to the actual work that representing involves as well as to the work of reading or viewing, the nail and the hole are traces of the *work* of art, in all senses of that word.⁶

The nail and the hole, two examples of what Bal terms “textual navels,” proclaim both the birth and the production of art, revealing how the viewer or reader is a necessary part of that production.

In a letter to Wallace Stevens, Jean Wahl refers to Husserl’s affirmation of “an enormous. . . a priori in our minds, an inexhaustible infinity of a priori . . . the approach to the unapproachable“ (*OP*, 194). I use Bal’s navel metaphor as my “approach to the unapproachable.” The “un-approachable” is that pre-objective and pre-communicative dimension of experience which, in different ways, is ever-present as the source of creative production in the work of Woolf, Stein and Stevens. “It may be that there is a zone of silence in every art,” Woolf writes in “Walter

⁶ *Ibid.*, 84, 77.

Sickert,” “[t]he artists themselves live in it” (*CE* 2, 236). Stein certainly “lived in it.” The non-sense language of her *Tender Buttons* is an attempt to capture primordial experience, the natural “silent” order of things prior to the structures of grammar and reason: “I had to feel anything and everything that for me was existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name” (“PG,” 145). Through naming we try to make the world our own but, as Stevens puts it in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”, “we live in a place / That is not our own” (*CP*, 383) and “[f]rom this the poem springs”:

There was a muddy centre before we breathed

There was a myth before the myth began,

Venerable and articulate and complete. (*CP*, 383)

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology seeks to uncover the genesis of perception - he calls it “the lived experience, that which we actually perceive” (“Doubt,” 14) – and to describe how this experience bears on the formation of linguistic and conceptual meaning. My argument is that the writings of Woolf, Stein, and Stevens, like the paintings of Cézanne, lay bare the tension between perception and conception. For none of the three writers does the emphasis fall on the result but on the act - Stevens calls it “the act of the mind” (*CP*, 240) - of articulating the “unapproachable” source of creative production. In claiming this, I take my bearings from Kevin Hart: “[Husserl’s] incessant broodings over the reduction speak more vividly of something central to art than do his disciples’ extensions of phenomenology into aesthetics.” “Everything begins with the reduction,” Hart writes, meaning that the reduction – that state of fascination, which releases some

primary impulse in the art maker - is the point of departure (and point of return) in every creative process.⁷ I want to show that creative production for Woolf, Stein and Stevens begins (and ends) at this “navel” point.

A navel, the central knot of the body, is a sign of dependence on and yet detachment from the mother. In other words, it points in two directions at once and this double nature is relevant to my argument that Woolf, Stein and Stevens present us with works of phenomenological “perpetual beginning.” “The philosopher is a perpetual beginner,” writes Merleau-Ponty, which “means. . . that philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning; that it consists wholly in the description of this beginning” (*PP*, xiv). The “navel” metaphor highlights this perpetual genesis in that it, on the one hand, signifies the opening point of an open-ended creative process – the umbilical cord has been cut, as it were. On the other hand, being a “trace of the mother,”⁸ it also points back to the source of this creativity, that is to say, to the pre-communicative phase when the umbilical cord was still attached. The navel, then, is a metaphor for the division of experience that phenomenology brings to light: “not only are we dealing with what is given but also with what is presupposed in order for the giving to occur.”⁹ That which is “presupposed” is exactly the Husserlian notion of an “enormous. . . a priori in our minds,” which Jean Wahl refers to in his letter to Stevens.

By opening up my reading of creative production through Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall,” Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, and Stevens’s “Notes toward a Supreme

⁷ Kevin Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” *Boxkite* 2 (1998): 286, 285.

⁸ Bal, “Dispersing the Image,” 83.

⁹ Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 288.

Fiction,” I too start at the navel. In my reading of Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall,” I show that a black mark on a wall on which the narrator fixes her eye serves as the actual point of departure of her/our imaginary journey. Likewise, the “Buttons” of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* can be thought of as navel points - belly buttons – and designate starting points for creativity: buttons must be pressed to switch on a process. Finally, in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”, Stevens presents us with “Notes,” preparatory scribbles that lead toward but never fully reach a “Supreme Fiction.” Like the nail and the hole in Vermeer’s painting, Woolf’s “mark,” Stein’s “buttons,” and Stevens’s “notes” are those fine details which highlight the preliminary phase of creative production. Marks, buttons, and notes are points in a continuum of creative opening but are also, inevitably, points of eternal return to the pre-objective and pre-communicative source of this creativity. This phenomenological process of “perpetual beginning” is what Woolf calls “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again” (*W*, 247), what Stein refers to as “[b]eginning again and again [which] is a natural thing,” (“CE,” 23) and what Stevens terms the “ancient cycle,” which

satisfies

Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,

To an immaculate end. We move between these

points:

From that ever-early candor to its late plural. (*CP*, 382)

The reduction, then, is not only a point of departure for creative production, it is also a point of eternal return. Merleau-Ponty writes: “The most important lesson that the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (*PP*, xiv). As soon as the “a priori. . . the unapproachable” has been approached through language, the art maker’s initial state of fascination, the “Thing itself” (*Ideas*, 66) will have vanished:

. . . if the thing itself were reached, it would be from that moment arrayed before us and stripped of its mystery. It would cease to exist as a thing at the very moment when we thought to possess it. What makes the “reality” of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp. (*PP*, 233)

My final aim in this study is to show how the works of the three Modernists anticipate this “fate of perception,” that is to say, the inability completely to grasp what Woolf’s Lily Briscoe calls “the thing itself before it has been made anything” (*L*, 260).¹⁰

¹⁰ I have borrowed the term “fate of perception” from Geoff Ward, *Statues of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 156.

CHAPTER 1

MODERNISM AND THE AESTHETICS OF PHENOMENOLOGY

In carrying out this epoché, we obviously continue to stand on the ground of the world; it is now reduced to the life-world which is valid for us prescientifically.

—Edmund Husserl, *Crisis 2* (147)

[I]ntentionality [is] too often cited as the main discovery of phenomenology, whereas it is understandable only through the reduction.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *PP* (*PP*, xvii)

I. “The Breakdown of the Object”

In his 1934 essay “Recent Irish Poetry,” Samuel Beckett claimed that Modern Irish poetry expressed an awareness of “the breakdown of the object,” which had occasioned a “rupture of the lines of communication.” The task of the Modern artist was therefore to “state the space that intervenes between him and the world of

objects.”¹ The “breakdown of the object” can also be used as a characterisation of the radical changes that were taking place in Western culture from about 1890 to 1930. It is a well-established view that the changes in the arts during this period, which is known as Modernism, were related to substantial changes taking place in the social sphere. Advances made within technology and nuclear physics, and changes of thought within social and political structures, changed the concept of what constituted reality. The scientific, religious and political beliefs that had previously asserted an objective reality were gradually breaking down: objectivity and factuality in all its form were threatened by “rupture” and a lack of coherence. “All human relations have shifted,” Virginia Woolf pointed out in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), “[a]nd when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature” (*WE*, 71). This change of relations, which Woolf placed “about the year 1910” (*WE*, 71), was marked by what Stephen Kern, in a more recent study of the conceptual changes of time and space from 1880 to 1918, refers to as “antithetical developments” between “dialectically related pairs”: the individual and the public, identity and difference, subjectivity and objectivity. Kern writes:

As the public became more intrusive, the individual retreated into a more strongly fortified and isolated private world. That is why we can observe in this period both a greater interpenetration and a greater separation of the two worlds.²

¹ Samuel Beckett, “Recent Irish Poetry,” *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 70.

² Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 191.

About the year 1913, in his “General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology” entitled *Ideas*, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl introduced the *epoché*, the phenomenological concept of reduction, as a tool to analyse these tensions between man and world. Husserl blamed the breakdown of social and political forms, leading to what he would later call “Europe’s sickness” (*Crisis I*, 153), on the fact that the “ordinary science[s] of fact” (*Ideas*, 184) had obscured the original foundation for knowledge. Western man’s unquestioning trust in pre-conceived scientific notions, asserting an objective and ready-made reality, had separated him from “the absolute ground of pure pre-conceptual experience” (*Ideas*, 27). It had made him lose sight of the fact that consciousness itself was the source of the meaning of the world, that objectivity arises from an intending subjectivity. Husserl thought of phenomenology as a “first philosophy” or a philosophy of “a radical beginning” (*Ideas*, 27). The goal of the *epoché* was to get “*Back to the things themselves (zu den Sachen selbst)*,”³ that is to say, to recover how the world was “first” experienced and constituted through consciousness. The mode of operation of “bracketing” (*Ideas*, 107-114) central to the *epoché* would help put out of play pre-conceived objectivity, uncover the world’s essential structure - the “primal ground” (*Husserl Short*, 10) for knowledge - and thus provide an exact description of things as these were met with in immediate experience. By returning to the pre-reflective dimension of experience, the subject could get back to the “thing itself,” see clearly the depth of his involvement with the world, “state the space” - to use Beckett’s terminology - between himself and a broken object-world, and cure Europe of its “sickness.”

³ Edmund Husserl as cited in Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Martin Heidegger: A First Introduction to His Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965).

Epoché as Aesthetic Tool

This study explores the related patterns between phenomenology and creative production in selected works of the high Modernist writers Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. Particular emphasis on the Husserlian reduction and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later interpretation of this concept creates an interpretive foundation from which to clarify the aesthetic inquiries of the three Modernist writers, the affinities of which, I argue, offer heretofore overlooked clues to the nature of Modernist aesthetics at large. In arguing this, I am taking my bearings from Kevin Hart's statement: "[Husserl's] incessant broodings over the reduction speak . . . vividly of something central to art."⁴

What I propose is not a study of influence; rather, I offer an intertextual examination, which highlights the kinship of method and concern between phenomenology and the aesthetics of Woolf, Stein and Stevens. What I hope to show is that the works of the three Modernists in different ways evidence a breakdown of old beliefs and a change of relations within Modernist culture. All respond to and offer a critique of this "breakdown"; all aim to reclaim the space between subject and object-world; all imply that the cure to this breakdown can be found in a phenomenological shift of attitude, the main purpose of which is to get back to "the thing itself," that is to say, to uncover the creative subject's pre-reflective experience of the world, taking this as a new starting-point for the creation and understanding of art.

⁴ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 286.

While Virginia Woolf would set out in the Modern world of broken objects to “seek among phrases and fragments something unbroken” (*W*, 210), Gertrude Stein portrayed the “twentieth century” as “a time when everything cracks,” which she claimed, “is a more splendid thing than a period where everything follows itself” (*Picasso*, 49). Stein’s “splendid” twentieth century evidences a time of radical change, of showing forth what lies beneath the cracked surface of habituality.⁵

Wallace Stevens also confronted the broken object-world by challenging his reader: “Piece the world together boys, but not with your / Hands” (*CP*, 192). According to him “the great poems of heaven and hell [had] been written and the great poem of the earth remain[ed] to be written” (*NA*, 142). He regarded the poet as “the priest of the invisible” (*OP*, 169) whose “Supreme Fiction” (*CP*, 380) was to impose new secular orders on the world and thus serve as a substitute for the breakdown of traditional faith. In *Adagia* Stevens writes:

The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a sceptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give. (*OP*, 159)

Similarly, in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” Stevens claims, “the poet must get rid of the hieratic in everything that concerns him” (*NA*, 58). By putting out of play the traditional “hieratic” notions about the world, the poet could turn to “the poem of the act of the mind” (*CP*, 240) - the creations of his own consciousness -

⁵ The word “splendid” derives from the Latin “splendidus,” meaning “bright, shining, glittering, brilliant, . . . illustrious, *showy*.” See *The Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 130. I will elaborate on Stein’s logic of the “splendid” in Chapter 3 of this study.

and thus re-perceive the world in its original “first idea” (*Stevens, Letters*, 426). “[P]oetic truth,” then, meant a turning away from belief in some higher being and became “an agreement with reality” (*NA*, 54), revealing “[a] new knowledge of reality” (*CP*, 534) different from that of nineteenth century Realism. The Realist art of representation or mirroring had attempted to give a true image of what was considered a free-standing reality but was criticised by Virginia Woolf, in “Modern Fiction,” for being “materialist” and “concerned with not the spirit but with the body” (*CD*, 6). For the Modernist artist, language could no longer simply represent “reality.” All forms of expression and inquiry underwent a radical shift of attitude, a clue to which lies in Gertrude Stein's commentary on the work of Picasso: “No one had ever tried to express things seen not as one knows them but as they are when one sees them without remembering having looked at them” (*Picasso*, 15). In trying to express a pre-objective and thus more direct experience of the world, the new realism of Modernism was concerned not with “the reflection of a pre-existing truth,” to borrow from Merleau-Ponty, but with “the act of bringing truth into being.” (*PP*, xx), thus attempting to get closer to “the thing itself.”

It should be stressed that the phenomenological “thing itself” that I have taken as my guiding theme has nothing to do with the Kantian notion of “the thing in itself” (the “*Ding an Sich*”), signifying what Kant termed the *noumenon*, which exists “not as an object of our sensuous intuition” but refers to the thing or event as it is “in itself,” independent of human experience.⁶ Unlike Kant’s “thing in itself,” the Husserlian “thing itself” lays bare the world as *phenomenon*, that is to say, in terms of how consciousness experiences it. For Husserl, “things” can only exist as the phenomena or essences that are given to the subject in immediate experience:

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1934), 186.

“Locating the object as thing or as intended phenomenon depends on the perspective of the inquirer.”⁷

Clues to the three literary Modernists’ concerns with the pre-reflective “thing itself” pervade their work. In her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf chants: “we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (MB, 72); in “Modern Fiction,” she is in quest of “life, or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing” (CD, 7); and in *To the Lighthouse*, the painter Lily Briscoe yearns to pin down the pre-reflective moment of sensation, “before habits had spun themselves across the surface” (L, 258), “the *thing* itself before it had been made anything” (L, 260; italics mine). In a highly experimental manner Stein’s work *Tender Buttons* attempts to unfold what the writer time and again refers to as “the thing *in* itself” (“PR,” 113, 119; “PG,” 147; italics mine), hereby trying to express the *inside*, pre-objective impression of the object at hand – a “rudimentary” (TB, 4) and still undeveloped first impression. In “The Course of a Particular,” Wallace Stevens writes of “the final finding in the air, in the thing / Itself” (OP, 97) and in the final poem of his *Collected Poems*, he attempts to get close to “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” (CP, 534). Throughout his writings, the poet also refers to the pre-objective experience of the “thing itself” as the “first idea” (Stevens, *Letters*, 426-427). Poetry is his tool for relearning to see the world “with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it” (CP, 380).

Before turning to Woolf, Stein and Stevens’s quests to grasp, in writing, the pre-reflective “thing,” it is necessary to examine and clarify the fundamentals of and relationship between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical inquiries and establish an interpretive foundation from which to read the selected works.

⁷ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 14.

II. Husserl's "First Philosophy" and the "Crisis" of Modernist Culture

The fundamentals of the *epoché* introduced in *Ideas* remain a guiding theme in Husserl's later phenomenology. Just as Beckett in 1934 claimed that Modern culture was marked by the "breakdown of the object," in the mid thirties Husserl would begin speculating on the theme of the "crisis of European existence. . . the breakdown of life" (*Crisis 2*, 299), the source of which was Modern man's "naïve" trust in "the objective sciences" - both "mathematical natural science" and the "humanistic sciences" - which had provided the objective norm for all knowledge (*Crisis 1*, 184, 151-52).⁸ As David Carr points out: "The problem of the 'crisis' was much in the air during this period. . . Many people, notably the Nazis themselves, were convinced that Europe was confronted not merely with a political crisis but with a crisis of its very civilization."⁹

In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl insisted on "carry[ing] out an epoché in regard to all objective theoretical intererests" (*Crisis 2*, 135). Due to his unquestioning acceptance of the objective norms for all knowledge, Modern man, Husserl argued, had lost sight of the original ground of philosophy. The crisis of Modern civilisation could only be cured by a recovery of this ground and the key to this, he claimed, was in the method of *epoché*. Through "bracketing" or suspending "the general thesis of the natural standpoint" (*Ideas*, 106) – both common-sense and scientific reflections about the world - the subject could return to the "phenomenological standpoint" (*Ideas*, 114). The latter

⁸ Husserl writes: "this objectivism or this psychological interpretation [of objective sciences] of the world, despite it seeming self-evident, is a naïve one-sidedness that never was understood to be such" (*Crisis 1*, 184).

⁹ David Carr, introduction to *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, by Husserl, xvi.

was part of a “*phenomenological residuum. . . which renders pure consciousness accessible to us*” (*Ideas*, 113), exposing to the subject the world as phenomenon, bringing to light the original data of consciousness (the “thing itself”) without the obstructions of pre-conceptions and scientific thematisations.¹⁰ It would, however, be a mistake to interpret the phenomenological meaning of “bracketing” in accordance with Terry Eagleton’s definition of the Modernist artwork:

the modernist work brackets off the reference or real historical world, thickens its textures and deranges its form to forestall instant consumability, and draws its own language protectively around it to become a mysteriously autotelic object, free of all contaminating truck with the real. Brooding self-reflexively on its own being, it distances itself though irony from the shame of being no more than a brute self-identical thing.¹¹

Eagleton’s definition of the Modernist work, is, as Christopher Butler has noted, “very reminiscent” of Peter Bürger’s often-mentioned political interpretations in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) that “see the artist’s techniques as symptomatic of larger, all-embracing cultural forces, which it tends to hypostatize as ‘discourses,’ which are curiously independent of the individuals using them.”¹² A common view underlying Modernism defines the Modernist creation as a subjective act of self-preservation. Due to the lack of grounding in a rapidly transforming cultural situation, the individual artist shifts his focus inward and creates a space of retreat,

¹⁰ For my understanding of Husserl’s “crisis” in relation to the changes in Modernist culture, I am indebted to Gary Overvold’s article “Husserl, Mann, and the Modernist Crisis of Culture.” *Analecta Husserliana* 49 (1996): 251-52.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton as cited in Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe, 1900-1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 273.

¹² *Ibid.*, 273, 269.

which negates the intrusive facts of objective reality. According to Andreas Huyssen's well-established diagnosis of Modernism in *After the Great Divide* (1986), the "core of the modernist aesthetic" upholds an ideal of "genuine art" against the "anxiety of contamination" by "inauthentic mass culture."¹³ The Modernist artwork is in this sense "the expression of a purely individual consciousness," which is "totally separate from the realms of mass culture and everyday life."¹⁴ Similarly, Eagleton's "brackets" operate to negate external reality, turning the Modernist artwork into an object of "fetishism," an "autonomous, self-regarding, impenetrable modernist artifact,"¹⁵ which Butler describes as a "comic" and "grotesquely exaggerated" picture of the Modernist artwork, offering a "completely one-sided" interpretation which "see[s] works of art as anxiously alienated from the external world and themselves." The Modernist artwork, Butler points out, "asks us to be aware of the relationship *between* technique and idea, medium and message."¹⁶

I feel that my phenomenological approach supports the kind of reading Butler calls for in this section. It would be a mistake to read the phenomenological procedure of "bracketing" in a similar manner, that is, as a cutting off or negation of the real, both alienating and isolating the artist and artwork from the world, thus

¹³ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 53, vii, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵ Eagleton as cited in C. Butler, *Early Modernism*, 274.

¹⁶ C. Butler, *Early Modernism*, 273, 274. Other scholarship since the work of Bürger and Huyssen has, like Butler, opposed the notion of a genuine high art and low mass culture divide. Mark S. Morrison, for instance, offers a "'revisioning' of modernism," which argues for an interdependence of modernist art and the commercial mass market press. See Morrison, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception 1905-1920* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 5. See also Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watts, eds., *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

placing emphasis on introspection and the purely inward space of consciousness and imagination. In *Ideas*, Husserl stresses:

We do not abandon the thesis we have adopted, we make no change in our conviction. . . And yet the thesis undergoes a modification – whilst remaining in itself what it is, we set it as it were “out of action”, we “disconnect it”, “bracket it”. It still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket, like the disconnected outside the connexional system. We can also say: The thesis is experience as lived (Erlebnis), but we make “no use” of it. . . (Ideas, 108).

The “thesis we have adopted” – our conventional preconceptions and expectations – thus remains there “like the bracketed in the bracket” (*Ideas*, 108): it is never abandoned but simply not made use of. Yet, the philosopher Maurice Natanson points out, “[f]ew concepts in phenomenology have led to as much misunderstanding as epoché. The chief problem seems to be that it is interpreted as signifying the denial or, somehow, the cancellation of reality.”¹⁷ As the following chapter will demonstrate, this misunderstanding of the reduction is a common feature in previous phenomenological approaches to the writings of Woolf and Stevens in particular. In order to avoid such a misunderstanding, a clarification of the phenomenological notions of “horizon” and “intentionality” will be helpful.

The word reduction stems from the Latin *re-ducere*, to lead or bring back.¹⁸

In its root sense, then, the act of reduction indicates a leading back to a more primordial dimension of experience. In the *Ideas*, Husserl writes: “we start from that

¹⁷ Maurice Natanson, *Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 57.

¹⁸ Max van Manen, “Phenomenology Online,” [http:// www. phenomenologyonline.com/ inquiry/10.html](http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html) (accessed 20 April 2004).

which *antedates* all standpoints: from the totality of the intuitively self-given which is prior to any theorizing reflection” (*Ideas*, 78). Prior to our daily world of habit lies a pre-predicative world of infinity, an “infinity of a priori,” as Jean Wahl called it in his letter to Stevens: “Along with [an] a priori repetition which is axial to everyday reality there is what Husserl would call a ‘horizon’ of continuity.”¹⁹ The world of the “natural attitude” is situated within the temporal horizons of past and future. Time is an infinite continuum, an infinite “stream” where one horizon passes into the other.

Continuity and repetition, then, are “immanent to life”: they are conditions essential to the possibility of experience. These conditions are “always. . . in advance” (*Crisis 2*, 110), providing the ground for all our acts and expressions. From this emerges the meaning of the concept of “intentionality,” the “axis of phenomenology,” which refers to the activity of consciousness.²⁰

The present is the focal point of conscious life, Husserl points out, but always against a background of the stream of the world's temporal horizons: “The world now present to me, and in every waking ‘now’ obviously so, has its temporal horizon, infinite in both directions, its known and unknown, its intimately alive and its unalive past and future” (*Ideas*, 102). The idea of “the stream of consciousness” traditionally referred to in connection with the self-conscious techniques of high Modernist writers such as Woolf and Joyce has been approached foremost through William James’s *Principles of Psychology*: “Consciousness. . . does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or ‘stream’ is the metaphor by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let*

¹⁹ Maurice Natanson, *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 15.

²⁰ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 103.

us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.”²¹ As James’s “actual practice points in the direction of what Husserl later explicated” and is a significant factor in the relation between the Modernists and phenomenology, it is odd that the related patterns between Husserlian thought and Modernist concerns with the intentional acts of consciousness is a rarely trodden field.²² Borrowing the term from James, in *Ideas*, Husserl speaks of “the stream of experience” (*Ideas*, 116).²³ Elsewhere he speaks of it as a “flow”:

The perceived thing can be, without being perceived, without my being aware of it even as potential only. . . and perhaps without itself changing at all. But the perception itself is what it is within the steady flow of consciousness, and it is itself constantly in flux; the perceptual now is ever passing over into the adjacent consciousness of the just-past, a new now simultaneously gleams forth and so on.

(*Ideas*, 130)

Consciousness is a dynamic movement, continually surging forward: “Intentionality is a flow, a river which consciousness is immersed in, making it unnecessary to say that one can ‘step’ into the river; one *is* the river.”²⁴

²¹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 155. For examinations of the Modernist “stream of consciousness” in the light of James’s thought, see Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954); and Melvin Friedman, *Stream of Consciousness: A Study of Literary Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955). James Naremore also devotes a chapter to “Virginia Woolf and the Stream of Consciousness” in *The World Without a Self* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 60-252.

²² Bruce Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology: A Study of "The Principles of Psychology"* (London: Indiana University Press, 1968), 6.

²³ The fact that Husserl’s thoughts about the nature of consciousness were influenced by James is mentioned in Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology*, 154.

²⁴ Natanson, *Erotic Bird*, 25.

This intentionality of consciousness, however, cannot be opened up without the reduction. In *Ideas* Husserl stresses, “it is only with the phenomenological reduction which would convert radicalism into conscious work, that genuine world-performing philosophizing begins” (*Ideas*, 19) – a point which is reiterated in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*: “intentionality [is] too often cited as the main discovery of phenomenology, whereas it is understandable only through the reduction” (*PP*, xvii). *Epoché* opens onto intentionality, to the fact that consciousness is always already immersed in a world of change and continuity. Judith Butler adds to our understanding of this concept:

The notion that consciousness belongs solely to the domain of subjectivity thus misses the phenomenological point that subjectivity always belongs to the world: consciousness is always consciousness *of* its object, it is nothing without its preposition, and its preposition marks its kinship with the world that it interrogates. Consciousness is, thus, in its very structure, in an implicit relation to the world it seeks to know, and seeks to know that world precisely to the extent that it is “of” it in some way.²⁵

The key to our understanding of the presence of things, then, lies in the intentionality of consciousness, in “the essential nature of ‘the consciousness of something’” (*Ideas*, 115). Consciousness by its very nature is always *consciousness-of*; every act of thinking implies an object thought *of*. To be intended is to be constantly built up through acts of the mind:

²⁵ Judith Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, by Natanson, x.

. . . the thing is the intentional unity, that which we are conscious of as one and self-identical within the continuously ordered flow of perceptual patterns as they pass from the one into the other. (*Ideas*, 131)

That which Husserl calls the “intentional unity” or “the thing itself” refers not to a thing but to the *relation* between the object side of the intentional structure (also called the “noema”) and the subject side; the intending act (also called the “noesis”) (*Ideas*, 272-276). It is not the opposition but the implicit relation between the two that the *epoché* brings to clarity.

Thus, there are two inter-related terms at work here: horizon and intentionality. Intentionality concerns our consciousness or perceptions of things and at its periphery lies the horizon of continuity. Husserl’s *epoché* is a “mere change of standpoint” (*Ideas*, 15), serving as a tool to illuminate what it means for a human being to be conscious of and operate within this horizon. Phenomenology aims towards a “full insight” (*Ideas*, 113) into the world, which, Husserl claimed, had been obscured by man’s unquestioning belief in the objective sciences. Through the operation of “bracketing,” the preconceptions and theoretical notions ruling our daily world of fact are never left behind but temporarily withheld: “I do *not* then *deny* this ‘world,’ as though I were a sophist, *I do not doubt that it is there* as though I were a sceptic, but I use the ‘phenomenological’ *epoché*, which completely bars me from using any judgement that concerns spatio-temporal existence (Dasein)” (*Ideas*, 111). “[R]eduction,” then, “is ironically a protest against reductionism”²⁶ It does not imply abandonment of one world for another but a shift in the direction of one’s attention; a shift away from our surface world of facts and back to its underlying ground or constitutive essence. Nothing is changed through the reduction; no

²⁶ See Manen, <http://phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html>.

previous reality is cancelled. The method of “bracketing” does not reject the real world, leaving the subject alienated and isolated; rather, it “restor[es] openness” to the world.²⁷ The “brackets” of phenomenology, then, are brackets of opening, as it were, as they aim to bring to light the condition that underlies experience and makes it possible. The goal of the reduction is to achieve a better understanding of man’s placement within the world of everyday life.

Husserl wanted to show that embedded in daily life is the genesis of philosophy, a “first philosophy.” In *Ideas* he claims: “the immediate *a priori* phenomenology. . . is the ‘first philosophy’ in itself, the philosophy of the Beginning” (*Ideas*, 16). Phenomenology was to be a “rigorous science” (*Crisis 1*, 71), which could give a new certainty of roots by grounding theoretical reflection in pre-reflective intentional experience. The reduction makes visible the usually invisible but essential structure upon which our visible world rests. Only by suspending habituality can consciousness re-examine itself and see clearly that objectivity and factuality in all its forms are “product[s] of human praxis. . . accomplishment[s] of a unique mode of intending subjectivity.”²⁸ Although the reduction turns the perceiver into a “non-participating spectator,”²⁹ it does not detach him from ordinary life; rather it sheds a clarifying light on the object in its *relation* to the subject. Mark Kingswell offers an illuminating explanation of this paradox: “the *epoché* takes the phenomenologist not out of the world but, in a sense, more deeply into it.” This shift of attitude, he explains, “serves to point out a central paradox in

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John Barnett Brough, “Art and Artworld: Some Ideas for a Husserlian Aesthetic,” *Edmund Husserl and the Phenomenological Tradition: Essays in Phenomenology*, ed. Robert Sokolowski (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 32.

²⁹ Edmund Husserl, quoted in Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Ontario: The Althouse Press, 1990), 182.

human experience as Husserl explores it. How is it that I am both a subject experiencing the world and an object within the world?"³⁰ The reduction, then, points to "both a greater interpenetration and a greater separation" of the individual and world.³¹ It brings to light neither a complete dichotomy, nor a complete unity between subjectivity and objectivity but a paradoxical "in between," a space between the subject and the object-world, perceiver and perceived. In this study, I will be calling this the paradox of the "eye/I," indicating that the perceiving subject is at once an active "eye," observing and reflecting upon the world from the outside, and a passive "I," a component within a world of continuity.

Husserl's work offers several versions of the reduction, the complexity of which makes it impossible to penetrate every aspect of them in the space available. What I shall do instead is focus on what he termed the eidetic reduction. Husserl described phenomenology as the "eidetic science," the science of "the Eidos, the pure essence" (*Ideas*, 62, 57). Essences, which are also spoken of as phenomena, are objects of intentional acts; they are "simply aspects or qualities of object-as-intended."³² "Phenomenology is the study of essences" (*PP*, vii), writes Merleau-Ponty: "Looking for the world's essence. . . is looking for what it is as a fact for us, before any thematization" (*PP*, xv.). Analyses of the primacy of perception are thus "eidetic" or "essential" analyses. Whenever I use the terms *epoché* or reduction, then, I refer to the eidetic reduction, signifying a "change of standpoint" (*Ideas*, 15),

³⁰ Mark Kingswell, "Husserl's Sense of Wonder," *The Philosophical Forum* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 102, 99. For another illuminating explanation of this paradoxical relation between subject and object-world, see Brough, "Art and Artworld."

³¹ Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 191.

³² Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 4.

which directs our attention to the essence or *eidōs* that lies on the other side of our everyday, concrete fact-world.

III. The Body as Consciousness: Merleau-Ponty's Refinement of Husserl

To sum up, the project of phenomenology takes the immediate data of consciousness - the data of the intentional act - as its starting point. This intentional unity - the “Thing itself” (*Ideas*, 66) – between the act of consciousness and the object as intended always manifests itself against a temporal horizon of continuity – an infinite “stream”.

Intentionality cannot be opened without the reduction.

Like his predecessor Husserl, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought a philosophical beginning free from preconceived views about reality. He intended to “[b]are all the roots” and bring to light “the science of pre-science” through the reduction (*VI*, 169, 167). For both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the role of the reduction is to lead us back to meanings that remain latent within the world of daily life. However, whereas Husserl’s point of departure for his “first philosophy” is consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty it is the body: ““my consciousness’ . . . is sustained, subtended, by the prereflective and preobjective unity of my body” (*VI*, 141-142). As James Tuedio puts it: “where Husserl would place the principal focus on ‘consciousness (as embodied),’ Merleau-Ponty chooses to begin with ‘the body as consciousness.’”³³ For Merleau-Ponty, whose existential phenomenology was based on both the fundamentals of Husserl's philosophical method and Heidegger's notion

³³ James Tuedio, “Bodily Anticipation of Reflexive Thought,” *Philosophy Today* 29 (1985): 102.

of “Being-in-world,” the roots of our acts and expressions lie in primordial assumptions, not about how phenomena appear to us as given in consciousness, as Husserl set out to show, but about the body in-the-world.³⁴ The efforts of his thought are centred upon “re-achieving,” through the reduction, “a direct and primitive contact with the world” (*PP*, vii) from which our acts, expressions and relations stem.

What the thought of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have in common, however, - and this is where my emphasis lies - is that the primordial bond between consciousness (embodied) or body (as consciousness) and world is the “starting-point and basis” (*Ideas*, 245) of phenomenological investigation. What I wish to show is that such pre-reflective intentionality is also the “starting-point and basis” for the creative procedures in the work of Woolf, Stein and Stevens. In my examinations of the three writers’ works I will refer to both Husserl’s notion of the *epoché* and Merleau-Ponty’s re-interpretation of the concept. Most clearly in “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945) and “Eye and Mind” (1964), his well-known essays on aesthetics, but also implicitly in his longer works *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and *The Visible and Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty uses the reduction to articulate the aesthetic experience of the Modernist artist and the ontology of the artwork. The reduction offers a tool to articulate not only Cézanne’s phenomenology of painting, but to formulate an aesthetics, a pattern of thought which sheds new light on creative production at large.³⁵ Through the method of “bracketing,” it is not only the

³⁴ In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes: “Far from being, as has been thought, a procedure of idealistic philosophy, phenomenological reduction belongs to existential philosophy: Heidegger’s ‘being-in-the-world’ appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction” (*PP*, xiv).

³⁵ For extended accounts of Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics and writings on the arts see Galen A. Johnson, ed. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

scientific or rational individual but also the creating artist that can “relear[n] to look at the world” (*PP*, xx) as it is met with in immediate, pre-objective experience, “before it is a thing one speaks of. . . before it has been reduced to a set of manageable, disposable significations” (*VI*, 102). Just as Husserl’s phenomenology describes how the world is constituted through acts of consciousness, so does Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics describe how the artwork – both visual art and text - is constituted and experienced primarily through the body: “It is my body which gives significance not only to the natural object, but also to cultural objects like words. . . Before becoming an indication of a concept it is first of all an event which grips my body . . .” (*PP*, 235).

Whereas Husserl introduced the *epoché* to ground all thought in the intentionality of consciousness, thereby offering a tool to overcome the “space” between the subject and a Modern world in crisis, in Merleau-Ponty’s writings on the arts, it is the painter’s or writer’s bodily encounter with the world that is expressed onto the blank space of his canvas or page. His phenomenology of perception, then, reclaims the space between the embodied subject and the object-world. The reduction does not only lie at the core of Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetic concerns as they appear in his 1945 essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” but it is also the engine of his later concepts of “écart,” “flesh” and “hyperdialectic.” These concerns and concepts, the fundamentals of which are explained in the following three sections, will be drawn upon and discussed throughout this study.

Epoché in "Cézanne's Doubt"

The point of departure for Merleau-Ponty's essay on Cézanne's painting is the reduction, a "bracketing" of common assumptions about what the world ought to look like and how this should be portrayed in art. In stark contrast to the "'natural' perception" of Renaissance art,³⁶ creating geometrically "correct" landscapes, Cézanne's goal was a visual art, which was not an illusion. Hence Merleau-Ponty's reading of Cézanne through phenomenological "bracketing" or suspension:

We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, cities and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. . . Cézanne's painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself. ("Doubt," 16)

Cézanne's mode of suspension opens up what Merleau-Ponty terms "the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive" as opposed to "a geometric or photographic one" ("Doubt", 14). Just as Husserl sought to uncover through the *epoché* the original data of consciousness, so does the "lived perspective" expose the original instincts – the "mute perception" (VI, 155) - of the perceiving body.³⁷

"Cézanne's Doubt" exemplifies this position. In a form of art that fused perception and conception, Cézanne attempted to grasp the coming into being of the landscape which was at once the object of his eye and an infinite world of change within which his body was immersed. In a conversation with Joachim Gasquet –

³⁶ See Isabelle Cahn, *Paul Cézanne: A Life in Art* (London: Cassell, 1995), 14-15.

³⁷ Michael Philipson's reference to phenomenology in his reading of Cézanne has been very important to my understanding of the implications of the reduction. See Philipson, *Painting, Language and Modernity* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 48-56.

which, it could be argued, must have influenced Merleau-Ponty's approach in

"Cézanne's Doubt" - the painter said:

The landscape becomes reflective, human and thinks itself through me. I make it an object, let it project itself and endure within my painting . . . I become the subjective consciousness of the landscape and my painting becomes its objective consciousness.³⁸

This is what recent philosophers have called "Cézanne's enigma": "Man absent from but entirely within the landscape"³⁹ – an enigma which recalls the paradox of the eye/I laid bare through Husserl's reduction.

As the outer landscape originated within Cézanne, as it were; as he was "germinating' with the countryside" ("Doubt," 17), he traced the growth of his own creation. Hence Merleau-Ponty's claim that he offers us "the impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes" ("Doubt," 14). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty also touches upon this thought:

In the work of his earlier years, Cézanne tried to paint the expression first and foremost, and that is why he never caught it. He gradually learned that *expression is the language of the thing itself and springs from its configuration*. His painting is an attempt to recapture the physiognomy of things and faces by the integral reproduction of their sensible configuration. This is what nature constantly and effortlessly

³⁸ Cézanne as cited in Joyce Medina, *Cézanne and Modernism: The Poetics of Painting* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 2.

³⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London, New York: Verso, 1994), 169.

achieves, and it is why the paintings of Cézanne are “*those of a pre-world in which as yet no men existed.*” (PP, 322)

Cézanne attempted to capture how expression stemmed from this primordial vision: “he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization” (“Doubt,” 13). On his journey towards the realisation of the object, he had to pass through the primordial appearances of this object “before it is a thing one speaks of and which is taken for granted, before it has been reduced to a set of manageable disposable significations.” (VI, 102) Cézanne's paintings convey a sense of the unfamiliar, “as if viewed by a creature of another species” (“Doubt,” 16) belonging to a “pre-world.”⁴⁰

Thus Merleau-Ponty found in Cézanne a paradigm for the reduction, that is, a shift of standpoint through which the familiar is rendered strange, but, using the words of Judith Butler, “that strangeness is exposed as the condition of possibility of the ordinary.”⁴¹ Towards the end of the essay Merleau-Ponty concludes: “Only one emotion is possible for this painter - the feeling of strangeness - and only one of lyricism - that of the continual rebirth of existence” (“Doubt,” 18). Cézanne’s “lyricism” lies in the primordial bond between subject and world. Since the body (as consciousness) is in the world, the creative process corresponds with the “continual rebirth of existence” and the creating artist becomes a “perpetual beginner” (PP, xiv). Anticipating the aims of the Cubists, who “produced a many-faceted interpretation of their chosen subject matter, taking the viewer’s eye around it,”⁴² Cézanne would paint the same landscape imagery of Mont Sainte Victoire and the

⁴⁰ For a further discussion of Cézanne’s work, see the section entitled “Interrelation and Separation: Dialectical Tensions in Paul Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers* and Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*” in Chapter Two of this study.

⁴¹ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xv.

⁴² Cahn, *Paul Cézanne*, 35.

same still life objects - the same blue carafe, sugar bowl, vessels and apples - over and over again:

Here on the bank of the river the motifs multiply, the same subject seen from a different angle offers subject for study of the most powerful interest and so varied that I think I could occupy myself for months without changing place, by turning more to the right, now more to the left.⁴³

By painting the same motifs again and again, the object remained ever-new: wonder at the object would constantly be renewed. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty claims: “The best formulation of the reduction is probably that given by Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant, when he spoke of ‘wonder’ in the face of the world” (*PP*, xxi). The experience of wonder, then, is a key to the “first philosophy” of phenomenology, recalling Aristotle's claim that “wonder is the source origin of philosophy itself, because it represents man's primary thirst for knowledge.”⁴⁴ In a core passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty links this experience to the nature of Modern thought:

The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere which has surrounded it are not to be taken as a sign of failure. . . If phenomenology was a movement before becoming a

⁴³ Paul Cézanne, *Cézanne's Letters*, ed. John Rewald (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1976), 327.

⁴⁴ Stephen Halliwell *Aristotle's Poetics* (London: Duckworth, 1986), p. 75. For a recent examination of the notion of “wonder” in phenomenology see Mark Kingswell, “Husserl's Sense of Wonder.” Other recent approaches to the concept of “wonder” include Ronald W. Hepburn, “Wonder,” in *Wonder and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighboring Fields* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984); and Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experience* (Cambridge Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1998).

doctrine or a philosophical system, this was attributable neither to accident, nor to fraudulent intent. It is as painstaking as the work of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne - by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being. In this way it merges into the general effort of modern thought. (*PP*, xxi)

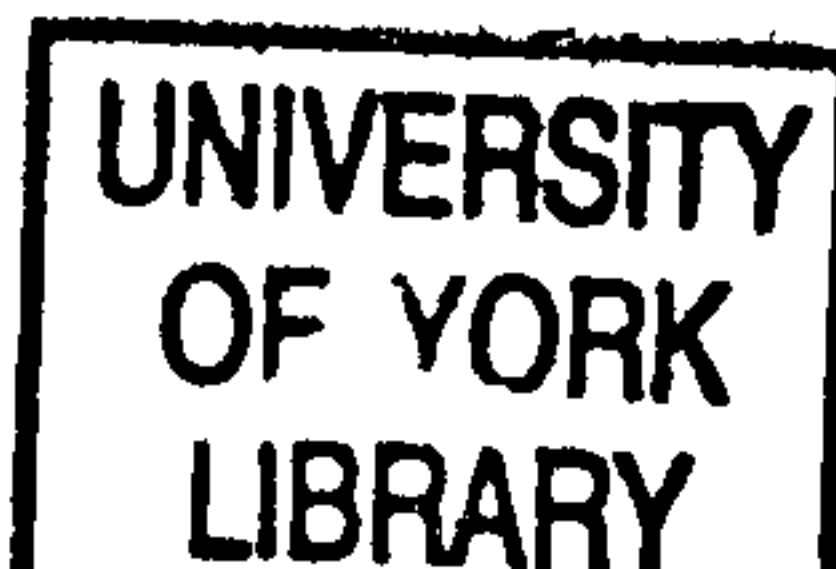
Phenomenology, then, re-awakens an awareness of the world as this is met in immediate, “lived” experience, making us see the world as if this were new.

Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty claims, “speaks as the first men spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before” (“Doubt” 19). His perpetual doubts in his “process of expressing” (“Doubt” 17) are “those of the first word” (“Doubt”, 19), of how to make the first mark on a blank canvas.

Flesh: An “Intermundane Space”

Intentionality for Merleau-Ponty is action. Through the body “we have direct access to space”; it is “our expression in the world, the visible forms of our intentions” (*Primacy*, 5). Consciousness, in other words, comes to birth in the body; hence intentionality is always corporeal and assigned to what Merleau-Ponty in his later work terms “flesh” (*VI*, 139).

Just as all our visible perceptions are conditioned by a pre-existing ground or horizon, our ability to speak about the world is conditioned by an unspoken, bodily communication with it. Merleau-Ponty points out that this primary bodily communication is the foundation for all thought and expressions. “Meaning is



invisible,” stresses Merleau-Ponty, “but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membrure*)” (Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 215-216). Likewise, language has a silent centre, a “core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape” (*PP xv*). Just as everything visible rests on an “invisible inner framework,” so does all speech rest on a bodily, “mute perception” (*VI*, 155) of the world. In Merleau-Ponty’s later phenomenology, the space of difference between these invisible/mute and visible/spoken dimensions of experience bears the name of “*écart*”. Jerrold Seigel explains the philosopher’s most difficult concept:

The Gestalt psychologists had shown that perception depends on the contrast between ‘figure’ and ‘background’; what we perceive is conditioned by the ground against which we see it. All perception rests on this separation or distance (*écart*) between something seen and what it is seen against: we perceive objects by reference to this *écart*, but we do not perceive the divergence itself- Hence the difference is the invisible ground of all our perceiving, the unperceived phenomenon on which our seeing rests.⁴⁵

Écart is thus “a principle of differentiation,” existing within being.⁴⁶ All our perceptions and clear expressions are grounded in this separation between the invisible and the visible, the pre-reflective and the reflective, the pre-semantic and the articulated. “This *separation* (*écart*). . . forms meaning” (*VI*, 216) - but we are not aware of it as it is prior to our ability to reflect on and speak about the world.

⁴⁵ Jerrold Seigel, “A Unique way of Existing: Merleau-Ponty and the Subject,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (January 1991): 475.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 475.

From the unperceived *écart* emerges Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh": "my body is made of the same flesh as the world. . . this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it" (VI, 249). The body, Merleau-Ponty tells us, has a twofold being that locates it at once apart from other sensible beings as a seeing/touching subject and among them as a seen/touched "thing": "every perception is doubled with counterperception . . . , is an act with two faces" (VI, 264). The paradox of the eye/I brought to light through the reduction thus becomes the paradox of the "lived" experience of the body. We are all caught up in the "*flesh of the world*" (VI 248) as both perceiving and perceived beings, at once distanced from and intertwined with experience. The structure of flesh is therefore chiasmic (VI, 264): it refers neither to a complete separation nor a unity between invisibility and visibility, mute perception and speech, seer and seen; rather, it points to an "intermundane space . . . where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap" (VI, 48), thus stating the space between them. "Flesh" is a "*general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea" (VI 139).

"Hyperdialectic"

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty comments on the fact that the concept of reduction was a point of eternal return in the thinking of Husserl. The philosopher re-examined the implications of the reduction from his *Ideas* to the *Crisis* without ever reaching a conclusion. Thus, Merleau-Ponty claims: "The most important lesson that the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete

reduction” (*PP*, xiv).⁴⁷ A key to this dilemma lies in the fact that the world persists in its own renewal and that the subject is in this world as a carnal being. Hence, “[t]he philosopher is a perpetual beginner. . . . It means also that philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning; that it consists wholly in the description of this beginning.” (*PP*, xiv). This impossibility of reduction, leading to the perpetual beginning of the phenomenologist, should not be taken as a sign of futility, Merleau-Ponty suggests, but as a constant reminder of the pre-reflective dimension of reality, the “first philosophy” embedded within daily life from which our critical and theoretical reflections arise. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “reflection does not grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present” (*PP*, 242).

In Merleau-Ponty’s final work *The Visible and the Invisible*, the impossibility of complete reduction is given a dialectical importance, culminating in the notion of “hyperdialectic” (*VI*, 94), a dialectic “without synthesis” (*VI*, 95) which is, nevertheless, “a good dialectic” in that “it is conscious of the fact that every *thesis* is an idealization, that Being is not made up of idealizations of things said, as the old logic believed, but of bound wholes” (*VI*, 94). Although the “hyperdialectic” of the perpetually beginning phenomenologist never reaches a point of closure, this should not be taken as a sign of futility or “scepticism” (*VI*, 95): “as a philosophical *theme*:

⁴⁷ In the preface to *Ideas*, Husserl’s comments on the incompleteness of his own project, implying his inability ever to reach the realm of “pure consciousness” through the reduction: “The author sees the infinite open country of the true philosophy, the “promised land” on which he himself will never set foot. This confidence may wake a smile, but let each see for himself whether it has not some ground in the fragments laid before him as phenomenology in its beginnings. Gladly would he hope that those who come after him will take up these first adventures, carry them steadily forward, yes, and improve also their great deficiencies, defects of incompleteness which cannot indeed be avoided in the beginning of scientific work” (*Ideas*, 29) It is this incompleteness that becomes the theme of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.

the incompleteness of the reduction. . . is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself, the rediscovery of vertical being” (VI, 178). The impossibility of complete reduction, then, should not be taken as a dead end, a sign of failure or indeterminacy; rather, it should be perceived as “a means to an end.”⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical thought serves as a constant opening onto the underlying ground which makes experience possible, never allowing us to lose sight of the “wonder in the face of the world” which is the key to all creativity. “Phenomenology does not problem solve. . . . [p]henomenological questions are meaning questions.”⁴⁹ The emphasis of the philosopher’s Modernist lesson, then, is not on result but on the *how* of the result, not on “the reflection of a pre-existing truth” but on “the act of bringing truth into being.” (PP, xx). It never allows us to lose sight of the “first philosophy” embedded in daily life: the invisible, pre-reflective dimension of experience in which all our visible acts, expressions and relationships are grounded.

In what follows, I will highlight how Stevens, Woolf and Stein bring to light the fleshy opening or *in between* where Merleau-Ponty’s hyperdialectic occurs. In different ways the three writers open onto the invisible inhabiting the visible and onto the mute perception – a “zone of silence” (CE 2, 236), as Woolf calls it – upon which our written and spoken language rests.

⁴⁸ Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 185.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

IV. The Cézannian Composition: Part and Whole

The literary Modernists whose works I explore in this study are not often considered together in literary criticism.⁵⁰ Woolf's works are traditionally examined within critical frames of feminism or psycho-analysis. Much recent criticism has approached Stein's obscure texts in terms of their anticipation of Post-Modernist disruption of language, and literary studies of Stevens are often concerned with the poet's promotion of an imagination/reality dichotomy. My choice to bring together the writings of a British novelist and essayist and two very different American poets comes out of a desire to highlight deep concerns that their writings share with the primordial dimension of experience, which is also the domain of phenomenological speculation. As I will clarify in the following chapters, phenomenological approaches to the work of Woolf and Stevens in particular have been demonstrated in single author studies but no attempts have heretofore been made to draw together the aesthetic concerns of literary Modernism through phenomenology. My examinations do not indicate that the phenomenological features in the works of Woolf, Stein and Stevens are found in their works only. The type of examination I am proposing could have been applied to others. The fact that throughout this study I call attention to the aesthetic concerns of Paul Cézanne as well as the work of Proust,

⁵⁰ Recently published works that do explore other overlooked affinities between the work of Stein or Woolf and Stevens include Sara J. Ford's *Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Examining both the poetry and the plays of the two poets, Ford focuses on the literal and physical space of the theatre, thus demonstrating how these writers in similar manners "stage the modern subject" (xiii). In another recent study Douglas Mao offers a socio-economic/philosophical examination of Stevens and Woolf's concerns with the material object in the world. See Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Joyce, the mid-twentieth century artist Joseph Cornell and contemporary poet John Ashbery underlines my desire to unfold what I see as a continuum of the Modernist attention to the Husserlian “thing itself,” reflecting these artists’ shared concerns with the pre-reflective, intentional experience of the subjective perceiver as the ground of objectivity and factuality. In an examination of the “realism” of Modernism, Danish critic Tania Ørum perceptively remarks that “the modernist form of writing could be described as a form of phenomenological reduction,” which, she notes, attempts to return to the foundation for human perceptions and expressions prior to objective points of view and scientific notions.⁵¹ It is this aspect of the Modernist text that I wish to bring to the fore. I hope to clarify how the meaning of the phenomenological reduction “merges into the general effort of modern thought” (*PP*, xxi), in the words of Merleau-Ponty, and offers a clue to the nature of Modernist aesthetics at large.

I have pointed out that the Modernist “new knowledge of reality” (*CP*, 534), shedding light on the immediacy of perception, stands in stark contrast to nineteenth century Realism, which presented the human relationship to the world as one of mirroring. What should also be noted is that the new realism of Modernism, which concerns itself with the pre-reflective moment of pure perception – the moment of “the thing itself” - should not be understood as equivalent to the Romantic moment of vision, expressing a “reconcilement of the external with the internal.”⁵² To the Romantic poet, poetry was an “imitatress of nature”⁵³ and nature was seen as a

⁵¹ Tania Ørum, “Modernismens realisme,” in *Gensyn men realismen*, ed. Jørgen Holmgaard (Medusa: Center for Æstetik og Logik, 1996), 216-217. The translation of the quoted passage from this article is mine.

⁵² Coleridge as cited in M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 131.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

“divine” “Soul.”⁵⁴ The poetic moment of vision, which could only be reached through “a loss of distinction between self and external scene,” was therefore a divine moment of spiritual transcendence. “I live not myself,” Byron said, “but I become Portion of that around me.”⁵⁵ For the Modernist writer, however, the twin processes of creative production and the outer world of change are not fed by some divine presence. As the following chapters will show, the Modernist artist moves away from mysticism or divinity. The works by Woolf, Stein and Stevens that I explore “press away from mysticism,” in the words of Stevens, “toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilisation” (*NA*, 116). The Modernist text, like the phenomenological world, “requires a living philosophy,” reflecting the “living experience” of a constantly changing and “incomplete world.”⁵⁶ Once again borrowing from Stevens, it “has to be living, to learn the speech of the place. / It has to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time” (*CP*, 240).

As phenomenology is often interpreted as an idealist philosophy, which rejects the external world, and, in the words of one Stevens scholar, “abdicates point of view or inclusive position, in favour of microscopic observation and exclusive vision,”⁵⁷ it might seem odd that I draw on this philosophy to describe the Modernist’s secular approach to creativity. Once again it must be stressed that the brackets of the reduction do not close off the world, leaving the subject in an ideal world of retreat. In reduction, “I do not turn my back on the world to retreat into an

⁵⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (London: Macmillam and Co., 1903), 321.

⁵⁵ Byron as cited in Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 347n77.

⁵⁶ Yvanka Raynova, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Turning Point and the Ethics of Responsibility,” transl. William L. McBride, in *Merleau-Ponty’s Later Works and Their Practical Implications*, ed. Duana H. Davis (New York: Humanity Books, 2001), 231

⁵⁷ Alan Perlis, *Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976), 78.

unworldly and, therefore, uninteresting special field of theoretical study. On the contrary, this alone enables me to explore the world radically.”⁵⁸ Phenomenology, in other words, exposes intentional consciousness as the ground of objectivity and factuality, thus stressing the correlation between the internal and the external, the essential and the factual.

It should be clear from what has been discussed so far that the *epoché* grounds speculation in the pre-reflective and pre-theoretical dimension of experience, recalling the “inexhaustible infinity of a priori” which Jean Wahl mentions in his letter to Stevens, which, I claim, is ever-present as the source of creative production in the work of Woolf, Stein and Stevens. I have drawn upon Beckett’s statement that the Modern artist should “state the space” between him and the objects, and noted that phenomenology, through the method of reduction and the opening of intentionality, opens onto that space. I have stressed that intentionality signifies the implicit relation between consciousness embodied (Husserl) or body as consciousness (Merleau-Ponty) and world. This implicit *relation* will be a guiding theme in my examinations of the works of Woolf, Stein and Stevens.

Husserl’s *Ideas* were published about 1913, during the summer of which Stein was writing *Tender Buttons*. It was also during this summer that Picasso painted her portrait and, as Stein explains in “A Transatlantic Interview,” the two of them were “obsessed by words of equal value” (“TI,” 17) - an obsession which came from Cézanne’s mode of composition:

. . . Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole,

⁵⁸ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 158.

and that impressed me enormously, and it impressed me so much that I began to write *Three Lives* under this influence and this idea of composition . . . (“TI,” 15)⁵⁹

Similarly, phenomenology ascribes equal value to the part and the whole. As Maurice Natanson remarks, “At every point. . . phenomenology honors the integrity of the aspect and the whole, the unit and the horizon in which it is viewed, the concrete and the universe in which it comes into clarity.”⁶⁰ In my discussions of the writings of Woolf, Stein and Stevens’s, it is my purpose to shed light on this phenomenological whole-part structure, which stresses interaction and interrelation over opposition between mind and world, unit and horizon, the single “mark”, “button” and “note” and the harmony of the entire Modernist composition.

“Phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method” (*PP*, viii), Merleau-Ponty writes. Just as intentionality can only be understood through the method of reduction, so can the movements of a phenomenological text only be grasped through the reduction, that is to say, through a “bracketing” of our conventional ways of seeing. In the words of Max van Manen, the reduction is “not only a research method, it is also a phenomenological attitude that must be adopted by anyone who wishes to participate in the questions that a certain project pursues. In other words, phenomenological meaning and understanding has to be produced constantly anew by the writers and the readers of phenomenological texts.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Clearly Picasso was also under the influence of Cézanne. Referring to him as the “one and only master!” he said “Don’t you think I looked at his pictures? I spent years studying them. . . Cézanne! . . . he was like our father. It was he who protected us.” See Judith Wechsler, *Cézanne in Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 18.

⁶⁰ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 205.

⁶¹ Manen, [http:// www. phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html](http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html).

Whereas Stein praised Cézanne for conceiving that in composition “Each part is as important as the whole,” Woolf would speak of wanting to “give the moment whole” (*Diary* 3, 209). What gives the artwork its “whole” is, I will argue, dependent on the “spaces between” subject and object, seer and seen, which is also the space between reader and text. The necessary participation of the reader in the creation of the “whole” text is a common strategy of the phenomenological “reception-theory” that Wolfgang Iser developed in the 1970s. In “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” Iser in fact draws upon Woolf’s study of Jane Austen when describing the phenomenological interaction between text and reader. That which forms the “aesthetic experience” of the literary text, he argues, is based upon an “involvement in and observation of the illusion” that the fictional produces.⁶² It is exactly this paradox of simultaneous involvement and observation, interrelation and separation that I wish to take further by drawing upon the *epoché* and Merleau-Ponty’s related concepts of “flesh” and “hyperdialectic.” My concerns with the reader of the text bring us back to Mieke Bal’s metaphor of the “navel,” that “fine detail” – a nail and a hole – in the Vermeer painting, which “hits the viewer” and, like the reduction, re-awakens a sense of wonder, stimulating him/her to reflect on, and participate in, making the art work: “In attracting attention to the actual work that representing involves as well as to the work of reading or viewing, the nail and the hole are traces of the *work* of art, in all senses of that word.” In this sense, Bal stresses, “the text is an occasion for, not the cause of meaning.”⁶³ Meaning unfolds through the direct phenomenological interaction with the artwork in question.

⁶² Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (London and New York: Longman, 1988), 212-13.

⁶³ Bal, “Dispersing the Image,” 87, 84, 77, 74.

Bal's navel metaphor, which is related to the concept of conception or creative birth, should not be confused with the Freudian notion of the "navel of the dream," a "spot" in every dream which is the "point of contact with the unknown."⁶⁴ Neither should its "trace of the mother" be taken as an emphasis on a pre-creative feminine space, or on femininity as "the very *navel of psychoanalysis*," as Shoshana Felman sees it, opening up "the question of woman as *resistance*" or of "female difference."⁶⁵ Bal's "navel" metaphor is not a gesture toward the difference between the unknown and the known or feminine and masculine spaces. On the contrary, the navel, she argues, is essentially "democratic": it is a "token of autonomy of the subject, male and female alike." The "navel mode," Bal stresses, "proclaims an interaction, not an opposition between discourse and image."⁶⁶ This aspect of democracy, recalling Stein's emphasis on the "equal balance" of Cézanne's composition, will, I hope, add to our understanding of both the interaction and interrelation between the part and the whole in the works of Woolf, Stein and Stevens and of the perpetual genesis of the Modernist art work. Apart from being a knot between our inside perceptions and outer facts, part and whole, seer and seen, viewer/reader and painting/text, the navel, I suggest, is a sign of simultaneous dependence on and detachment from the original ground of our being, the "ground of pure pre-conceptual experience" (*Ideas*, 27). My phenomenological take on the generative dimension of Bal's navel - the nail and hole on the wall - tries to give "a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin" (*PP*, viii). The navel is a "starting-point and basis," in

⁶⁴ Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 114.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 112, 120, 115.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 83, 87.

Husserl's terminology, an entry-point for aesthetic production and a connection with the ground of pre-conceptual experience.

Each of the following three chapters will take shape within the frameworks of other Woolf, Stein and Stevens scholarship. While my discussion takes its bearings primarily from the speculations of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, consideration is given to related aesthetic concerns of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. In the light of Bal's attention to the nail and hole on the wall in Vermeer's painting, I set out with a reading of Woolf's "A Mark on the Wall." In Chapter One, I show how Woolf "state[s] the space," to use Beckett's terminology, between subject and object (a mark on a wall), thus laying bare the space of creative production itself – the space of the creator's blank page, as it were - and revealing the intentionality of consciousness as the source of this production. From Woolf's ponderings upon the "Mark," I move to Lily Briscoe's doubts about making her first "mark" on a blank canvas in *To the Lighthouse*. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's "Cézanne's Doubt," I hope to shed light on a heretofore overlooked aspect of primordial doubt central to Lily's creative process, thereby offering a clue to Woolf's own aesthetic concerns. My readings of "The Mark on the Wall" and Lily's process serve as paradigms for the Modernist artist as practical phenomenologist, thus setting the parameters for the rest of my study. Woolf's work evidences the change of relations between man and the world, which, she argued, took place "about the year 1910," in that it draws attention to the usually unperceived spaces between things. As Lily Briscoe puts it in *To the Lighthouse*, "The question was of some relation between those masses" (L, 200). In Woolf's *The Waves*, in particular, six voices interrelate, transform, and at times disappear into each other, approximating Merleau-Ponty's notions of "flesh," an "intermundane space ...where

our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap” (VI, 48). The second half of Chapter One is devoted to close readings of *The Waves* which are, once again, set against Merleau-Ponty’s thought as well as Cézanne’s visual art. My phenomenological approach to Woolf’s work, which takes form within the context of other Woolf scholarship, is based on the premise that a radical “change of standpoint,” as Husserl called it, is central to her concerns with aesthetic production. In calling attention to the perpetual inter-change between subject and object, mind and world, reader and work, instead of their distinction or opposition, I will take issue with previous phenomenological, aesthetic, feminist and psychological approaches to Woolf’s work, which stress a gap between these poles.⁶⁷

Much recent criticism has described Gertrude Stein’s writings as essentially Post-Modern impenetrable word play, highlighting a groundless gap between signified and signifier, leading to fragmentation of meaning, indeterminacy and isolation of the subject. Drawing upon phenomenology, which grounds all speculation in the pre-reflective dimension of experience, thus highlighting not groundlessness but an openness to the world, in Chapter Three, I hope to shed new light on Stein’s aesthetic concerns in *Tender Buttons*. This experimental collection of prose poems, the title of which implies the “tenderness” of the radical transformations that took place in Modernist culture, requires a radical change of attitude in order to be read. *Tender Buttons* leads us away from the particularities of our fact-world - its “Objects”, “Food” and “Rooms” - and back to their constitutive

⁶⁷ In arguing for the inter-change between poles in Woolf, I join forces with critics such as Pamela L. Caughie who “enact[s] a way of thinking about and responding to narrative discourse that considers different ways of relating things rather than the distinction between two things.” See *Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), xii. Anna Snaith has also argued for the dialectical relationship of private and public in Woolf’s work as opposed to their opposition. See *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000). For a similar view, see Tamar Katz, “Modernism, Subjectivity and Narrative Form: Abstraction in *The Waves*,” *Narrative Columbus* 3, no. 3 (October 1995): 232-251.

essence; away from habitual ways of seeing and back to a pre-reflective experience of the “thing,” when this still appears as what Stein calls a “fine substance strangely” (*TB*, 4).⁶⁸ In Stein’s poetic “composition,” the marginal and central, the usually invisible and visible aspects of perceptual experience are given equal balance: “each part of [the] composition [is] as important as the whole.” Taking my bearings from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s speculations, I hope to clarify how meaning does not frame Stein’s text from the outside but is made and re-made from within through the phenomenological act of reading itself. In the final part of the chapter, I demonstrate how Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “hyperdialectic,” which is based on the impossibility of complete reduction, allows us to articulate more clearly the dialectical tensions of this work.

A common assumption in Stevensian criticism is that Stevens’s early poetry - *Harmonium* (1923) and *Ideas of Order* (1931) - portrays a division between the poet’s creation and the world, leading to isolation or self-enclosure. Unlike Woolfian and Steinian criticism, there has always been what one might call a phenomenological camp in Stevens studies. Disturbingly, many of these phenomenological approaches do not explore sufficiently the meaning of the phenomenological reduction, hence missing the point of the intentionality of consciousness, “the main phenomenological theme” (*Ideas*, 241). Whereas such critics stress the division of mind and world after the reduction, the result of this procedure is, in fact, a clearer view of their implicit relation. For Stevens “the theory of poetry is the theory of life” (*OP*, 178; *CP*, 486), thus “[o]ne poem proves another and the whole” (*CP*, 441). Poetry, in other words, is always in an implicit relation to the whole frame within which it comes into being, recalling the concept of

⁶⁸ “Objects,” “Food” and “Rooms” are the titles of the three parts that constitute *Tender Buttons*.

intentionality: “Poetry is not the same thing as the imagination taken alone. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations and interactions” (*OP*, 163).

In approaching Stevens’s work through the thought of both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, in Chapter Four I suggest that the intentional relation of mind and world is central to both Stevens’s early and late poetry, thus automatically ruling out the sharp division between an early Stevens, who separates or isolates mind from world, and a late Stevens, who, according to several critics, re-engages with the world.

What emerges from these introductions, then, is that previous interpretations of the three writers’ works have, through various approaches, stressed the opposition between subject and object, artwork and world. In drawing upon Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s speculations over the reduction, I take issue with the view of Modernist art as concerned with a split between artistic creation and objective reality, seeing the art work as “anxiously alienated from the external world and themselves.” What I hope to highlight is how the very different writings of Woolf, Stein and Stevens promote not a separation of mind and world but, rather, a grounding of thought in pre-reflective intentionality. All endeavour to describe how the meaning of the object-world is experienced and constituted through acts of perception. These writers, I argue, stress not a gap between private and public realms, subjective creation and external reality but their necessary co-operation and interdependence. The phenomenological mode of “bracketing” opens onto the world and brings to light a space of exchange between inside and outside, essence and fact, perception and expression. In different ways, Woolf, Stein and Stevens open up the “unapproachable” territory between the pre-reflective and the reflective, thus

exposing the space of creative production itself, poised in between the primal
“mark,” “note” or “button” and the final word.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ For this insight I am indebted to Kevin Hart: “poetry is an experience of language,” he writes, “it is an experience of the gap between the reflective and the pre-reflective.” See Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 292.

CHAPTER 2

**THE “PATTERN” BEHIND THE “COTTON WOOL”:
VIRGINIA WOOLF’S “ESSENTIAL THING”**

[I]t is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art . . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

—Virginia Woolf, *MB* (72)

[O]ur body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *PP* (151)

I. Virginia Woolf and Phenomenology

Virginia Woolf’s diaries are pervaded by speculations on the division between direct experience of the visible world and the written word. In a 1928 entry she writes:

The look of things has a great power over me. Even now, I have to watch the rooks beating up against the wind, which is high, and still I

say to myself instinctively “What’s the phrase for that?”. . . But what a little I can get down into my pen of what is so vivid to my eyes . . .

(*Diary 3*, 191.)

“-[O]nce one takes a pen & writes,” ponders Woolf elsewhere, “[h]ow difficult not to go on making ‘reality’ this & that, whereas it is one thing” (*Diary 3*, 196). What we usually call “reality” is “real” only because we learned to see it that way. In “Modern Fiction,” she famously criticises her Edwardian antagonists Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy for being “materialist” (*CD*, 6): “they write of unimportant things. . . they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (*CD*, 7). But Woolf wonders, “Is life like this?” and “Must novels be like this?” (*CD*, 8). If only one could suspend the conventional forms of depicting the real, Woolf seems to argue, and return to the “one thing” that reality is before it is processed by some trivial objectivism, before we even learned to pin it down in the “this & that” of language. “[I]f we escape a little from the common sitting room,” Woolf writes in *A Room of One’s Own*, to realise “that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women” (*RO*, 112). What I wish to show in this chapter is that Woolf’s work promotes this “reality” as that which is given to us in immediate experience without being obstructed by the habits of the mundane world – “the world of men and women” -, offering a perhaps surprising image of the writer as neither a mystic, concerned with what one critic has called “a kind of exalted subjectivity,”¹ nor concerned with depth psychology, as

¹ Frank McConnell, “‘Death Among the Apple Trees’: *The Waves* and the World of Things,” *Bucknell Review* 16 (December 1968): 25. Other critics who characterise Woolf’s writing as “mystical” include Madeline Moore, who refers to Woolf’s moments of “mystical unity,” Stella McNichol, who calls *The Waves* a “mystical work,” and Cyril Conolly who describes *The Waves* as “one of the books which comes nearest to stating the mystery of life.” See Moore, “Nature and

others have argued, but as a practical phenomenologist.²

A number of critical studies have pointed out similarities between phenomenology and Woolf's work. In *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (1970), Harvena Richter remarks: "[Woolf's] approach to certain philosophical and psychological problems was far ahead of her time. One may be reminded of Bergson, William James, and Freud in reading her novels."³ Despite the fact that Woolf did not read Bergson, his philosophy "was very much 'in the air,'" Richter notes and adds: "[a]n argument for the influence of Edmund Husserl could just as readily be posed. Both philosophers reflect changing attitudes toward the concept of time."⁴

As already pointed out, this is not a study of influence but an examination of the kinship of method and concern between phenomenology and the Modernist aesthetics of Woolf, Stein and Stevens. My phenomenological approach to Woolf's work, which draws upon the work of both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, is based on the premise that the shift of attitude that in phenomenology bears the name of *epoché* is central to her thoughts about creativity. Connections between Woolf and Merleau-Ponty have heretofore been noted by Mark Hussey, who, in *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (1986), uses Merleau-Ponty's

Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*," in *Virginia Woolf: Reevaluation and Continuity*, ed. Ralph Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 222); McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1980), 118; and Conolly, *Enemies of Promise* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1949), 49.

² Among critics who stress Woolf's concerns with cognitive or post-Freudian psychology are Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 14; and Jean O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 200, xi. Also see Emily Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Dalgarno offers a reading of the visible and invisible in Woolf by drawing upon psychoanalytic theory, in particular that of Lacan.

³ Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 245.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39 n. 24

phenomenology of perception, alongside the philosophies of Sartre and R.D. Laing, as a point of departure for examining the role of the body in Woolf's work.⁵ "The ontological importance of writing to Woolf cannot be overestimated," Hussey stresses, "she believed writing to *be* her life."⁶ The phenomenological quality of this ontology has been highlighted from a Heideggerian perspective by Suzette Henke in "Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: A Phenomenological Reading,"⁷ and, more recently, Carole Rodier has offered a chronological examination of Woolf's novels by drawing upon the thinking of Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, and Jean-Pierre Richard.⁸ The only critical study that has heretofore attempted an in-depth exploration of the kinship between Husserlian phenomenology and Woolf's philosophical concerns is M.L. Wadikar's *Journey Towards the Centre of Being: Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson* (1980). Although Wadikar, like Richter, points out that "[i]t is not. . . easy to establish any direct influence of Husserl on the two novelists," he aims to explore the "curious resemblance" between their speculations by offering a "detailed examination of Husserl's position" and using this to shed light on Woolf and Richardson's work.⁹ Unfortunately, Wadikar's examination of the novelists' "journey[s] towards the centre of being" in light of how consciousness, according to Husserl, "'effectuates' ideas or 'essences,'" is far from

⁵ Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), xv and 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷ Suzette A. Henke, "Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: A Phenomenological Reading," *Neophilologus* 73, no. 3 (July 1989): 461-472.

⁸ Carole Rodier, *L'Univers imaginaire de Virginia Woolf* (Paris: Editions du Temps, 2001).

⁹ M.L. Wadikar, *Journey Towards the Centre of Being: Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson* (Meerut, India: Anu Prakashan, 1980), 3-4.

detailed because he does not explore the *epoché*, the most radical and essential of Husserl's procedures.¹⁰ "Phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method" (*PP*, viii), stresses Merleau-Ponty, implying that the movements of a phenomenological text can only be grasped through the method of *epoché*.

In "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*" (1980), Madeline Moore also briefly refers to phenomenology but leaves unexamined the statement: "It was not Woolf's purpose in *The Waves* to overcome the phenomenological opposition between subject and object, but rather to dramatize that conflict."¹¹ Moore's term "phenomenological opposition" has the unfortunate effect of making her reader believe that phenomenological thought involves a separation of subject and object. We are presented with a similar idea in Patricia Ondek Laurence's *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (1991). When commenting upon Woolf's usage of brackets in the "Time Passes" section in *To the Lighthouse*, Laurence refers to Husserl's phenomenological concept of "bracketing" but contradicts this with Woolf's concerns: "If for Edmund Husserl, the phenomenologist, objects exist independently of ourselves in the external world, and anything beyond our immediate experience is "bracketed" – then for Woolf it is the opposite."¹² Woolf, she argues, offers a "unique treatment of the outward and the inward" as the "'march of events' is relegated to brackets (with the exception of *The*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ Moore "Nature and Community," 222, 220.

¹² Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 110.

Waves) while the inner discourse of characters is centre stage.”¹³ Ironically, in claiming that “objects” in Husserlian thought are independent in the “external world” and thus detached from the subject, Laurence charges the goal of the *epoché* with a disregard of the external world of facts whereas nothing is disregarded or denied in Husserl’s method. On the contrary, the point of the reduction is to place ordinary, daily events within brackets in order to shift one’s attention away from them and re-direct it towards the pre-predicative dimension of experience, which is “always. . . in advance” (*Crisis* 2, 110), thus providing the ground of our human acts and expressions. This is exactly what Woolf attempts by using square brackets in “Time Passes”:

The spring without a leaf to toss, bare and bright like a virgin fierce in her chastity, scornful in her purity, was laid out on fields wide-eyed and watchful and entirely careless of what was done or thought by the beholders.

[Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father’s arm, was given in marriage that May. What, people said, could have been more fitting? And, they added, how beautiful she looked!]. (*L*, 179)

Through the act of “bracketing,” phenomenological *epoché* lays bare the world’s essential structure, exposing the world in its pre-givenness and the implicit relation of consciousness to it (intentionality). Woolf’s usage of normal brackets in the “Time Passes” section also suggests an epochal shift of attitude, leading us away from objectivity and factuality and calls attention to what Laurence terms the characters’ “inner discourse,” that is to say their immediate consciousness or

¹³ Ibid. Critics who, like myself, stress parallels between the *epoché* and Woolf’s aesthetic concerns include Henke, “Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” 467; and Mao, *Solid Objects*, 228.

perception of things. Lily Briscoe, for instance, is intensely conscious of what Woolf in a diary entry calls “the singing of the real world” (*Diary 3*, 260), the ever-present, repetitive song of the sea, which, borrowing from Husserl, is “prior to any theorizing reflection” (*Ideas*, 78):

Messages of peace breathed from the sea to the shore . . . Lily laid her head on the pillow in the clear still room and heard the sea. Through the open window the voice of the beauty of the world came murmuring, too softly to hear exactly what it said – but what mattered if the meaning were plain? – entreating the sleepers (the house was full again; Mrs Beckwith was staying there, also Mr Carmichael), if they would not actually come down to the beach itself at least to lift the blind and look. They would see then night flowing down in purple; his head crowned; his sceptre jewelled; and how in his eyes a child might look. And if they still faltered (Lily was tired out with travelling and slept almost at once; but Mr Carmichael read a book by candlelight), if they still said no, that it was vapour this splendour of his, and the dew had more power than he, and they preferred sleeping; gently then without complaint, or argument, the voice would sing its song. (*L*, 193)

Unlike Laurence, then, I suggest that Husserl and Woolf’s modes of “bracketing” share a kinship of both method and concern. Neither Husserl’s nor Woolf’s “brackets” close off subjective experience from the external world; rather, they open onto the world, attempting to bring to light the condition that underlies experience and makes it possible. A feature of this condition is the intentionality of

consciousness, the fact that consciousness is always, already in an implicit relation to the real. Both suggest, or so I argue, that our mundane fact-world arises from an intending subjectivity.

It is important to note that nothing is denied or changed in *epoché*, and that the object-world is not at any point separated from the subject. In fact Husserl stresses: “*We do not abandon the thesis we have adopted, we make no change in our conviction. . . we set it as it were ‘out of action’, we ‘disconnect it’, ‘bracket it’.* It still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket, like the disconnected outside the connexional system” (*Ideas*, 108). All Husserl meant to accomplish through the mode of “bracketing,” in other words, was a “change of standpoint” (*Ideas*, 15), which would “abstain from” (*CM*, 19) but not disregard the ordinary. “[T]he world experienced in this reflectively grasped life,” stresses Husserl, “goes on appearing, as it appeared before; the only difference is that I, as reflecting philosophically, no longer keep in effect (no longer accept) the natural believing in existence involved in experiencing the world – though that believing too is still there” (*CM*, 19-20). What the reduction seeks to highlight is the intentionality of consciousness, the fact that consciousness is always consciousness *of*. As Anthony Steinbeck stresses, “intentionality is not a thing, but a relation . . . nevertheless, describing intentionality in terms of ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ correlates can be misleading if they are taken as independent entities.”¹⁴ We remember that this intentionality of consciousness can only be opened up through the reduction. The *epoché* is the key to intentionality, to the fact that consciousness is always already related to the real, hence it cannot

¹⁴ Anthony J. Steinbeck, “Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and Saturated Intentionality,” in *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytical Divide*, eds Lawrence Hlass and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 55.

possibly demonstrate the “opposition” between, or independence of, the subject and the object: “[t]he term ‘object’ is for us always a name for the essential connections of consciousness.”¹⁵ The phenomena with which the phenomenologist is concerned are always the objects of intentional acts. The intentional object only exists together with the subject side of the intentional structure, creating the “intentional unity” (*Ideas*, 131). To get back to the “the Thing itself” (*Ideas*, 66), in Husserl’s words, meant to provide an exact description of primordial phenomena as they would appear to an intending subjectivity.

Thus, the phenomenological reduction, the guiding engine of phenomenology, should be regarded as a “a new kind of practical outlook” (*Crisis 1*, 169), that is to say, a shift of attitude, which uncovers the world’s essential structure, overlooked by what Husserl called the “objective sciences.” When he insisted on getting “*Back to the things themselves*,” he meant to uncover this primordial bond between the subject and his/her world. In this chapter I propose that Woolf, not merely in “Time Passes” but throughout her work, challenges us to such a shift of attitude, re-directing our attention to what she in “Modern Fiction” calls “life, spirit, truth or reality, this the essential thing,” (*CD*, 7)), that is, the natural, and unspoken order of things, which has always been there before we could even reflect on it; before we even learned to pin it down in the “this & that” of mundane life and conventional language. It is this essential order that Lily Briscoe tries to grasp through painting in *To the Lighthouse*: “Phrases came. Visions came. . . But what she wished to get hold of was the very jar on the nerves, the *thing itself* before it has been made anything” (*L*, 260; italics mine). Through her recurrent ponderings upon “the

¹⁵ David Bell, *Edmund Husserl* (London: Routledge, 1990), 198.

thing itself" (*L*, 260; *MB*, 72, 87) or "the essential thing" (*CD*, 7; *MB*, 78), Woolf seeks to present a more truthful description of the way things are presented to us in direct experience. Her writings reflect her perpetual struggle to translate into words what is inherently mute and yet, in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "continues to envelop language" (*VI*, 176): "... life is a luminous halo," Woolf tells us in "Modern Fiction," "a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (*CD*, 8).

In what follows, I hope to indicate that Woolf's notions of "the thing itself" (*MB*, 72, 87) or "the essential thing" (*MB*, 78) can best be approached as signifying the intentionality of consciousness. Just as intentionality is the "starting-point and basis" (*Ideas*, 245) of phenomenological investigation, so does the epochal shift of attitude, which I claim lies at the core of Woolf's aesthetic speculations, highlight the pre-reflective intentional unity of perceiving subject and object-world as the "starting-point and basis" for creativity. Phenomenology, I will argue, offers a tool to articulate further what Peter Abbs, in his stimulating article "From Babble to Rhapsody: On the Nature of Creativity," refers to as the "astonishing act of development and transformation" in Woolf "which testifies to an inherent kind of creativity, moving from nature to culture, from instinct to reflection, from the immediate and ephemeral to the mediated and symbolized."¹⁶

In structure, the rest of this chapter is divided into five sections. In the following section, I set out by showing how Woolf's short story "The Mark on the Wall" (1924) "state[s] the space," to use Beckett's terminology, between the creative

¹⁶ Peter Abbs, "From Babble to Rhapsody: On the Nature of Creativity," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, No. 4 (October 1991): 291.

subject and the object (a mark on a wall), thus laying bare the space of creative production itself – the creator’s blank page, as it were - and revealing the intentionality of consciousness as the source of this production. In section three, I use Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of Cézanne’s painting as it appears in “Cézanne’s Doubt” to shed light on a heretofore overlooked aspect of primordial doubt central to Lily’s creative process, thereby offering a clue to Woolf’s own aesthetic concerns. In “*The Waves: A ‘Gigantic Conversation’*” (section IV), I draw upon Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “flesh” - his phenomenon of reciprocal contact between perceiving subjects - to articulate more clearly the “unsubstantial territory” (*W*, 11) that Woolf tries to bring into words in *The Waves*. I have mentioned the fact that the incompleteness of the reduction is given a dialectical placement in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy: it is a continual point of departure and point of return for his philosophical concerns and explains his thought’s underlying pattern of separation and interrelation, of distance and closeness. In the fifth section, a comparative analysis of Paul Cézanne’s painting *The Large Bathers* (1906) and Woolf’s *The Waves* shows that similar dialectical tensions between subject and world, part and whole can be detected in the painter’s and writer’s Modernist compositions. In summing up the fundamentals of the chapter, in the final section, I hope to shed new light on the patterns of perpetual beginning that pervade Woolf’s texts.

II “The Mark on the Wall”: A *Point* of Departure

Many of Woolf’s essays and short stories reflect a concern with the immediacy of perceptual experience. In “Modern Fiction,” she writes:

life, it seems, is very far from being “like this”. Examine for a moment the ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old. .
 .(CD, 8)

Woolf’s “atoms” of experience can be taken as a reaction to the Modernist “breakdown of the object,” in Beckett’s words, the “atomisation” of a transforming culture to which Albert Einstein was applying his law of mass-energy equivalence. In a recent article, Wayne Narey in fact argues that Woolf “[w]ith ‘The Mark on the Wall’ . . . offers an artistic manifesto of an emerging concept of time and perspective, a manifesto, . . . perhaps influenced by the theories of Albert Einstein and his new views of the universe.”¹⁷ An argument for the influence of new phenomenological theories about the relation between man and his world could similarly be advanced. The “myriad impressions,” which Woolf describes as “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms,” could also be taken as the immediate data of consciousness, rendering what Husserl would term a “flow of perceptual patterns as they pass from one into the other.” (*Ideas*, 131).

¹⁷ Wayne Narey, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘The Mark on the Wall’: An Einsteinian View of Art,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 29 (26 March 2001): 35.

“Everything begins with the reduction,” Kevin Hart writes, implying that Husserl’s concept of phenomenological reduction – that initial state of wonder in the face of the world, releasing in the perceiving subject some primary impulse - is the central point of departure (and return) in every creative process.¹⁸ I want to show that Woolf’s “mark” in “The Mark on the Wall” calls attention to this initial state of perception, suggesting that it is the “expressive operation of the body, begun by the smallest perception which is amplified into painting and art” (*Signs*, 70). This will bring us back to Mieke Bal’s metaphor of the “navel”, that fine visual detail in the object, which “hits the viewer,” re-awakens a profound sense of wonder and amazement, and stimulates him/her to reflect on, and participate in making the art work. Likewise, in Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall,” a “mark” on a wall on which the narrator fixes her eye serves as the actual “point” of departure for both the narrator and the reader’s creative processes. Woolf’s focus is not on the result but on the creative process itself and the mind’s reflections on how to translate immediate experience into words. “But by writing I don’t reach anything,” she wrote in her diary, “All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind” (*D*, 133). I will show how, through a shift of attitude equivalent to that of the reduction, we are challenged to reflect on our own act of perception as the story’s “swarm[ing]” (*SS*, 53) consciousness “states the space” between itself and the mark on an imaginary journey of writing.

From what I have said already, it should be clear that the phenomenological key to our understanding of the presence of things lies in the intentional nature of consciousness. But we cannot go there unless we go through the eidetic reduction,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.

that is to say, by shifting our attention from factuality and objectivity in all its forms to the essential dimension of experience. “Phenomenology is the study of essences,” Merleau-Ponty points out, and “[l]ooking for the world’s essence. . . is looking for what it is as a fact for us, before any thematization” (*PP*, vii, xv). Central to the eidetic reduction lies a form of thought experiment that Husserl called “imaginary variation” or “free variation,” the point of which is, as Judith Butler explains, “not to fix the actuality of the object, but to render its actuality into a possibility,” revealing the object’s essence as it appears to us in immediate, pre-objective experience, “the strangeness of quiddity, that it is rather than not.”¹⁹

“Life is, soberly and accurately, the oddest affair,” Woolf wrote in a diary entry, “has in it the *essence* of reality” (*Diary 3*, 113; italics mine). An emphasis on the essential rather than the factual pervades her work. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily realises that the essence of Mrs. Ramsay can only be grasped when adding up the many “free variations” of her, the many aspects of this object-as-intended: “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with. . . Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with” (*L*, 266). In *Jacob's Room*, Jacob is, like Percival in *The Waves*, an “eyeless” presence whose “essence” is built up in all its possible manifestations through the eyes of others.²⁰ While “Fanny’s idea of Jacob was more statuesque, noble and eyeless than ever” (*JR*, 238), Julia Eliot thinks of him as “the silent young man” (*JR*, 95) and Clara Durrant finds him “unworldly” (*JR*, 94). In offering us various possibilities as to what Jacob might be, the omniscient narrator

¹⁹ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xii. For a clarifying explanation of Husserl’s “free variation”, see Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994), 139-143.

²⁰ In her diary Woolf describes *The Waves* as “an abstract, mystical eyeless book” (*Diary 3*, 203)

stresses: “the young man in the chair is all of these things.” He is both “the most real, the most solid, the best known to us,” and yet “the moment after we know nothing about him.”(*JR*, 96). When Sasha Latham in the short story “A Suming Up” is “thinking of [Mr. Pritchard] in the abstract” (*HH*, 145), she is, in fact, thinking of him as an essence, as “something immaterial, and unseizable, which existed and flourished and made itself felt independently of his words” (*HH*, 144-145). This is the art of the phenomenological creator, teasing the essential from the factual, the possible from the actual.

Husserl’s method of reduction suspends the “natural attitude” – common sense and pre-conceived notions – and directs our attention to a pre-theoretical, “primordial form of apprehension,”²¹ uncovering the “essence” of things, lying on the other side of our concrete fact-world. Similarly, in her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf shifts our attention away from the common “world of men and women” (*RO*, 112), laying bare the essence of her Modernist philosophy:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically

²¹ Joseph Kockelmans, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology* (West Lafayette, India: Purdue University Press, 1994), 127.

there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (*MB*, 72).

Just as phenomenology exposes the world's essential structure obscured by habituality, so does Woolf uncover the essential "hidden. . . pattern" beneath the "cotton wool" of daily living. Just as intentionality of either consciousness (Husserl) or the body (Merleau-Ponty) is the "starting-point and basis" for phenomenological investigation, so does Woolf reveal "the thing itself" as the foundation for creative production. Because of the ceaseless activity of consciousness, which constantly catches the "atoms. . . as they fall," every single moment for Woolf is a creative moment. Woolf's insight anticipates Merleau-Ponty: ". . . our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms." (*PP*, 150-151). As the world is "a work of art," the experience of being is essentially a process of creativity. What I wish to argue, then, is that for Woolf, the "thing itself" stands for the implicit relation between the perceiving subject and world, between the part of and the whole work of art.

In "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf sets a black mark on a wall into relief by transforming its actuality into "pure possibility." The possible grows out of the way in which the narrator *intends* this object:

How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade or straw so feverishly, and then leave it. . .

If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature - the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like carnations. . .

(*SS*, 53)

“[O]ur thoughts swarm upon the object” just as we in everyday life swarm upon “the atoms. . . as they fall.” The swarming mind proceeds by offering the reader a flow of imaginary variations as to what the mark might be. It might be a “nail. . . for a miniature - the miniature for a lady with white powdered curls” (SS, 53) or “the mark. . . may even be caused by some round black substance such as a small round leaf, left over from summer” (SS, 55). Thus, the object intended, the mark, is gradually constituted through various acts of the mind. Anticipating a statement made by Rhoda in *The Waves*, Woolf’s story makes us see as if “the walls of the mind [have] become transparent,” laying bare the blank space of the artist’s page, as it were, as it is “[b]uilt up with . . . many strokes” (W, 191). In an inconclusive manner, stressing perpetual possibility and amazement, Woolf’s swarming mind continues to provide us with glimpses from daily life, miniature lectures on the novel form, Shakespeare and childhood memories. “I want to think quietly,” the narrator meditates, “to slip easily from one thing to the other” (SS, 55). The swarming mind moves from one thought to the next without ever pinning down any point “as one rushes past in a train,” rendering a flow of consciousness which reflects the “rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair” (SS, 54). Woolf, then, attempts a Husserlian “imaginary variation” of sorts as she

proceeds by offering anecdotes from ordinary life. . . seiz[ing] on the brief passage as a way of exemplifying consciousness as it flashes up to illuminate its world. And the proliferation of such moments attests to the impossibility of a full or final exemplification of this process.²²

²² J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xi.

I will save myself and my reader from going into a detailed analysis of the different imaginary variations of the mark. Whether it seems to be a nail at one point, a hole, a rose leaf or a snail at others is in fact not at all important. What is it, then, that the swarming nature of Woolf's narrator seeks to know? The point of her imaginary variations in this story is not to hit a final "mark" or to make a "point," as it were, of the actual object, but rather to "restor[e] wonder to the object," in the words of Judith Butler, to uncover "the thatness of the thing, . . . that it is possible at all."²³ Like Slater's pins in the short story "Moments of Being. Slater's Pins have No Points," Woolf's creative journey has "no points."²⁴ By writing the creator behind the swarming mind does not "reach anything"; "[a]ll [it] mean[s] to make is a note of a curious state of mind" (*Diary 3*, 113). Thus, like Husserl, Woolf "makes the intentional act of consciousness itself an object for consciousness; the result of this is to reveal that consciousness is the source of the meaning of the world."²⁵

At the end of the story, the narrator offers a final variation of the mark: "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail." Avrom Fleishman has argued that "The Mark on the Wall" has "a controlled linear form," a form which offers a "*progressive definition* of a term": "When the key term is so simple a thing as a mark. . . the form of the story is, as it were, a making of something out of nothing."²⁶ But, "something" is never fully made out of the mark; rather, what Woolf's story amounts to is a heightening of our sense of doubt as to what the mark really is. Having offered

²³Ibid., x.

²⁴ For this "point" I am indebted to Avrom Fleishman, "Forms of the Woolfian Short Story," in *Virginia Woolf: Reevaluation and Continuity*, 69-70.

²⁵ Cerena Pondrom, "Kafka and Phenomenology: Joseph K's Search for Information," *Wisconsin Studies for Contemporary Literature* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 90.

²⁶ Fleishman, "Forms of the Woolfian Short Story," 54, 56.

various possibilities as to what the mark could be, the finality of the mind's last remark cannot but be doubtful. In "A Conflict of Closure in Virginia Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall,'" Marc D. Cyr calls attention to this aspect of doubt: "The mark on the wall might be a snail, but. . . it might not, and this doubt breaks the expected sequence. Mary Carmichael, Woolf tells us, 'has every right' to do this if she does so 'not for the sake of breaking but for the sake of creating'. . . and I think the same right may be granted the narrator in 'The Mark on the Wall,' whose conclusion offers not closure, but opening."²⁷ It is this same sense of doubt, stressing opening rather than a dead end, which is laid bare through the shift of attitude that in phenomenology bears the name of reduction.

To clarify this point, in his *Ideas*, Husserl writes: "The attempt to doubt everything has its place in the realm of our perfect freedom. . . the attempt to doubt any object of awareness in respect of its *being actually there necessarily conditions a certain suspension (Aufhebung) of the thesis; and it is precisely this that interests us*" (*Ideas*, 107-108). In order to reach the realm of "doubt," the phenomenologist attempts the *epoché*: "*We do not abandon the thesis we have adopted, we make no change in our conviction. . . And yet the thesis undergoes a modification – whilst remaining in itself what it is, we set it as it were 'out of action', we 'disconnect it', 'bracket it'*" (*Ideas*, 108). In his study of Husserl, Maurice Natanson clarifies Husserl's reduction by pointing out that our taken for granted attitude to life - the "thesis" of Husserl's "natural standpoint" (*Ideas*, 107-111) - has suspended our

²⁷ Marc D. Cyr, "A Conflict of Closure in Virginia Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 33, no. 2 (1996): 204. For a different analysis which makes a similar point see Stephen J. Miko stimulating article "Reflections on *The Waves*," *Criticism* 30, pt. 1, (1988): 63-90. *The Waves*, Miko writes, is "peculiarly involved with not-resolving, as I think Virginia Woolf's whole career was, because of her most fundamental doubts (and her resolute honesty about them" (69). I will return to this aspect of "fundamental doubt," interpreting it as a version of phenomenological primordial doubt in the next section of this chapter.

abilities to doubt and wonder in the face of the object. The phenomenological reduction, however, suspends the certainties and actualities that rule everyday life, thus leading the perceiver back to the dimension of “primordial doubt or wonder.”²⁸

In “The Mark on the Wall,” the journey towards “the essential thing” unfolds through glimpses from familiarity - daily life, literature, and childhood memories - but the narrator’s perpetual emphasis on “the inaccuracy of thought” (*SS*, 54) always casts doubt on this familiarity. The swarming mind seeks essence - unities of meaning - rather than fact: “I want to sink deeper and deeper away from the surface, with its hard separate facts” (*SS*, 55). These facts include “leading articles, cabinet ministers - a whole class of things which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing” (*SS*, 56), recalling the “ill-fitting vestments” (*CD*, 7) of the Realists that Woolf criticises in “Modern Fiction.” Now, many years later, the mind realises that the “real thing” lies beneath the “hard” (*SS*, 55) surface of factuality:

. . . the less we honour [learned men] as our superstitions dwindle . . .
 one could imagine a very pleasant world . . . A world without
 professors or specialists, or house-keepers with the profiles of
 policemen, a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish
 slices the water with his fin, gazing the stems of the water-lilies . . .
 How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world . . .
 now that I have fixed my eyes upon it, I feel that I have grasped a
 plank in the sea . . . Here is something definite, something real.
 (*SS*, 58-59)

²⁸ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 54.

Thus we move from factuality to a state of what Bernard in *The Waves* calls “perceiving merely” (*W*, 239), a state in which the object is immediately present to the subject, anticipating both Mrs. Ramsay’s looking at the lighthouse in *To the Lighthouse* “until she became the things looked at - that light for example” (*L*, 68) and Louis's entwining with a stalk in *The Waves* until the two become one intentional unity: “I hold the stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world” (*W*, 7). Likewise, in “The Mark on the Wall,” we sink with the swarming mind deeper and deeper into a state of primordial perception until the mind thinks not merely of how “Wood is a pleasant thing to think about” (*SS*, 59), but of *being* wood: “I like to speak of the tree itself: first the close dry sensation of being wood; then the grinding of the storm. . . I like to think of it, too, on a winter's night standing in the empty fields” (*SS*, 60). What the swarming mind suggests, in other words, is that below the familiar “cotton wool” of everyday life - and of Realist fiction - there is a hidden “pattern”, to use Woolf’s idea from “A Sketch of the Past,” with which we are all connected. “How peaceful it is down here,” the mind exclaims, “rooted in the centre of the world” (*SS*, 59). Having suspended “the surface, with its hard separate facts” (*SS*, 55), the “real” (*SS*, 59) is exposed as a purer consciousness of the object prior to factuality and certainty, that it so say, when facts are still doubtful. Doubt in this sense is not to be confused with a dead end but should be taken as a sign of openness, of “the freedom inherent in our openness to Being.”²⁹

What I am claiming, then, is that Woolf’s “A Mark on the Wall” exemplifies the operation of the reduction in that it uncovers the primordial doubt of the creating subject. The emphasis on doubt, which is triggered by the opening sentence:

“*Perhaps* it was in the middle of January in the present year that I first looked and saw the mark on the wall,” (SS, 53; italics mine), prevents us from ever getting a final version of what the mark really is: “as for that mark, I’m not sure about it, I don’t believe it was made by a nail after all” (SS, 52).³⁰ “The inaccuracy of thought!” the mind exclaims, but only to continue doubting: “What a scraping paring affair it is to be sure!” (SS, 54). The doubtfulness as to what Woolf’s mark is anticipates Bernard’s characterisation of both art and life in *The Waves* as “[a]n imperfect phrase” (W, 181). Woolf’s swarming mind is representative of what Stevens in “The Poems of Our Climate” terms “the never-resting mind” for whom “[t]he imperfect is our paradise” (CP, 194). As noted by James Hafley, Stevens’s poems offer “a superb analogue for Virginia Woolf’s method”: “the condition of imperfection is the ideal because it permits that license to re-create.”³¹ In Stevens’s poetry, recurrent images of “snow,” barrenness and winter are representative of the beginning of the poet’s creative process: “Clear water in a brilliant bowl, / Pink and white carnations. The light / In the room more like snowy air, / Reflecting snow” (CP, 382). A similar emphasis on pure appearance over meaning, captured by the clarity of Stevens’s “brilliant bowl,” light, and snow, is captured in the opening scene of “A Mark on the Wall”: “Perhaps it was in the middle of January. . . that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. . . the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantel piece. Yes, it must have been the winter time.” (SS, 53). Woolf, like Stevens, displays the cycle of creativity

²⁹ Allen S. Weiss, “Merleau-Ponty’s Interpretation of Husserl’s Phenomenological Reduction,” *Philosophy Today* 27, (1983): 347.

³⁰ Marc D. Cyr makes a similar point: “The first paragraph of the story raises the initial doubt though it doesn’t come into focus until the end.” “A Conflict of Closure,” 197.

³¹ James Hafley, “Virginia Woolf’s Narrators and the Art of Life Itself,” in *Virginia Woolf: Reevaluation and Continuity*, 36.

as a world that her narrators or protagonists can walk through. It has its seasons and its cycles of lives; it will always begin again from a “primordial form of apprehension,” which is wintry, cold but clear. The artist, in other words, remains a “perpetual beginner” in phenomenological terms: he/she will always return to his/her own starting-point.

Not only does Woolf’s “mark” indicate the “starting-point and basis” of the artist’s process, it also triggers our process of reading. Woolf’s story, describing how consciousness meets the object in immediate experience, requires of us an attentive awareness of the text as this comes into being. In arguing this, I not only take my bearings from Merleau-Ponty’s claim that phenomenology requires of us an “awareness” and “will” to “seize the meaning of the world as that meaning comes into being” (*PP*, xxi), but also from Mieke Bal’s metaphor of the textual “navel.” Like the “nail” and the “hole” that Bal spots on the wall in Vermeer’s painting, the “mark” that triggers Woolf’s story functions as the “navel” of creative production, making us aware of the story’s unfolding before our eyes, stressing that “we are parts of the work of art. . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (*MB*, 72). As Bal puts it: “The work no longer stands alone: the viewer must now acknowledge that she makes it work; the surface is no longer still but tells a story of its and her making.”³²

Like Bal’s “navel,” Woolf’s “mark” points in two directions at once and this doubleness takes issue with the statement by Avrom Fleishman referred to earlier, suggesting that the form of Woolf’s story is a “controlled linear form.” On the one hand, the mark triggers a perceptual process of perpetual opening, but, on the other

³² Bal, “Dispersing the Image,” 77.

hand, it never allows us to lose sight of the condition of creativity itself, of the artist's primordial doubt when making the first "mark." Like Stein's "buttons," Woolf's "mark," then, is a metaphor for the division of experience that phenomenology brings to light: "not only are we dealing with what is given but also with what is presupposed in order for the giving to occur."³³ That which is "presupposed" is exactly the Husserlian notion of an "enormous. . . a priori in our minds" which Jean Wahl refers to in the mentioned letter to Stevens to which the subject is always, already implicitly related.

Having reached the end of "A Mark on the Wall," the creative cycle begins and ends but only to begin again. Just as "the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again" (*W*, 247) of Bernard's phrases in *The Waves* are set against a never-ending horizon of breaking waves, so does the swarming mind in "The Mark on the Wall" speak of "[t]his train of thought" (*SS*, 59) as "the perpetual waste and repair" (*SS*, 54), locating this against a horizon where "[e]verything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing" (*SS*, 60). What Theodore A. Toadvine Jr. claims about Merleau-Ponty's speculations in the essay "Cézanne's Doubt" sheds a clarifying light on the doubtful end of Woolf's story of the mark: "The difficulties of expression are the difficulties of the first word. . . The source of Cézanne's uncertainty lies in this contingency: nothing guarantees that the work will hit its mark, since only creation can teach where the mark lies."³⁴

³³ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 288.

³⁴ Theodore A. Toadvine Jr., "The Art of Doubting: Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne," *Philosophy Today* 41 (1997): 547.

III. Lily Briscoe's Primordial Doubt in *To the Lighthouse*

Woolf's struggle to make meaningful what is inherently mute; to pin down in words the pre-communicative "essential thing" often drove her to illness: "But what a little I can get down into my pen of what is so vivid to my eyes, and not only to my eyes; also to some nervous fibre, or fanlike membrane in my species" (*D*, 131.) In a 1906 letter written to his son, Cézanne's speculations on his inability to fully grasp, in paint, his direct experience of the visible world, is, oddly enough, strikingly similar:

I must tell you that as a painter I am becoming more clear-sighted before nature, but that with me the realization of my sensations is always painful. I cannot attain the intensity that is unfolded before my eyes. I have not the magnificent richness that animates nature.³⁵

The writer and painter, then, seem to share a fundamental doubt about translating the pre-reflective dimension of experience. This is what Merleau-Ponty's notion of "Cézanne's Doubt" stands for. The doubts of the artist's expression are "those of the first word" ("Doubt," 19), of making the first "mark."

To recapitulate, for Merleau-Ponty, the concept of reduction - a bracketing of our habitual assumptions about the world - leads to what he in *Phenomenology of Perception* terms a "[b]ar[ing][of] all the roots," uncovering the intentional nature of the body as a "direct and primitive contact with the world" (*PP*, vii). We have seen that Merleau-Ponty found in Cézanne a paradigm for the reduction: "Cézanne's

painting suspends. . . habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself” (“Doubt,” 16). The reduction, then, is a shift of attitude, which sheds light on creative production, bringing to light the painter’s primordial doubts in a “process of expressing” (“Doubt,” 17).

A return to primordial doubt is, as shown in our analysis of “A Mark on the Wall,” a return to pre-reflective intentionality (the “thing itself”), to creative freedom, openness and possibility. In Merleau-Ponty’s essay, primordial doubt serves as the starting point for a way of seeing without presuppositions – Merleau-Ponty calls it “the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive” (“Doubt,” 14) -, which works to unfold the work of art as “the impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes.” (“Doubt,” 14). Due to the suspension of the familiar and geometrically “correct” perspective, the “lived perspective,” in Cézanne’s paintings, evokes a “feeling of strangeness” (“Doubt,” 18), but this “strangeness” is, in the words of Judith Butler, “exposed as the condition of possibility of the ordinary.”³⁶ The strange, wonderful and doubtful is, in other words, exposed as the universal basis for our familiar ways of seeing.

The key to Cézanne’s “lyricism” (“Doubt,” 18), then, lies in the primordial bond between the subject and the object-world. According to Merleau-Ponty, his paintings demonstrate how the body (as consciousness) is rooted in the natural world’s creative cycle, hence the sense of primordial doubt or wonder that pervades his work corresponds with “the continual rebirth of existence” (“Doubt,” 18).

³⁵ Paul Cézanne, *Letters*, 327.

³⁶ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xv.

“Wonder in the face of the world,” (*PP*, xxi), Merleau-Ponty tells us elsewhere, is “the best formulation of the reduction” (*PP*, xiii).

In what follows, I draw upon Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics of Cézanne’s painting to clarify a heretofore-overlooked aspect of primordial doubt essential to Lily Briscoe’s creative process in *To the Lighthouse*. I am not the first to point out that Lily’s process of painting is a key to Woolf’s thoughts about creativity.³⁷ Neither am I the first to call attention to a kinship of method and concern between Woolf and/or Lily Briscoe and Cézanne’s aesthetic inquiries. George Smith claims: “What critics have failed to notice. . . is that Lily’s way of seeing Mrs. Ramsay is Cézanne’s way of seeing.” Smith notes that Woolf considered Roger Fry’s work on Cézanne “among the finest. . . on art ever written,” hence “Lily’s style of perception matches not only Cézanne’s, but Fry’s analysis of Cézanne as well.”³⁸

Lily’s way of seeing Mrs Ramsay is one that yearns to encompass her entire essence: “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with. . . Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with” (*L*, 266). In a 1939 passage from her autobiographical *Moments of Being*, Woolf takes a break from the “drudgery” of writing Roger Fry’s autobiography and expresses similar thoughts regarding the essence of her own mother: “if one could give a sense of my mother’s personality one would have to be an artist. It would be as difficult to do that, as it should be

³⁷ Michael Rosenthal, for instance, claims, “Lily’s non-representational canvas suggests a metaphoric version of Woolf’s non-realistic fiction.” See Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 113; Patricia Ondek Laurence writes that “the strokes and pauses of Lily Briscoe’s paintbrush in *To the Lighthouse* establish a metaphor of the relationship among thought, writing and silence,” in *The Reading of Silence*, 117. For other readings of Lily’s creative journey, see Alice van Buren Kelley, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 114-143; and Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, 144-150.

done, as to paint a Cézanne” (*MB*, 85). In this light, George Smith has a point in claiming that “Lily’s way of seeing Mrs Ramsay is Cézanne’s way of seeing.” It is also true that Woolf’s interest in the work of Cézanne might have been influenced by Roger Fry, whose autobiography she was writing and who, in 1910 and 1912, had organised the two first major Post-Impressionist exhibitions in London, covering works by Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso.³⁹

Fry had emphasised how Cézanne’s works represented the “new spirit” of Modernism in terms of its aim towards the “making” of “significant forms”⁴⁰ - a thought which is explored further in Clive Bell’s 1914 study *Art*: “Cézanne’s life is a continuous effort to capture and express the significance of form,” Bell points out, “Everything can be seen as pure form.”⁴¹ According to the formalism of Bell and Fry, what mattered to Cézanne was,

What philosophers used to call “the thing in itself,” what now I imagine they call “the essential reality.” For after all, what is a rose? What is a tree, a dog, a wall, a boat? . . . Imagine a boat in complete isolation, detach it from man and his urgent activities and fabulous history, what is it that remains . . . What pure form and that which,

³⁸ George Smith, “Woolf, Cézanne and the *Nachträglichkeit* of Feminist Modernism,” in *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Lisa Rado (New York, London: Garland, 1994), 77.

³⁹ For discussions about the reception of Cézanne in England and by the Bloomsbury group in particular see Beverly H. Twitchell, *Cézanne and Formalism in Bloomsbury* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983); and Weber Horst, *Cézanne and Literature: An Essay in Cultural History* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1991).

⁴⁰ Medina, *Cézanne and Modernism*, 1. For a further insight regarding Fry’s interpretation of Cézanne, see his works *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (New York: Macmillan, 1927); and *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920).

⁴¹ Clive Bell, *Art*, (London: Arrow Books, 1914), ” 187, 190.

lying behind pure forms, gives it its significance. It was for this
Cézanne felt the emotion he spent his life expressing.⁴²

Bell's reference, in this passage, to "the essential reality" recalls Woolf's quest for "life, spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing" (*CD*, 7), but whereas Bell employs a formalist perspective, I see Woolf's speculations regarding "the essential thing," which she also refers to as "the thing itself" (*L*, 260), as more phenomenological than formalist. Galen A. Johnson stresses the difference between phenomenology and formalism when claiming that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of Cézanne's painting "should be classified together with the antiformalist Cézanne interpretations." Whereas formalist approaches to Cézanne, "particularly . . . Roger Fry's landmark formalist study published in 1927," "focused on Cézanne's design, pure form, and use of line and planes on the two-dimensional surface," Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology places emphasis on the "prescientific perceptual experience of the natural world in his landscapes and still lifes."⁴³ It is this pre-scientific or pre-reflective perceptual experience – the experience of the "thing itself" – that Woolf also struggled to pin down in words. Lily's way of seeing underscores this: "Phrases came. Visions came. . . But what she wished to get hold of was the very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything" (*L*, 260).

To elaborate my point, a closer look at Bell's statement reveals a subtle difference between Bell's notion of "the thing in itself" and Woolf's phenomenological understanding of the "thing itself." Bell's reference to "[w]hat philosophers used to call 'the thing in itself'" brings to mind the Kantian notion of

⁴² *Ibid.*, 190.

“the thing in itself” (the “*Ding an Sich*”), signifying what Kant termed the *noumenon*, which, as opposed to the *phenomenon*, exists “not as an object of our sensuous intuition” but refers to the thing or event as it is “in itself,” independent of human experience,⁴⁴ or, as Bell puts it, “detach[ed]. . . from man.” The Kantian “thing in itself,” then, is “unknown and unknowable” to human beings⁴⁵ - a position which Husserl rejects: “It is. . . a fundamental error to suppose that perception. . . fails to come into contact with the thing itself. We are told that the thing in itself and its itselfness is not given to us. . . But this view is nonsensical” (*Ideas*, 135-136). Unlike Kant’s “thing in itself,” Husserl’s “thing itself” lays bare the world as *phenomenon*, that is to say, in terms of how consciousness experiences it. For Husserl, “things” can only exist as the phenomena or essences that are given to the subject in immediate experience: “Locating the object as thing or as intended phenomenon depends on the perspective of the inquirer.”⁴⁶

A common assumption in Woolfian criticism is that her speculations about “the thing itself” involve, at times, a Kantian understanding of the *noumenon*. According to Andrea L. Harris, “When Woolf says ‘the thing itself,’ she means, literally, the thing – a concrete object in the world. In other texts by Woolf, ‘the thing itself’ may be read as referring to *noumena* rather than *phenomena*. For example, Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* reflects upon ‘this other thing, this truth, this

⁴³ Galen A. Johnson, “Phenomenology and Painting: ‘Cézanne’s Doubt,’” *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 6-7.

⁴⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 186.

⁴⁵ R.P. Singh, *A Critical Examination of Immanuel Kant’s Philosophy* (New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1987), 5.

⁴⁶ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 14.

reality, which suddenly laid hands on her, emerged stark at the back of appearances and commanded her attention”⁴⁷

Unlike Harris, I locate Woolf and “the thing itself” within what I see as a Modernist attention to the Husserlian “thing itself,” uncovering the perceiver’s primary consciousness of the thing seen, “the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing,” as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus calls it.⁴⁸ Whenever she speaks of “the thing itself” or “the essential thing,” she never refers just to the material object in the world: the meaning of the “thing” always depends on an intending subjectivity. The “other thing, this truth, this reality,” which Lily Briscoe reflects on, is, or so I argue, equivalent to the “pattern,” which, as we were told “A Sketch of the Past,” is “hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life” (*MB*, 72). This pattern exposes the world not as a Kantian noumenon, that is, some higher reality, unknown to human beings, but *as phenomenon*. What emerges to Lily “at the back of appearances” is the essential structure of the world obscured by the habits of daily life. What suddenly stands out is the structure of this world as a “work of art” of which the perceiving subject is an integral part: “we are parts of the work of art. . . we are the music; we are the *thing itself*” (*MB*, 72; italics mine). What I propose, then, is that the “thing itself” in Woolf’s work signifies not an independent thing in the world but the intentional *relation* between the world and the human being.

⁴⁷ Andrea L. Harris, “‘Bare Things’: Returning to the Senses in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” *LIT* 7 (1997): 340, 348n. Another critic who highlights Woolf’s concern with the Kantian “thing in itself” is Igor Webb, “‘Things in Themselves’: Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 17 (Winter 1971-72): 570-3. Woolf’s concern with the material object in the world, the “thing,” has, more recently, been examined from a socio-economic/philosophical perspective in Mao, *Solid Objects*, and in Bill Brown, “The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism),” (*Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism*),” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (April, 1999): 1-28.

⁴⁸ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 70.

With this phenomenological definition of “the thing itself” in mind, we are now ready to clarify the way in which Lily’s final creative journey, in *To the Lighthouse*, demonstrates a kinship of method with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of Cézanne’s painting.

In the final chapter of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily is standing outside “on the edge of the lawn” (*L*, 230; italics mine). This “edge” suggests that she is on a threshold of perception, moving into and yet self-consciously away from the world that she observes, standing inside and yet outside her own position. This is also “Cézanne’s enigma”: “Man absent from but entirely within the landscape.”⁴⁹ Lily’s position also suggests that she is on the edge of feeling the presence of the now absent Mrs. Ramsay. Her journey on this final morning of the book, which is in fact a fresh beginning, is about coming to terms with the space caused by Mrs. Ramsay’s death, a space that is mirrored in the blankness of her canvas. The “blankness of her mind” (*L*, 197) corresponds with “the problem of space” (*L*, 231) of the canvas in front of her. It keeps obstructing her view “with its uncompromising white stare” (*L*, 212).

A common assumption in recent criticism is, as Suzette Henke has also pointed out, that Woolf’s intangible spaces or silences are signs of her “mysticism.”⁵⁰ More philosophical approaches are offered by Patricia Ondek Laurence, who examines “the feeling of ‘emptiness’ that suggests the non-being

⁴⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 169.

⁵⁰ For critical studies which describe Woolf as a “mystic,” see section I. of this chapter, n.1. Other aspects of Woolf’s “mysticism” are examined in Naremore, *The World Without a Self*; and Louise Poresky, *The Elusive Self: Psyche and Spirit in Virginia Woolf’s Novels* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1981), both of which Suzette Henke refers to in her Heideggerian argument against a mystical Woolf. See Henke, “Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*: A Phenomenological Reading,” 461.

from which 'being' arises and constructs spaces in [Woolf's] novels." The "sense of strangeness" conveyed through these spaces is, Laurence claims, "about the being in the world or the silence before creativity."⁵¹ Similarly, Mark Hussey speaks of a "preverbal space from which human being arises," which he relates "to the modes of art in Woolf's aesthetics."⁵² What we have learned about the phenomenological reduction and its placement as a creative engine in the work of Merleau-Ponty will prove useful in examining more closely the pre-constructive spaces that both Laurence and Hussey refer to.

The way in which Lily Briscoe tries to come to terms with her feeling of blankness, mirrored by the white space in front of her, is by going through what resembles the *epoché*, a bracketing of the world that she knows, initially making her feel as if she is "cut off from other people, able only to go on watching, asking, wondering" (*L*, 198), which, however, opens up a world of possibilities: "She had no attachments here, she felt, no relations with it, anything might happen" (*L*, 198). After feeling that "the usual link that usually bound things together had been cut (*L*, 198), Lily experiences what Merleau-Ponty would call a "direct and primitive contact with the world" (*PP*) and is momentarily overwhelmed by a feeling of doubt:

Always. . . before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on

⁵¹Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, 119.

⁵²Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 38-39. For another approach to Woolf's "spaces," see Diana Filby Gillespie, *The Sister's Art: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 8-9 and 268-269. Gillespie draws insightful parallels between "silences" and "spaces" in the literature of Woolf and the paintings of Vanessa Bell.

some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts
of *doubt*. (*L*, 214-215; italics mine)

The sense of “nakedness” and of being “an unborn soul” is a metaphor for Lily’s pre-communicative visions and primal doubts about making her first mark on the “hideously difficult white space” (*L*, 216). As seen in our analysis of “A Mark on the Wall,” the creative mind’s suspension of the “hard facts” of habituality lays bare the creating artist’s doubts about his starting-point, about where and how to make her first “mark”. Hence Lily’s feeling that “the urgency of the moment always missed its mark” (*L*, 240) and that “there was all the difference in the world between this planning airily away from the canvas, and actually taking the brush and making the first mark”: “But. . . Where to begin? . . . at what point to make the first mark?” (*L*, 213).

Lily’s sense of nakedness and primal uncertainty serve as a fresh point of departure - a phenomenological beginning - of her creative journey: “she could not shake herself free from the sense that everything this morning was happening for the first time, perhaps for the last time” (*L*, 261). She wonders what it would be like to get back to a level of pre-objectivity at which the object could be immediately present to her: “One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table” (*L*, 272). In *The Waves* Bernard has a similar experience: “How much better is silence; the coffee-cup, the table. . . Let me sit here for ever with bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself.” (*W*, 246).

Both Lily and Bernard want to capture how phenomena appear to them as they are prior to any form of judgement, “before habits had spun themselves across the surface” (*L*, 258); before habits and preconceptions have coloured their acts and expressions. Mark Hussey notes that feminist studies have described Woolf’s

concern with this pre-objective dimension of experience - "the idea in Woolf's fiction of a preverbal space from which human being arises" - as a "wild zone," a usually invisible and suppressed female territory, which Woolf seeks to make visible.⁵³ Andrea L Harris underpins the idea of such a female zone when describing the "bare things. . . things in themselves" that Bernard speaks of as a "feminine terrain of things in themselves." Rhoda too, Harris claims, "seeks the 'little language' as opposed to the masculine language of stories as a means to attaining the 'thing in itself.'"⁵⁴

In contrast with feminist readings of Woolf, such as Harris's, I would rather agree with Marilyn Kurtz: "Woolf's concerns are larger than social or feminine; they are all-encompassing and limitless. . . [Woolf] is concerned with ontology, with the nature of being not just a woman, not even just a human being, but a part of the flux of existence in the endless, timeless universe."⁵⁵ The language of the "bare things" that Bernard, like Lily and Woolf herself, seeks to uncover is not so much a feminine language as the phenomenology of "the thing itself." Woolf, paradoxically, attempts to emulate the pre-communicative life of consciousness: that primary experience of the visible world before our usual modes of discourse have concealed it. Much like Gertrude Stein, she tries "to express things seen not as one knows them but as they are when one sees them without remembering having looked at them" (*Picasso*, 15). According to Merleau-Ponty, language has a silent centre, a "core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape" (*PP* xv) to

⁵³ Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 38-39, 39.

⁵⁴ Harris, "Bare Things," 339.

⁵⁵ Marilyn Kurtz, *Virginia Woolf: Reflections and Reverberations* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 7.

which he, significantly, refers as “the life of the bare things” (VI, 125). Our distinct and clear expressions arise from these primordial “bare things,” which brings us back to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of Cézanne’s painting: “Cézanne tried to paint the expression first and foremost, and that is why he never caught it. He gradually learned that *expression is the language of the thing itself and springs from its configuration.*” (PP, 322). Just as Cézanne, on his journey from the blank canvas to his final painting, tried to express his pre-objective experience of the thing, so does Lily yearn to grab hold of the pre-communicative dimension of experience, “before habits had spun themselves across the surface”: “it was not knowledge but unity she desired. . . nothing that could be written in any language known to men” (L, 258, 70).

Just as Cézanne’s phenomenological suspension of habit would lead him back to an “unfamiliar world in which one is uncomfortable and which forbids all human effusiveness” (“Doubt” 16), Lily is drawn into an unfamiliar space where she has, momentarily, “lost consciousness of outer things and her name and her personality” (L, 216) and where “[t]he house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her” (L, 198):

It was all in keeping with this silence, this emptiness, and the unreality of the early morning hour. It was a way things had sometimes, she thought, lingering for a moment and looking at the long glittering windows and the plume of blue smoke; they became unreal. So, coming back from a journey, or after an illness, before habits had spun themselves across the surface, one felt that same unreality, which was so startling; felt something emerge. Life was most vivid then. . . One need not speak at all. One glided, one shook one's sails. . . between things, beyond things. (L, 258)

“[T]here is a zone of silence in the middle of every art. The artists themselves live in it” (*CE* 2, 236), Woolf claims in the essay “Walter Sickert.” Likewise, it is from an unfamiliar feeling of “silence” and “emptiness” that “[l]ife [is] most vivid” to Lily; it is here that she feels “something emerge.” Her performance of the *epoché*, in other words, is a paradoxical exercise. The taken for granted dimension of experience is suddenly “expose[d]” to Lily, “as the condition of possibility of the ordinary,”⁵⁶ in Judith Butler’s terms, hence it seems strange and overwhelms Lily with a sense of “unreality.” In a similar manner, the “zone of silence” within which Lily suddenly finds herself stands out as the “condition of possibility” of her artistic creation.

The silent, “white space” of the canvas, which is always at the centre of Lily’s world, brings us back to an earlier passage in *To the Lighthouse* where Mrs. Ramsay finds herself in “the still space that lies about the heart of things” (*L*, 142), and to *Mrs Dalloway*, in which Clarissa senses “an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room.” (*MD*, 39). *The Waves* is also structured around a blank and silent centre in the form of Percival.⁵⁷ Like practical phenomenologists, Woolf’s creative selves perpetually experience a Husserlian “bracketing” of the familiar “cotton wool of daily life” (*MB*, 72) and are faced with “moments of being” (*MB*, 78) where this silence or primordial blankness stands out. These sudden illuminating moments, Woolf points out in *Moments of Being*, are “a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances” (*MB*, 72), which should not be taken as moments of “mystical unity,”⁵⁸ as suggested by one critic, but as moments of phenomenological insight, uncovering the essence of experience. Maurice Natanson

⁵⁶ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xv.

⁵⁷ I will return to the implications of Percival later in this chapter.

⁵⁸ Moore, “Nature and Community,” 222.

describes this in the following way: "If the greatest part of daily life is experienced in naïve terms and taken for granted as real, there are moments, at least, when the individual is aware that he is experiencing something in a particular manner."⁵⁹ What Woolf's silences signify, then, are not revelations of the mysteries of life but a discovery of the "essential thing," a laying open of the essential structure of reality, the "hidden pattern" behind the "cotton wool": "some common feeling," Lily says, "which held the whole together." (*L*, 259).

The way in which the world is rendered strange to Lily is connected with a lyrical feeling of some deeper connection with the world: "the whole world seemed to have dissolved. . . into a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality" (*L*, 241). In the words of Merleau-Ponty: "The landscape thinks itself in Lily"; "[she] is its consciousness" ("Doubt," 17). In fact, the whole world seems to transform into a field of intentional relations: "the cliffs looked as if they were conscious of the ships, and the ships looked as if they were conscious of the cliffs" (*L*, 246). Just as Cézannes's work, according to Merleau-Ponty, echoes "the continual rebirth of existence" ("Doubt" 18), reflecting the subject as a carnal being in this world of repetition, so does Lily claim: "one had constantly a sense of repetition - of one thing fallen where another had fallen" (*L*, 268). Thus Lily, this practical phenomenologist and "perpetual beginner," "pitch[es] herself firmly again before her easel," telling herself to "[g]et that and start afresh, get that and start afresh" (*L*, 261).

When Lily Briscoe asks Andrew what his father's books are about, he replies: "Subject and object and the nature of reality" (*L*, 33). This "nature of reality" is the "space" that, in the terminology of Beckett, "intervenes" between the Modernist

⁵⁹ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 21.

artist and the world of objects and which can only be stated through the act of creation itself. Just as Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne sought to bring to vision the primordial world passed through on his journey from the blank canvas towards a clear vision of his motif, so does Lily, while "tunnelling her way into her picture" (*L*, 234), pass through this nature of reality, a pre-reflective and pre-communicative zone of silence and nakedness, but only to come out at the end of the tunnel and to see the light of the lighthouse, "laying down her brush in extreme fatigue" and exclaiming, "I have had my vision" (*L*, 281).

IV. *The Waves: A "Gigantic Conversation"*

By drawing upon both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's speculations on the reduction, in my examination so far, I hope to have identified in Woolf's work an interpretation of the same phenomenological phenomenon, calling attention to the notions of primordial doubt and wonder, and shedding light on the creative subject as a practical phenomenologist, a phenomenological "perpetual beginner."

The efforts of Merleau-Ponty's thought are centred upon "[b]ar[ing] all the roots" (*VI*, 169), thus "reaching," through the reduction, "a direct and primitive contact with the world" (*PP*, vii). From this primal and primitive contact arise not only our acts of expression but also our relations with other subjects. The reduction, then, is not only fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic concerns but it also functions as the engine of the philosopher's later concept of "flesh": "my body is made of the same flesh as the world. . . this flesh of my body is shared by the world,

the world *reflects* it” (VI, 249). I have already suggested that Woolf’s work evidences the change of relations between man and world, which, she argued, took place “about the year 1910,” in that it draws attention to the spaces between things. “The question,” Lily Briscoe stresses, “was of some relation between those masses” (L, 200). In what follows I hope to articulate more clearly, through Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts about “flesh,” Woolf’s configuration of the relationship between perceiving body and world in *The Waves*.

In *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (1973), James Naremore argues that Woolf, in her novels, “tries to evolve a technique which will allow her to present the ‘luminous halo’ of experience, even the ‘tremor of susceptibility’ in the self, without neglecting what is ‘outside. . . and beyond’.” Drawing on the work of Harvena Richter, who “has suggested that we set aside the conventional terminology and ‘approach the question of *voice*,’ which, in Virginia Woolf, ‘is at once conscious and unconscious, personal and impersonal, individual and collective,’” Naremore attempts “to indicate how the narrator of Mrs. Woolf’s novels modulates between these extremes until it becomes the voice of everyone and no one,” but stresses: “It is probably impossible to find a term that would accurately characterize this voice.”⁶⁰

The particular “voice” that Naremore refers to is most apparent in *The Waves*. Woolf struggled with the book’s closure. “[H]ow to. . . press it into one,” she wondered, “it might be a ‘gigantic conversation’” (*Diary 3*, 285). The final version of *The Waves* never presents us with “conversation” in the usual sense of the term. Like waves in a sea, the words of the six central voices are at once dispersed and yet gathered in Bernard’s closing soliloquy, bringing to light an intersubjective world

where voices “melt into each other with phrases . . . are edged with mist. . . [and] make an unsubstantial territory” (*W*, 11). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty provides us with a term for this “unsubstantial territory”: “flesh” (*la chair*). “The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance,” he writes, but rather a “general thing,” a phenomenon of reciprocal contact between perceiving subjects (*VI*, 139). Our “operative language” (*VI*, 153) Merleau-Ponty suggests, is inscribed in this world of flesh.

The Waves is, without doubt, Woolf’s most phenomenological work. Using aspects of Heidegger’s phenomenology, Suzette Henke has already demonstrated that the ontology of *The Waves* is “more phenomenological than mystical,” thus arguing against previous scholars such as Naremore, Louise Poresky and Madeline Moore, who place emphasis on the “mystical” dimension in Woolf’s writing.⁶¹ Mark Hussey, on the other hand, echoes Arthur Koestler’s claim that *The Waves* is a “masterpiec[e] at dead ends,”⁶² when arguing for the “aesthetic failure” of the work, suggesting that it is an example of “antireading”(86-87): “*The Waves* is hostile to reading, and yet, it has nearly always been read as a complete, harmonious work of art. It is, though, a product of crisis and reflects this in its form.”⁶³ Unlike Woolf’s other novels, *The Waves*, Hussey argues, “does not allow for the participation of the reader, but continually dictates through a highly self-conscious construct.”⁶⁴ James Phelan, however, offers yet another reading of Woolf’s novel: “Woolf has offered us a most

⁶⁰ James Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, 75.

⁶¹ Henke, “Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*: A Phenomenological Reading,” 461-472;

⁶² Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar* (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1945), 31.

⁶³ Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 86-87.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

unusual kind of engagement with her characters. We are asked not only to be simultaneously and overtly aware of their mimetic, thematic, and synthetic composition but also to refrain from making judgments of them or to develop attachments to them of the kind we develop towards Lizzy Bennet, attachments that would make us expect and desire certain outcomes for them.”⁶⁵ What Phelan implies is that we, the readers, must suspend all preconceptions and expectations that we would usually employ in a literary text in order to engage with Woolf’s work. We must, in other words, adopt the shift of attitude of phenomenological reduction.

My wish to shed a new light on Woolf’s work through the reduction is based on Kevin Hart’s statement: “[Husserl’s] broodings over the reduction speak . . . vividly of something central to art.”⁶⁶ Taking my bearings from Merleau-Ponty’s reworking of Husserl’s reduction, I propose a twofold change in our approach to *The Waves*. One is to provide, through Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “flesh,” a terminology for the “voice” in Woolf’s work that Naremore lacks. The other is to show that the reduction “speak[s] vividly of something central” to Woolf’s aesthetic concerns, that it functions as the engine of the creative and wave-like patterns that hold *The Waves* together, thus offering an entirely different reading of this work as Woolf’s strongest aesthetic statement.

Not only is *The Waves* the most phenomenological of Woolf’s longer works, it is also the most poetic and insubstantial in terms of its language and genre. Woolf called it a “play-poem,” “[a]way from fact; free, yet concentrated, prose yet poetry; a novel and a play.” (*Diary 3*, 139). The brackets used in the “Time Passes” section of

⁶⁵ James Phelan, “Character and Judgment in Narrative and in lyric: Toward an Understanding of the Audience’s engagement in *The Waves*,” *Style* 24, pt. 3 (1990): 418-19.

⁶⁶ Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 286.

To the Lighthouse are still there but implicitly, presenting us with a much denser vision which “saturate[s] every atom” in order to “eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity; to give the moment whole, whatever it includes. Say the moment is a combination of thought, sensation, the voice of the sea” (*Diary* 3, 209). A similar attempt to pin down the “voice” of the totality of things pervades Merleau-Ponty’s thinking. Consider the following passage from *The Visible and the Invisible*:

In a sense the whole of philosophy, Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of things, the waves and the forests. (*VI*, 155)

Merleau-Ponty’s “voice of no one . . . the very voice of things, the waves and the forests” (*VI*, 155), bringing to light a more primordial “wild meaning” from which our clear and meaningful language arises, sits well with Woolf’s aim to reveal in one “moment” the totality of the spoken and the unspoken, a “combination of thought, sensation, the voice of the sea,” which would, eventually, shape itself as a “gigantic conversation.”

Whereas the word conversation is often associated with purely linguistic interchange, the “gigantic conversation” that Woolf seeks to “press into one” has overtones of something more primordial, something of pre-semantic insubstantiality, existing prior to our usual form of communication. “The world is always ‘already there’ *before* reflection begins” (*PP*, vii), Merleau-Ponty writes in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. It is “already there” in the shape of what Husserl called “the misty horizon that can never be completely outlined [but which] remains

necessarily there” (*Ideas*, 102). Husserl’s “misty horizon” figures the infinity and continuity of the world. It is “misty” because it exists before reflection and can never be fully grasped in words, and yet it is the “horizon,” that is to say, the very background against which all our expressions stand out. We never lose sight of this misty horizon in Woolf’s *The Waves*: it is there at the periphery of the six speakers’ perceptions. “We are edged with mist,” says Bernard, the book’s most dominating voice. “[w]e make an unsubstantial territory” (*W*, 11). While still thinking about writing *The Moths*, which was the working title of *The Waves* (*Diary* 3, 150, 190), Woolf pondered on how to “go down step by step into that queer region” (*Diary*, 239), “queer” because unfamiliar and yet the ground of creativity. It is against this misty and “queer” horizon that all creative acts, including that of writing stand out: “One sees a fin passing far out,” wrote Woolf elsewhere, suggesting that first and pre-semantic impulse of creativity: “What image can I reach to convey what I mean?” she wrote: “Really there is none.” (*Diary* 1, 113).

The Waves presents us with three separate and yet interconnected cycles of creation: that of nature, that of the human being and that of the creating artist, a “lady [who] sits between two long windows, writing” (*W*, 12) to whom Bernard repeatedly refers.⁶⁷ This writing figure, a hidden and yet active force inside the text, never allows us to lose sight of the source from which the work that we are reading stems. The book’s six inter-locking voices have often been referred to as “selves” or aspects of one whole self or creative mind.⁶⁸ It has also been pointed out that Woolf did not think of

⁶⁷ The writing lady re-appears on pp. 102, 201, and 224.

⁶⁸ For instance, Jean Guiguet claims that the six voices are “originally merged in one single voice – the thinker,” and James Naremore argues that “The speeches often seem like one pervasive voice with six personalities.” See Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, trans. Jean Stewart (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 285; and Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, 152.

these voices as “characters” in the usual sense of the word.⁶⁹ What I would like to suggest is that Bernard, Lily, Susan, Rhoda, Neville and Louis are six “essences” in the phenomenological sense of the term.

It should be clear from what has already been discussed that essences are “aspects or qualities of objects-as-intended.”⁷⁰ To be intended is to be built up through acts of the mind. Recalling our interpretation of “The Mark on the Wall,” in the course of “imaginary variation” - the thought experiment related to the eidetic reduction - the object is intended in all its possible manifestations. In “The Leaning Tower,” Woolf writes about the writer's encounter with the object as exactly such a process of variation: “A writer is a person who sits at a desk and keeps his eye fixed, as intently as he can, upon a certain object. . . . A writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, that changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects” (*WE*, 159). In a similar manner, or so I argue, the voices of Bernard, Lily, Susan, Rhoda, Neville and Louis in *The Waves* are one swarming mind's (that of the “lady writing”) imaginary variations on one “model.” Just as the writing lady's eye is “upon” her “model” from within the book, so are the eyes of the six essences directed towards specific objects.

As pointed out, the phenomenal feature central to experience exposed through the reduction is that consciousness by its very nature is always directed toward some object. This fact that every act of the mind implies an object thought of bears the name of “intentionality.” People do not exist in and for themselves but only

⁶⁹ Michael Rosenthal writes: “Woolf did not conceive of these voices as adding up in any way to literary “characters” and quotes the following passage from her diary: “What I now think (about *The Waves*) is that I can give in a very few strokes the essentials of a person's character” (*A Writer's Diary*, 157).” See Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf*, 145.

⁷⁰Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 14.

in and through intentional relations; through thoughts, memories, and perceptions *of*. Thus, there are two inter-related terms at work here: horizon and intentionality. Intentionality concerns our consciousness or perceptions of things and at its periphery lies the misty horizon of continuity.

The monologue-like soliloquies which make up Woolf's *The Waves* can be characterised as intentional acts, continuous streams of fresh perceptions *of* things. Like the birds in the book's third interlude, Woolf's six perceivers are "*aware, awake; intensely conscious of one thing, one object in particular*" (*W*, 59.):

'I see a ring,' said Bernard, 'hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.'

'I see a slab of pale yellow,' said Susan, 'spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.'

'I hear a sound,' said Rhoda, 'cheep, chirp; cheep chirp; going up and down.'

'I see a globe,' said Neville, 'hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.'

'I see a crimson tassel,' said Jinny, 'twisted with gold threads.'

'I hear something stamping,' said Louis. 'A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.' (*W*, 5)

Thus, through the eyes of Woolf's perceivers we "see. . . fine substance[s] strangely" (*TB*, 4), to borrow from Gertrude Stein, but only to uncover this strangeness as "the condition of possibility of the ordinary."⁷¹ From the outset of Woolf's "play-poem," we plunge into a strange, abstract universe of pure sensory

perceptions. Presenting us with what the omniscient narrator in the book's second interlude calls "a mosaic of single sparks not yet formed into one whole" (*W*, 21), these perceptions suggest an openness to the world before opinions are fully formed and could be indicative of both early childhood and the primary phase of creative production. Both human awareness and creative awareness begin with first perceptions.

These first perceptions manifest themselves against the cyclical pattern of a horizon in the interludes: the rising and setting of the sun, the singing of birds, and the breaking of the waves. Woolf's diary tells us that she imagined these perceptions to appear as "islands of light - islands in the stream that I am trying to convey; life itself going on" (*Diary 3*, 229). What the six speakers perceive is conditioned by the ongoing stream of life against which they see it. That which Louis calls "the central rhythm. . . the common mainspring," which he watches "expand, contract; and then expand again" (*W*, 76) - an image of what Natanson terms the "a priori repetition which is axial to everyday reality"⁷² - is exposed not only through the cyclical pattern of nature, described in the interludes, but also through the speakers' repetitive streams of fresh perceptions, embracing the ever-new. Susan is the one who most clearly finds a sense of being within the cycles of nature, the meadows and the fields: "I think I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees. . . I am the seasons. . . January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn. (*W*, 78-79).

The interaction between the six speakers' streams of single perceptions and the continual change of the misty horizon, within which they exist, takes on the shape of some "gigantic conversation," a conversation which goes beneath and beyond our

⁷¹ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xv.

ordinary forms of communication and becomes a “combination of thought, sensation, the voice of the sea” (*Diary* 3, 209). It is “gigantic” in that it points to the Husserlian horizon of continuity, which exists before we can even reflect on or speak about it. It is thus too huge to be fully pinned down in words and yet is it the ever-present ground of expression.⁷³ I can best condense this “gigantic” idea by what Wallace Stevens in the poem “A Primitive Like an Orb” speaks of as “a shapeless giant,” “A giant on the horizon, glistening” (*CP*, 442). Stevens’s “giant” is “shapeless” because it refers to the unsubstantial shape of pre-semantic experience, the first creative impulse, which, like Woolf’s “fin passing far out,” has not yet been fully crystallised: it is “on the horizon, glistening” (*CP*, 442). In *The Waves* Bernard echoes Woolf’s thoughts when noting: “A fin turns” in a “waste of waters” (*W*, 157). Signifying the primal creative impulse which he “shall in time to come uncover and coax into words” (*W*, 157), this “bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason, it springs up as one might see a fin of a porpoise on the horizon” (*W*, 157).

Bernard’s “Little Language”

As mentioned earlier, unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty assigns intentionality to the “flesh” of the body. It is the body which first experiences the world, not the mind. Just as our visible perceptions are conditioned by a pre-existing but unperceived ground or “horizon,” our ability to express our thoughts is conditioned by an unspoken, bodily communication with the world: a “mute perception” (*VI*, 155) or

⁷² Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 15.

“wild meaning” (VI, 155) of pre-reflective experience. Just as “the visible itself has an invisible inner framework” (VI, 215-216), language has a silent centre, a “core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape” (PP, xv). Although our clear perceptions and expressions presuppose this invisible /mute dimension of experience, we do not perceive it in daily life as it already exists within being.⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenon of “*flesh of the world*” (VI, 248) is anchored in this unperceived “*separation (écart)*” (VI, 216) within being itself, thus articulating the space of exchange in between the visible and invisible dimensions of experience, in between speech and “mute perception,” and in between the seen and the seer: “[T]he thickness of flesh between the seer . . . is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication” (VI, 135). The structure of “flesh” is therefore described as a “chiasm” (VI, 264), indicating an event that is neither dichotomous nor unitary but something in between. “Flesh” is a “*general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea” (VI, 139). All bodies have in the same way an intentional bond with the world. We are all part of our common world of “flesh” as active/passive beings: “visible-seer[s]” (VI, 260, 262). We are at once seeing/touching subjects and seen/touched things, at once distanced from and intertwined with the world. “Flesh,” in other words, calls attention to our difference and similarity: “Vision alone makes us learn that beings are different,

⁷³ For this insight I am indebted to Judith Butler’s phenomenological approach to Stevens’s poetry. See Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xiv.

⁷⁴ For a clarifying examination of Merleau-Ponty’s concept, see Jerrold Seigel, “A Unique way of Existing: Merleau-Ponty and the Subject,” 475-476. For other useful explanations, see John Carvalho, “Folds in the Flesh: Merleau-Ponty/Foucault,” in *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytical Divide*, eds. Lawrence Hass and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 293-312, and Brendan Prendeville “Merleau-Ponty, Realism and Painting: Psychophysical Space and the Space of Exchange,” *Art History* 22, no. 3 (September 1999): 364-88.

‘exterior,’ foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together*, are ‘simultaneity.’” (*Primacy*, 187).

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenon of flesh allows us to articulate more clearly the paradox of experience that Woolf struggled to “press into one” in *The Waves*. The book’s “gigantic conversation” reaches its zenith in Bernard’s final summing up. Here Bernard’s voice and those of the other five merge, creating one “gigantic” voice, indicating that the flesh of the single body is at once shared and reflected by the world: “Who am I? I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know” (*W*, 227-228). How can it be, Woolf seems to suggest, that we are conscious of other people, who are, simultaneously, conscious of us? Her six speakers are, on the one hand, part of the surging “stream” of “life itself going on,” but are, on the other hand, above it, looking down from their dry “islands of light,” stressing at once their difference and similarity, their distance and intertwining: “At the moment when I am most disparate,” says Bernard, “I am also integrated” (*W*, 62).

Woolf’s diary reveals that she was fascinated with Proust’s writing. “The thing about Proust,” she writes in a 1925 entry, “is his combination of the utmost sensibility with the utmost tenacity. . . He is as tough as catgut & as evanescent as a butterfly’s bloom. And he will I suppose both influence me & make me out of temper with every sentence of my own” (*Diary 3*, 7).⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty was equally impressed with Proust’s capacity to capture the unseizable within the solid: “No one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the

⁷⁵ Hermione Lee has also pointed out that Woolf “wanted to feel what Proust felt and to see if she couldn’t turn this world into something like *À La Recherche*.” See Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 468.

invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth” (VI, 149). Proust most clearly highlights this idea when in *Swann’s Way* he refers to music as the “little phrase” and Merleau-Ponty draws upon this notion when elaborating his own phenomenon of flesh. Like the “little phrase,” flesh is a “*general*” notion, like “the notions of light, of sound, of relief, of physical voluptuousness” (VI, 139, 149) which we cannot quite “get at . . . immediately and lay hands on” (VI, 150). In our “operative language,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “sense and sound are in the same relationship as in the ‘little phrase’” (VI, 153). The full meaning of language lies not merely in our spoken words but in the mute perception or silent language inhabiting these words: “language is everything. . . it is the voice of no one. . . . the very voice of things, the waves and the forest” (VI, 155).

Proust’s concerns with the unrepresentable seems to have influenced the gigantic project of *The Waves* in particular. When “[s]um[m]ing up. . . the meaning of [his] life” (W, 199) to provide us, the readers, with a final story, Bernard claims that he is “tired of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground” (W, 199). “[D]istrust[ing] neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper,” he “long[s] for” (W, 199) a different kind of language, which is not of our usual conversational kind:

some *little language* that lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably (W, 199; italics mine)

Just as Proust’s “little phrase” catches the invisible lining of the visible, the sense within the sound, so does Bernard’s “little language” highlight the unseizable and

immaterial hidden within the “neat designs” of our conventional language. This “little language” refers to the “broken” and “inarticulate” but it is not the opposite of what is “whole” and articulate; rather, it is that invisible/mute element which inhabits our visible world and words. What Bernard longs to express is a more direct experience of the “thing itself” without the obstructions of beautiful, neat phrases - a “poetry [which] rediscovers what articulates itself within us, unbeknownst to us” (*VI*, 208).⁷⁶

“It is Percival who inspires poetry” (*W*, 30), Bernard tells us elsewhere in *The Waves*. The mute and “eyeless” figure of Percival, who is brought into existence purely through the others’ perception of him, is not really a character but a metaphor for “the thing itself,” the “core of primary meaning” (*PP*, xv), to use Merleau-Ponty’s term, in which the acts and the expressions of the others are anchored. When Percival arrives at his own farewell dinner, he instantly inspires one gigantic moment, and, adding a sense of wholeness to the world of broken objects, makes visible the common ground of the six beings, the “flesh of the world,” the “voice of no one. . . . The very voice of things, the waves and the forest” (*VI*, 155):

‘Now once more,’ said Louis, ‘. . . Do not move, do not go. Hold it for ever.’

‘Let us hold it for one moment,’ said Jinny; ‘love, hatred, by whatever name we call it. . . . Forests and far countries on the other side of the

⁷⁶ Patrick McGee also argues that Bernard’s “little language” stands for the unseizable but in a different way: “the little language is the discourse of the Other,” which “signifies something beyond. . . at which all language aims.” Unlike my suggestion that the pre-semantic dimension of experience, which I see as exposed throughout Woolf’s work, offers a clue to her phenomenological concerns with creative production, McGee uses his notion of the “Other” to point out a “compatibility” between Woolf and Lacanian theory, claiming that Woolf “reaches toward the unrepresentable. . . the locus of the signifier before it is captured by the symbolic rule of patriarchy.” See McGee, “Woolf’s Other: The University in Her Eye,” *Novel* 23 (Spring 1990): 244, 230, 245.

world,' said Rhoda, 'are in it;. . . 'Happiness is in it,' said Neville, 'and the quiet of ordinary things. . . . 'Week-days are in it,' said Susan, 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday . . . What is to come is in it,' said Bernard. . . . (*W*, 118-19)

In accordance with Merleau-Ponty's speculations, the repeated "it" in this passage is "not matter . . . not mind . . . not substance" but one of those unsubstantial "general" notions like "the notions of light, of sound, of relief, of physical voluptuousness" (*VI*, 139, 149): "love" is in it, "[h]appiness is in it," "[w]eek-days are in it." "It" directs our attention to the "gigantic" horizon of experience that cannot be completely expressed, and yet it is the ever-present ground of our acts, relations and expressions. "It" refers exactly to that we cannot "get at . . . immediately and lay hands on" but which is, nevertheless, "the common tissue of which we are made" (*VI*, 150, 203).

In this light, let us finish this section by considering the opening of Woolf's short story "A Haunted House":

Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting. From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure - a ghostly couple.

"Here we left *it*," she said. And he added, "Oh, but here too!" "*It's* upstairs," she murmured. "And in the garden," he whispered. "Quietly," they said, "or we shall wake them."

But it wasn't that you woke us. Oh, no. "They're looking for *it*; they're drawing the curtain," one might say and so read on a page or two. "Now they've found *it*," one would be certain, stopping the

pencil on the margin. And then, tired of reading, one might rise and see for oneself, the house all empty, the doors standing open. . .

(*HH*, 3; italics mine)

As Woolf with *A Haunted House* was sowing the seeds of the “Time Passes” section in *To the Lighthouse*, the method and concern in these works is similar.⁷⁷ Just as the repeated “it” in the short story points to the pre-reflective dimension of experience and, like phenomenology, exposes this as the ground of expression, so is the silent, empty, “eyeless” house, “beholding nothing” (*L*, 183) in “Time Passes” exposed as the ever-present condition round which the people in the house normally operate. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, in her reading of “Time Passes,” Patricia Ondek Laurence refers to Husserl’s phenomenological method of “bracketing” but contradicts this with Woolf’s “treatment of the outward and the inward”: “If for Edmund Husserl, the phenomenologist, objects exist independently of ourselves in the external world, and anything beyond our immediate experience is ‘bracketed’ – then for Woolf it is the opposite.”⁷⁸ In stressing that objects, according to Husserl, are independent in the “external world” and thus detached from the subject, Laurence seems to charge the method of bracketing with a division of the subject and the object, whereas such a division is not the point of Husserl’s procedure. What he meant to achieve through “bracketing” was a “mere change of standpoint” (*Ideas*, 15), highlighting the intentionality of consciousness and identifying this as the source of objectivity. Husserl, then, stresses not the independence of the object but explores the object in its relation to the intending subject. Douglas Mao contradicts Laurence

⁷⁷ As Hermione Lee puts it, “A Haunted House foreshadows ‘the questing airs in the ‘Time Passes’ Section of *To the Lighthouse*.” See Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 318.

⁷⁸ Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, 110.

and shares my view when arguing that “Woolf’s attempt to give ‘an empty house, no people’s characters” in the “Time Passes” of *To the Lighthouse* is tantamount to an “epoché of sorts.”⁷⁹ In agreement with Mao, I suggest that Woolf’s procedure in “A Haunted House,” is, in fact, analogous to the mode of operation of the *epoché*.

Once again, then, Woolf’s procedure is tantamount to the operation of the *epoché*, shifting our attention back to the “thing itself.” “A Haunted House” presents us with a phenomenological “bracketing” of conventional “neat designs” of representation, exposing “it” or “life, spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing” (*CD*, 7), the more primordial dimension of experience that is the condition of expression and creativity alike. This is implied in the fact that the narrator stops her pencil upon thinking “Now they’ve found it.” “It” marks that primary perception, the “fin passing far out,” which Woolf struggled to “get down into [her] pen” (*Diary 3*, 191) and out on her page, thus calling our attention to creative production itself, laying bare the space between the first, pre-semantic perception and the articulation of the “thing itself.”

Like the “mist”, edging the “unsubstantial territory” of *The Waves*, the repeated “it” in “A Haunted House,” then, represents what we are always, already haunted and somehow framed by: “we are always already *in*. . . [and] *of it*” (*VI*, 248); it is “not what I think, but what I live through” (*PP*, xvi-xvii). This “essential thing” corresponds with the “gigantic” region that Woolf never stopped questioning and struggled to grasp in words - a giant which lays at once the foundation for and is the integument of our acts of consciousness: “life is a luminous halo, a

⁷⁹ Mao, *Solid Objects*, 228.

semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (CD, 8).

V. Interrelation and Separation: Dialectical Tensions in Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers* and Woolf’s *The Waves*

Various critics have approached Woolf’s exploration of human consciousness in *The Waves* from a psychological perspective. In *Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (1970), Jean O. Love remarks that *The Waves* is the only of Woolf’s works in which “truly reflective consciousness” and “dialectic” is present and locates the concept of “primordial consciousness” within what she calls a “mythopoetic” style, approaching this “by means of a theoretical system derived from developmental cognitive psychology.”⁸⁰ In a similar manner, Robert Humphrey combines Woolf’s work with typical psychological concerns, calling *The Waves* “a presentation of the purest psychological analysis in literature.”⁸¹ Jean Guiguet too emphasizes the “interior monologue” of Woolf’s speakers, claiming that “everything is turned inward” in *The Waves*, suspending the “external elements” of an “objective universe” that appeared in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.⁸² More recently, Mark Hussey has argued that what he sees as the “aesthetic failure” of *The Waves* “is partly due to its inwardness.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Love, *Worlds in Consciousness*, 200, xi.

⁸¹ Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*, 14.

⁸² Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, 379.

It seems to me, however, that the expressions of Woolf's six voices have more to do with the phenomenology of immediate perception than depth psychology, more with the phenomenological relation between perceiver and world than with the purely inward thoughts of each perceiver. It looks as if Woolf's voices turn inward only to discover that they cannot escape being pulled out by a world within which they are already immersed as carnal beings.

The radical changes of "human relations" (*WE*, 71) which took place during the Modernist period were marked by what Stephen Kern has described as "both a greater interpenetration and a greater separation" between "dialectically related pairs" such as the individual and the public, difference and similarity.⁸⁴ Similarly, in *The Waves*, Woolf applies equal importance to internal and external elements. Inside and outside, essence and fact both interpenetrate and separate, creating a constantly rippling whole very much like waves in a sea. This viewpoint is not unlike that of Anna Snaith, who in her recent study about the "Public and Private Negotiations" in Woolf's works argues that Woolf's specific "technique" of discourse "neither unites or separates the public and private realms; rather, it places them in a dialectical relation."⁸⁵ Similarly, Tamar Katz has stressed that the speakers in *The Waves* are "at once distanced from and formed by culture" and that *The Waves* as "an epitome of modernism," is "bound" to this form of "doubleness."⁸⁶ Unlike these critics,

⁸³ Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 82, 87, 88.

⁸⁴ Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 191.

⁸⁵ Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*, 69.

⁸⁶ Katz "Modernism, Subjectivity, and Narrative Form: Abstraction in *The Waves*," 235, 248. Pamela L. Caughie offers a point not unlike Katz's when claiming that Woolf "enact[s] a way of thinking about and responding to narrative discourse that considers different ways of relating things rather than the distinction between two things." See Caughie, *Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism*, xii.

however, my project interprets Woolf's configuration of this dialectic and duality in a philosophical context, locating her thought within a continuum of what I claim is a Modernist attention to the Husserlian "thing itself" (*Ideas*, 66), uncovering the paradoxical relation between the individual and the world through the reduction: "How is it that I am both a subject experiencing the world and an object within the world?"⁸⁷

Offering a comparative analysis of Cézanne's painting *The Large Bathers* (1906; Figure 1) and Woolf's "play-poem" *The Waves*, in what follows I have tried to indicate how Cézanne and Woolf through different media evidence the above mentioned dialectical tensions between Modern man and his world.⁸⁸ When Cézanne in a letter to his son wrote: "it is all a question of putting in as much interrelation as possible," he spoke of incorporating, in his art, not only the "interrelation" between himself and his object-world, but also the "interrelation" between objects.⁸⁹ He explained this to Joachim Gasquet: "Those glasses and plates are talking to each other, endlessly exchanging secrets ... They do not stop living ... They spread imperceptibly around each other, through intimate reflections, as we do through glances and words."⁹⁰ Virginia Woolf first spotted the unusual liveliness of Cézanne's objects when in April 1918 she first laid eyes on one of his still lifes with apples. In a diary entry she wrote: "There are 6 apples in the Cézanne picture. What

⁸⁷ Mark Kingswell, "Husserl's Sense of Wonder," *The Philosophical Forum* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 102, 99. For another illuminating explanation of this paradoxical relation between subject and object-world, see Brough, "Art and Artworld."

⁸⁸ Cézanne painted three different versions of *The Large Bathers*, two of which are in the Barnes Collection, Pennsylvania, and the National Gallery, London, respectively. In my discussion I will be referring to the last 1906 version, which is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

⁸⁹ Paul Cézanne, *Cézanne's Letters*, 323.

⁹⁰ Cahn, *Paul Cézanne*, 71.

can 6 apples *not* be? I began to wonder. There's their relationship to each other, & their colour, & their solidity" (*Diary 1*, 140).⁹¹ In her own work, Woolf too suggests that there are no things in themselves but only phenomena constituted through specific relations. The six voices in *The Waves* interrelate, transform, and at times disappear into each other, approximating to what Merleau-Ponty terms "*l'intermonde*," revealing our common world of "flesh," an "intermundane space ...where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap" (*VI*, 48). In once again using Merleau-Ponty's speculations as a tool to articulate the dialectical tensions between subject and world, part and whole, perceiver and perceived, I hope to clarify the phenomenological nature of Cézanne's and Woolf's aesthetic concerns.

Landscapes of Reduction: Part and Whole

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology seeks to uncover the genesis of perception – he calls it "the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive" ("Doubt," 14) – and to describe how this experience bears on the formation of linguistic and conceptual meaning. I would like to demonstrate how both Cézanne and Woolf sought to lay bare this tension between perception and conception; both wanted to trace the genesis and the process of creative production.

For Merleau-Ponty the roots of our habitual world are found in primordial ideas, not of how phenomena appear to pure consciousness, as Husserl set out to show, but of how they appear to the embodied subject. Only by enacting the

⁹¹ In a 1918 letter Woolf reflected on the same apples: "They are really very superb. The longer one looks the larger and heavier and greener and redder they become" (*Woolf, Letters*, 230).

reduction, by “bracketing” what we, according to habit, believe to be real, can we return to a zero-point of perception, to what the philosopher calls “re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world” (*PP*, vii). Merleau-Ponty found in Cézanne’s painting an example of the reduction. “Cézanne’s painting suspends. . . habits of thought,” he writes in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” “and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself” (“Doubt,” 16). When clarifying how Cézanne’s canvasses suspend the familiar, uncovering our “wild” and primitive ground of existence, the philosopher must have had in mind *The Large Bathers*:

Nature itself is stripped of the attributes which make it ready for animistic communions: there is no wind in the landscape, no movement in the Lac d’Annecy; the frozen objects hesitate as at the beginning of the world. It is an unfamiliar world . . . (“Doubt,” 16)

Now consider the following passage from the first holograph draft of *The Waves*:

. . .this is the beginning . . .birds have sung and; & the . . .spiders webs have been lit by starlight . . .The blank . . .of profound night has cleared little by little. On this white space first the trees have shown, ponderous with mist. And then the sea, moving, has shown truly distinct from the fields. (*HD*, 6)

This early draft shows us Woolf’s thoughts about a “fresh philosophy” (*HD*, 758), or what in “On Being Ill” she calls a “new language . . .more primitive, more sensual, more obscene,” a fresh language which stems from a place which is as unfamiliar and frozen as Cézanne’s stripped landscape: “There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds’ feet is unknown” (*CD*, 45, 46). The untrodden and cold landscapes of Woolf and Cézanne are landscapes of reduction,

laying bare the preliminary phase of creative production. A “new” and “more primitive” language presupposes the reduction: a “stripped,” “white space,” a blank page or zero-point. Each by means of a different medium, the painter and writer sought to re-create a language of “the beginning,” using paint and words to communicate the pre-communicative, which is, nevertheless, the source of creativity.

As Cézanne was, in his own words, “germinating” (“Doubt,” 17) with his object-world, he traced the growth of his own creation. In *Still Life With Apples* (1893-94; Figure 2), he gives form to a slanting table, vessels and fruit that do not seem accurately elliptical. The surface is characteristically distorted: the famous apples seem too solid to balance on the tilting plate; they almost roll out of the picture surface and yet we cannot reach them. The tilting and unusually lively objects bring into focus the immediate nature of perceptual experience *before* our knowledge of gravity and geometry begins to order it. Challenging our usual way of looking, the painting enacts the reduction, returning us to the “lived perspective” (“Doubt,” 14) from which Cézanne painted: “I paint as I see as I feel,” he said.⁹²

Like his apples and vessels, Cézanne’s people are stripped of the characteristics of the ordinary. The figures in the portraits *Portrait of Mme Cézanne in a Red Dress* (1890-94; Figure 3), *Old Woman with a Rosary* (c. 1896; Figure 4), *Woman with a Coffee-Pot* (c. 1893-95; Figure 5), and *Boy with Skull* (1896-98; Figure 6) appear to stare into nothingness in a dream-like manner. The gazes of these strange people are stiffened; their lips are tightened; their expressions are completely

Cézanne as quoted in Stephen F. Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 343.

arrested. These figures, too, “hesitate as at the beginning of the world” (“Doubt,” 16), a “pre-world” (*PP*, 322), which is still silent and timeless.⁹³

“(T)ime shall be utterly obliterated,” Woolf wrote in a diary entry on *The Waves*. Like Cézanne, she was concerned with the process of creative production: “I want to watch & see how the idea at first occurs. I want to trace my own process” (*Diary 3*, 118, 113). Throughout Woolf’s work, the pre-communicative dimension of experience – “a zone of silence” - is ever-present as the source of this first idea. “The artists themselves live in it” (*CE 2*, 236), she claims. The six essences that constitute *The Waves* certainly “live in it.” Like Cezanne’s strange fruit and inanimate people, the voices of Bernard, Rhoda, Louis, Neville, Susan and Jinny operate on the basis of the reduction. Woolf has realized her “new. . . more primitive” language through a series of “suspended present tense”⁹⁴ soliloquies, realising the “new. . . more primitive” language that she spoke of in “On Being Ill.” This form of speech suspends the habitual, puts out of play usual references to time and place and registers only the immediate, creating an ongoing stream of fresh zero-points: “I flutter. I ripple. I stream like a plant in the river” (*W*, 83). In Woolf’s phenomenological pre-world “the normal is abolished” (*W*, 97), exposing a stranger, more primordial viewpoint as the condition for expression and creative production alike. What is attempted, in other words, is an *epoché*. Through a phenomenological shift of standpoint, Woolf leads us away from factuality and objectivity - that which

⁹³ Meyer Schapiro makes a point not unlike that of Merleau-Ponty when claiming that Cézanne’s fruit and vessels imply a “still unordered world.” The fruit, he argues, “is not yet fully part of human life.” See Schapiro, “The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still Life,” in *Modern Art: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 25.

⁹⁴ For this terminology I am indebted to Stephen J. Miko, who perceptively remarks that the “suspended present tense” of Woolf’s six voices “seems to reduce existence to a moment perpetually, to collapse both past and future without giving up consciousness of both past and future.” See Miko, “Reflections on *The Waves*,” 69.

she in “A Mark on the Wall” calls “the surface, with its hard separate facts” (*SS*, 55) – and back to the primal ground of experience. She suspends our preconceptions about what a novel ought to look like to recover a more original image of “reality, this, the essential thing” (*CD*, 7) obscured by “the cotton wool of daily life” (*MB*, 72).

We have seen that Gertrude Stein once praised Cézanne for showing that “in composition ...[e]ach part is as important as the whole.” We have also seen that phenomenology applies a similarly equal importance to the part and the whole. The “reduction is ironically a protest against reductionism,” stresses Max van Manen.⁹⁵ Rather than reducing our vision to an introspective and partial one, thus rejecting the ordinary, it refers to a mere change of outlook. The method of reduction should not be taken as a rejection of the world as we know it, but as a fresh starting-point from which to see the depth of our involvement with it. In phenomenology, then, the part is highlighted but only to provide a clear view of its relationship with the whole frame within which it exists, which includes other things and other people.

At every point this equal balance between part and whole, single unit and frame, can be detected within the frames of *The Large Bathers* and *The Waves*. Whereas the aim of the Impressionists (Monet, Seurat, Renoir) had been to grasp the immediacy of the fleeting impression, Paul Cézanne wished “to make of Impressionism something solid, like the art in the museums,” that is to say, to find a balance between the broken and the solid, the fleeting and the tangible.⁹⁶ Likewise Woolf’s writing demonstrates a fine balance between pairs of opposites. Just as Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* senses that the “feathery and evanescent” surface of her

⁹⁵ See Manen, [http:// www. phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html](http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html).

⁹⁶ Cézanne as quoted in Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 345.

painting is “clamped together with bolts of iron” (*L*, 231), so does Louis in *The Waves* see through the impressionistic “mist” edging his surface world of moments to reach “some hardness at the centre” (*W*, 26).

In Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers*, the natural setting of sky, water and slanting trees create the painting’s framework, and in Woolf’s *The Waves*, the soliloquizing voices are framed and balanced by the rising and setting of the sun, the continual breaking of the waves, and the singing of birds. These frameworks indicate the cyclical pattern of nature: perpetual difference within a horizon of similarity, accentuating at once the aspect and the whole, surface and depth, feathery evanescence and iron, impressionistic mist and solidity.

Cézanne’s concern with “putting in as much interrelation as possible” turns our attention not to things in themselves but to the spaces between them: the spaces between vessels and fruit, bodies and trees, clouds and sky. Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* demonstrate similar concerns, anticipating a theme that would come to “saturate” *The Waves* completely (*Diary 1*, 209). In *Mrs. Dalloway* Clarissa ponders on the “the ebb and flow of things”:

here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling, all to bits and pieces as it was, part of the people she had never met; being laid out *like a mist between* the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.

(*MD*, 10.11; italics mine)

The “mist between” things that Clarissa refers to can, I think, be described as another example of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenon of “flesh,” that unperceived and misty

divergence within being from which self, other and world arise in mutual and reciprocal relations: “this flesh of my body is shared by the world” (VI, 249). The “mist” links the prosperous Clarissa with the poor and poetic Septimus, in the eyes of whom all conventional interests are “bracketed,” leaving the world exposed as phenomenon, making him see clearly that “the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art” (MB, 72). Septimus’s attention is centred only on the “mist between” things:

leaves were alive; trees were alive . . . The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. (MD, 28)

The fact that Septimus sees clearly the essential “pattern” of things connects him directly with Woolf’s “pattern,” which is “hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life” (MB, 72). Woolf’s “pattern” finds its philosophical counterpart in Merleau-Ponty’s “invisible inner framework” (VI, 215) of the visible. Wholeness of this pattern depends on the “spaces between” things, that is to say, the relations between the visible and the invisible, sound and silence, speech and the “mute perception” (VI, 155) of the perceiving body. In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe, a painter and, like Cézanne, a practical phenomenologist, underscores this idea: “The question was of some relation between those masses” (L, 200).

This invisible “pattern” of our existence, the *betweenness* of things, is brought into focus in *The Large Bathers* and *The Waves*. Cézanne’s nude bathers are, even more so than his earlier people, strange and abstract figures. The brown hair and far from sensual but rather plant-like shapes of these slanting women, each of whom

seems enclosed within a space of her own, mirror the equally brown and slanting tree trunks that frame their space.⁹⁷ The scene accentuates at once separation and interrelation between the natural and the human. Cézanne's plant-like women remind us of that moment in *The Waves* when Louis intertwines with and becomes inseparable from the object he intends: "I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick ... I am all fibre" (*W*, 7). Similar phenomenological moments of entwining occur in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*. Whereas Mrs Ramsay "often found herself sitting, and looking with her work in her hands until she became the things looked at - that light for example," (*L*, 68), Septimus does not meditate on becoming the tree towards which his eyes are directed, he already *is* the tree: "when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement" (*MD*, 28). In other words, he *is* "the words; . . . the music; . . . the thing itself" (*MB*, 72).

In his reading of *The Large Bathers*, T.J. Clark draws particular attention to what he calls the "double figure" at the right side of the painting: the bodies of two women merge and seem to disappear into each other; it looks as though the one's shoulders become the other's buttocks and vice versa.⁹⁸ Like Bernard in *The Waves*, these interweaving figures seem to wonder: "Who am I? ... Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know" (*W*, 240-41). Again Merleau-Ponty beautifully articulates these concerns with mutuality and reversibility:

⁹⁷For this insight I am indebted to Ulrike Becks-Malorny's comment that the "The figures are also aligned in the same way as the trees. . . The women are self-absorbed; they exist only for themselves." See Becks-Malorny, *Paul Cézanne 1839-1906: Pioneer of Modernism*, trans. Phil Goddard in association with First Edition Translations Ltd. (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 88.

⁹⁸T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 157.

The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the “other side” of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. ...Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught up in the fabric of the world and its cohesion is that of a thing. ...the world is made of the same stuff as the body. (*Primacy*, 162-163)

The reversibility of the seeing and the seen takes place within what Merleau-Ponty terms the “interworld (*l'intermonde*),” exposing our common world of “flesh,” an “intermundane space. . . where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap.” (*VI*, 48). Within this crossover space, the perceiving and the perceived, the subjective and the objective intertwine, marking both difference and similarity. It is here that vessels and fruit “exchang[e] secrets,” as Cézanne pointed out, and where nude bodies seem more plant-like than human.⁹⁹ The body, Merleau-Ponty tells us, has a twofold being that locates it at once apart from other sensible beings as a seeing/touching subject and among them as a seen/touched “thing”; it is at once distanced from and intertwined with experience. Thus, the whole world is a mutually intended world of seeing/seen, touching/touched bodies. We are all caught up in the “flesh of the world” as active/passive beings: “visible-seer[s]” (*VI*, 260, 262). This is also “Cézanne’s enigma”: “Man absent from but entirely within the landscape”¹⁰⁰ and what I have called the paradox of the “eye/I.” The individual is at once a seeing “eye,” projecting his/her vision into the world but is, at the same time a passive “I,” a

⁹⁹ For a careful examination of this “exchange” of space, see Prendeville, “Merleau-Ponty, Realism and Painting.”

¹⁰⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 169.

component within a horizon of continuity. By reflecting and imposing meaning upon the world, we separate ourselves from it, and yet we are integral parts of the same world.

This paradox of the “eye/I” is, or so I argue, key to the wave-like movements of *The Waves*. Although each of the book’s six speakers repeatedly tries to impose imaginative order upon a world of flux - “We. . . stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road” (*W*, 120) -, they are all integral parts of the same world and “made of the same stuff”: “we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist.” (*W*, 11). Thus, as “life comes; life goes” (*W*, 145), Woolf’s six free variations of the artist’s mind – that of the “lady writing” (*W*, 12) – vacillate between interrelation and separation; between the need for community and the need to be private selves. While “[o]utside the undifferentiated forces roar,” the six essences contract like waves and look “inside [where] [they] are very private, very explicit” (*W*, 213), but only to be pulled back into the upsurge of the visible world. Hence the play-poem’s continual wave-like movements of reduction and expansion:

The mind grows rings; the identity becomes robust; pain is absorbed in growth. Opening and shutting, shutting and opening, with increasing hum and sturdiness, the haste and fever of youth are drawn into service until the whole being seems to expand in and out like the mainspring of a clock. (*W*, 215)

To sum up, Cézanne’s bathing bodies - the double figure in particular - and the perpetually “shutting and opening” body of Woolf’s six figures lay bare a paradox of experience, which is central to the creative artist. The world that the artist tries to arrest in language or paint is, simultaneously, the frame of continuity and

change within which he/she is rooted as a carnal being. Thus the tensions between bodies and frameworks in *The Large Bathers* and *The Waves*, bringing about a balanced shifting between part and whole, surface and depth, the fleeting and the tangible, attempting to “make of Impressionism something solid.”

As pointed out by critics, when looking carefully, the middle of Cézanne's *The Large Bathers* reveals the face of a woman.¹⁰¹ Her eyes are hidden in the sky, the water's edge forms her mouth, and the slanting trees constitute her hair. While mirroring the mirror-relation between bodies and trees, the sky too approaches the human, once again stressing the mutuality of body and world. Once this face is spotted it returns our gaze, drawing us into the painting and yet pushing us away, giving *us* the feeling of being “visible-seers.” In a similar manner, Woolf's *The Waves* makes us aware of our self-reflexivity. Our being conscious of the “lady . . . between the two long windows, writing” (*W*, 12), a figure of the writer as a hidden and yet active force inside the text, calls attention to “that which we actually perceive” (“Doubt,” 14), making us reflect on our own activity of reading. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's “intermundane space . . . where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap” is also the space at which our eyes are directed: the picture surface and the page of the book. In other words, in our experience of looking or reading, we too experience the reduction. Cézanne's face in the sky and Woolf's hidden lady “bracket” the expected and bring into focus the particular phenomena to which we are oriented. As Woolf writes in ““The Moment: Summer's Night”: “One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant” (*CE* 2, 293).

¹⁰¹ Sidney Geist calls Cézanne's hidden images such as the face in the sky “cryptomorphs.” See Geist, *Interpreting Cézanne* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 1-2. For another insightful discussion of Cézanne's hidden images, see Joyce Medina, *Cézanne and Modernism: The Poetics of Painting* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

As readers we are, at once, active “spectators,” projecting our own visions into the work, and “passive participants,” components within a horizon; parts of the whole work of art.

If, as Stein wrote about Cézanne’s mode of composition, “[e]ach part is as important as the whole,” then, the viewer or reader’s viewpoint is an integral part of the composition’s landscape. Woolf reminds us of this in “How Should One Read a Book”: “[d]o not dictate to your author, try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice” (*CD*, 60). Writer/Painter, reader/viewer and text/painting: each is an essential part of the artwork’s making and re-making. Hence Bernard in *The Waves*: “to be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people’s eyes” (*W*, 95); “I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me” (*TW*, 109). Not only does he refer to the eyes of Louis, Neville, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda, with whom he is “many-sided” (*W*, 95) but also to the eyes of his readers. Just as Cézanne, during the process of painting, was “germinating” (“Doubt”, 17) with his landscape, we are, “germinating” with the painting and book, as it were. By making the transition from the aspect to the whole, from the “mist” edging the surface of these works to the “bolts of iron” beneath, we help “make of Impressionism something solid.”

VI. The Creative Eye/I: Beginning Again

What emerges from my discussion in the previous section is that Woolf's "play-poem" *The Waves* is neither a work of "at dead ends" (Koestler), nor a product of "aesthetic failure," which "does not allow for the participation of the reader" (Hussey). What I hope to have clarified is that the speakers' *and* readers' constant enactment of the reduction lies central to the wave-like movements of Woolf's work. The reader's participation is never rejected; rather, the reader and the read, like the part and the whole of Stein's Cézannian composition, are placed in a dialectical relation.

"Everything begins with the reduction," Kevin Hart writes, "but never so that it escapes the trial of beginning again and again."¹⁰² Here Hart takes his bearings from Merleau-Ponty: "The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction." (*PP*, xiv) and yet the philosopher stresses: "the unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere which has surrounded it are not to be taken as a sign of failure" (*PP*, xxi); rather, "it is as painstaking as the work of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne - by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being (*PP*, xxi). The impossibility of reduction, leading to the phenomenologist's perpetual beginning should not be taken as a sign of futility but as a constant reminder of the pre-reflective dimension of experience - the "first philosophy" embedded within daily life - from which meaning and relations arise. This incompleteness is given a

¹⁰² Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 289.

dialectical placement in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: it is a continual point of departure and point of return for his phenomenological and aesthetic concerns and explains his thinking's underlying pattern of separation and interrelation, distance and closeness.

It should be clear from what I have already demonstrated that similar dialectical concerns pervade Woolf's writings. Her intention with *The Waves* was "to give the moment whole, whatever it includes." (*Diary* 3, 209). Using the *epoché* as my guiding tool, I have shown that what "give[s] the moment whole" in her work is her awareness of the totality of the visible and the invisible, the "voice" of the spoken and unspoken dimensions of experience. Knowing that the reduction is "not only a research method," as Max van Manen taught us, but that "it is also a phenomenological attitude that must be adopted by anyone who wishes to participate in the questions that a certain project pursues,"¹⁰³ I have also clarified the way in which the reader's participation is a necessary part of the whole of Woolf's Modernist composition.

The sense of wholeness Woolf desires, however, never lasts. Her "moments of being," disentangled from behind the bracketed "cotton wool" of daily life, revealing how "we are the music, we are the thing itself" always break – "There – snap" (*CE* 2, 296) - and teach us a phenomenological lesson, which Merleau-Ponty articulates beautifully:

If the thing itself were reached, it would be from that moment arrayed before us and stripped of its mystery. It would cease to exist as a thing at the very moment when we thought to possess

¹⁰³ See Manen, [http:// www. phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html](http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html).

it. What makes the “reality” of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp.

(*PP*, 233)

This is the “fate of perception.”¹⁰⁴ As soon as the invisible and unsayable – that which Jean Wahl in his letter to Stevens speaks of as the “a priori. . . the unapproachable” - has been expressed in language, the perceiver’s initial state of wonder at the object, the “thing itself,” will have vanished. I would like to finish this chapter by showing that this impossibility of complete reduction offers a clue to the sense of inconclusiveness and re-beginning that Woolf’s works give us.

In *The Waves*, Bernard, Woolf’s surrogate writing self, creates his own separate order through phrases, imaginary “rings” of unity, recalling the “ring” of his first perception. However, he is aware that his phrases are make-believe, fictive “bubbles” (*W*, 94), which are bound to snap. Just as the swarming mind in “The Mark on the Wall” speaks of language as an “old game of self-preservation” (*SS*, 59), Bernard knows that his phrases are a mere shelter, a “perpetual illusion” (*W*, 214), which can never completely grasp “the thing itself.” Neville underscores this when exclaiming: “Speech is false” (*W*, 113). Despite the fact that each of Woolf’s creative beings attempts to order the perceived, “there is no stability in this world” (*W*, 96), for “[o]ne cannot live outside the machine for more perhaps than half an hour” (*W*, 127), this “machine” being “the stream . . . of life itself,” always “going on” (*Diary* 3, 229), to which the subject is always, already related.

Bernard longs for a “little language” exactly because he cannot grasp in words the essential truth, the “thing itself,” that he is looking for: “I have made up

¹⁰⁴ I have borrowed the term “fate of perception” from Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1993), 156

thousands of stories; I have filled innumerable note-books with phrases to be used when I have found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer. But I have never yet found that story” (*W*, 156). Although he yearns to express a more primordial vision of the world, such expression, paradoxically, relies on the virtues of a language that is always, already a belated version of this vision: “But how describe the world seen without a self?” asks Bernard (*W*, 239); how to describe the world as it is met with in immediate experience before it is processed by the self’s critical objectivism? “There are no words,” Bernard answers (*W*, 239). There is, in other words, no point at which full reduction can be achieved. Hence, Bernard’s final “summing up” remains “[a]n imperfect phrase” (*W*, 181).

Central to the dialectical tensions between reduction and expansion, separation and interrelation in *The Waves* lies the silent figure of Percival. This absent and yet always present figure is what Wallace Stevens would call “the central poem. . . the poem of the whole, / The poem of the composition of the whole” (*CP*, 442); he “is and. . . / Is not and, therefore, is” (*CP*, 440). He is a metaphor for the essence of experience - the “thing itself” -, which can never be completely grasped in words but nevertheless remains the foundation for expression. It is through the death of Percival that Bernard rediscovers a more original vision of the “thing itself.” At the time of Percival’s death, Bernard’s own child is born, making him sense the “two sides of [his] body” and wonder: ““Which is happiness?’ . . . ‘Which is pain?’” (*W*, 219). This double feeling adds to our understanding of the creative pattern of “perpetual beginning” that I am arguing for. It is relevant to my concern with the generative dimension of the creator’s “mark” as a “navel,” a fissure which simultaneously joins and divides, at once signifying a bond with the “ground of pure pre-conceptual experience” (*Ideas*, 27) and a new opening for creativity.

Percival's death primarily leaves Bernard with a feeling of doubt, which brings us back to Lily's doubts about making her first "mark" after Mrs. Ramsay's death. Like Lily Briscoe's sense of "nakedness" when faced with the blank stare of her canvas, Bernard is overwhelmed by a lack of creative ideas: "Nothing came, nothing. I cried then with a sudden conviction of complete desertion. Now there is nothing. No fin breaks the waste of this immeasurable sea" (*W*, 237). This experience of doubt and despair, however, is combined with an experience of wonder and joy, making "the landscape return to [Bernard] . . . but with this difference" (*W*, 239). Recalling the opening of "The Mark on the Wall," which is set in "the middle of January" (*SS*, 53) and the "snowfield" of "On Being II" (*CD*, 46), Bernard now moves about in a fresh "wintry landscape" (*W*, 238), a "new world, never trodden," and "is unable to speak save in a child's words of one syllable" (*W*, 239). Much like the speaker in Stevens's "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," Bernard "[is] the world in which he walk[s]" and "f[i]nd[s] [him]self more truly and more strange" (*CP*, 65). Once again the cycle of creativity is displayed as a world that the protagonist can walk through. Just as the death of Mrs. Ramsay triggered Lily's *epoché*, leading to the clarity of her creative vision, so does the combined experience of death and birth leave Bernard feeling like a latter-day Adam in a new world, overwhelming him by phenomenological wonder "as on the first day of creation" (*W*, 220). Recalling the wonder in the face of objects that pervade the children's first perceptions in the opening scene of Woolf's "play-poem," Bernard's vision briefly coincides with that of his latent child-self, conveying a sense of a new beginning: "So I went out. I saw the first morning he would never see - the sparrows were like toys dangled from a string by a child. To see without attachment, from the outside, and to realize their beauty in itself - how strange!" (*W*, 220). Habituality is put out of play and the world

is exposed as phenomenon: “strangeness is exposed as the condition of possibility of the ordinary.”¹⁰⁵ As the phrase maker’s usual “shelter from phrases” (*W*, 239) are “bracketed,” he is now “perceiving merely” (*W*, 239) and has become what in “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” Woolf calls “a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye” (*CD*, 71). Once again, the form of doubt that Woolf presents us with, then, “has its place in the realm of our perfect freedom” (*Ideas*, 107): doubt is not a dead end but a sign of openness to the world, leading to a new beginning, a “[d]awn. . . some sort of renewal. . . Another general awakening” (*W*, 247). Like a practical phenomenologist, Woolf’s creative mind is a “perpetual beginner” (*PP*, xiv) who always returns to his/her starting-point and always begins again from a zero-point of perception.¹⁰⁶

In a similar manner, we are presented with a new opening at the end of Woolf’s short story “An Unwritten Novel.” Just a split second after this story’s narrator realises, like Bernard, that there are in fact no stories, that “Life’s bare as a bone,” the visible world “floats [her] afresh!” (*SS*, 36). The “white light” that illuminates the “carnations” and “chrysanthemums” (*SS*, 36) of this short story’s end scene recalls the “chrysanthemums,” and the “light upon the page” (*SS*, 53) that opened “The Mark on the Wall.” Once again, the light and whiteness recall the creator’s “never-resting mind,” to borrow from Stevens, and the blankness of the writer’s fresh page.

¹⁰⁵ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xv.

¹⁰⁶ For this point I am indebted to Jerrold Seigel who describes the “perpetual beginning” central to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as “a constant questioning and return to its own starting point.” See Seigel, “A Unique Way of Existing,” 479.

It is often from behind a window that the double vision of Woolf's creative selves unfolds, where the swarming mind moves into and yet self-consciously withdraws from its object. In the holograph drafts of *The Waves*, the six children more than once see "a lady writing *between two windows* at a table" (*HD*, 16; italics mine). This window is indicative not only of the space between the creating artist and the world of broken objects - a space which is stated through the creative process - but also of the fine line between the "eye" and the "I," the slanted stroke in the "eye/I," as it were. The paradox of the eye/I pervades Woolf's work. While looking down upon the world "from an upper window," the narrator in "A Room of One's Own" wonders how the human mind can both "separate itself from the people in the street," and "think with other people. . . as, for instance, in a crowd." (*RO*, 96). This brings us back to a moment in *Mrs Dalloway* where Clarissa "slice[s] like a knife through everything" but is "at the same time. . . outside, looking on" (*MD*, 10). It is also from behind a window that Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* moves into and yet self-consciously away from her object, the rhythmic, flashing light of the lighthouse, constantly sending signals from the island to the mainland through the "stream" of "life itself going on" (*Diary 3*, 228). The six essences in *The Waves* are, on the one hand, part of this surging stream, but are, on the other hand, *above* it, looking down from their dry "islands of light" (*Diary 3*, 229). Just as the moth in the essay "The Death of the Moth," which flutters about at "the bottom of the window-pane" (*CD*, 180) but fails to fly across it, symbolises the creative eye/I's simultaneous withdrawal from and connection with the world beyond its window, so do Woolf's moth-like essences fly about in endless circles of perpetual beginning, They "expand, contract and then expand again" (*W*, 76), perpetually oscillating between moving towards and withdrawing from the world. This movement of withdrawal and

return is, moreover, conveyed by their suspended present tense soliloquies, pulling us, the reader, in and then pushing us out. Much Like Lily Briscoe we are challenged to “[g]et that and *start afresh*, get that and *start afresh*” (*L*, 261) and become “perpetual beginners.” Just as Stein, in “Poetry and Grammar,” stresses that “writing should go on” (“PG,” 130), implying that creative production is a part of the whole, that it corresponds with the continuity of the world within which we exist, so does Woolf point out in “Modern Fiction”: “. . . all that we can do is keep on moving, now a little in this direction, now in that. . . It need scarcely be said that we make no claim to stand, even momentarily, upon the vantage ground” (*CD*, 5).

What emerges from my discussion, then, is that the impossibility of the complete reduction, that is to say, the impossibility of fully grasping what Woolf calls “the thing itself” or “the essential thing,” should not to be taken as a “product of crisis” or a sign of futility. Rather, it offers a key to what I see as a phenomenological cycle of re-beginning, which never allows the reader to lose sight of the condition which underlies expression. Just as phenomenological beginning is co-present with the original instincts of the perceiving subject, so are beginnings in Woolf co-present with the primal perceptions of the creative mind. Beginnings are full of promise and the creator’s only hope in a world of broken objects - a world of what Bernard calls “odds and ends, sticks and straws, detestable little bits of wreckage, flotsam and jetsam, floating on the oily surface” (*W*, 225). As Patrick McGee perceptively remarks, “Bernard’s discourse is the fin of *The Waves*: to exploit the bilingual pun in fin, it is *le fin* – the end, the aim, the conclusion”¹⁰⁷ - an end which can, however, never offer closure but only a new opening. In order to find anew the meaning of a

¹⁰⁷ McGee, “Woolf’s Other,” 242.

Modern world of rupture, this Modernist artist must get back to “the thing itself,” “the absolute ground of pure pre-conceptual experience” (*Ideas*, 27). Thus Bernard attempts to “state the space” between himself and the object, to “ne[t] [it] under with a sudden phrase” (*W*, 225), like a “fin” can be netted in “a waste of waters” (*W*, 157): “Fight! Fight! . . . it is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together - this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit” (*W*, 225). Setting this fight against “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again” (*W*, 247)” of a horizon of continuity, which is too “gigantic” to be fully “coax[ed] into words” (*W*, 175), Woolf directly expresses the rejection of finality and returns to her own point of departure - her own struggle to express the pre-linguistic “fin. . . far out.”

CHAPTER 3

THE "SPLENDOUR" BENEATH THE CRACKS:

GERTRUDE STEIN'S *TENDER BUTTONS*

[T]his problem remained, how to express not the things seen in association but the things really seen, not the things interpreted but the things really known at the time of knowing them.

—Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (36)

I. The Dialectic of *Tender Buttons*

Gertrude Stein may be regarded as one of the most innovative and obscure Modernist writers. At the core of *Tender Buttons* (1914), her most experimental work, lies a dialectical tension between meaning and non-meaning, order and disorder, sense and non-sense, the opacity of which some of the earliest critical studies of Stein described as both “an eloquent mistake” and “the ravings of a lunatic,” resisting interpretation.¹ “That which is not recognizable is designated meaningless,” Nicola Pitchford explains in a more recent article, “a text unlike others is disliked.”²

¹ John Malcolm Brinnin and Max Eastman as quoted in Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 125. B.F. Skinner is another early critic who

The most common assumption in recent criticism is that Stein's opacity anticipates Post-Modern uncertainty, fragmentation of meaning and displacement of identity. In his 1974 essay "Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist: The Rhetoric of *Tender Buttons*," Neil Schmitz claims that the "stuttering discourse of [Stein's] experimental portraits" anticipates the "continuous present" used by the sixties writers Alain Robbe-Grillet and William Burroughs, which would "releas[e] their subject from the unities of plot and character," and John Barth's "Beckett-like soliloquies" of "agonized isolation," respectively. He thus sets "the elusiveness of [Stein's] style" within a context of "contemporary narrative" that he labels "Post-Modern."³ Similarly, in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981), Marjorie Perloff places *Tender Buttons* in a category different from Modernism. Locating Stein's obscurities within a genre of what she, using John Ashbery's terminology, calls the "Other Tradition" and defining this as "the mode of undecidability in twentieth century poetry," spanning from Arthur Rimbaud to John Cage, Perloff argues: "Gertrude Stein's syntax enacts the gradually changing presence of human consciousness, the instability of emotion and thought. The gap between signifier and signified is repeatedly emphasized, a gap that leaves room for continuous

claimed that *Tender Buttons*, which, in his eyes, was the outcome of Stein's experiments with automatic writing, was resistant to interpretation. See Skinner, "Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?," *Atlantic Monthly* 153 (January 1934): 50-57; Carl van Vechten describes the typical resistance in Stein reception: "[*Tender Buttons*] was widely quoted and ridiculed by friends and enemies in the American Press." See van Vechten, introductory comment to *Tender Buttons*, in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New York: The Modern Library, 1962), 460. More recently David Lodge has claimed that *Tender Buttons* is an "inscrutable" piece of work, which stays outside of "the realm of meaningful communication, to an extent rare in Modernism." Lodge as quoted in Nicola Pitchford, "Unlikely Modernism, Unlikely Postmodernism: Stein's *Tender Buttons*," *American Literary History* 11.4 (Winter 1999): 652.

² Pitchford, "Unlikely Modernism, Unlikely Postmodernism," 652.

verbal play.”⁴ In *A Different Language: Stein’s Experimental Writing* (1983), Marianne DeKoven approaches Stein as an “experimental writer” along the lines of structuralist linguistics and especially gendered aspects of deconstructivist theory, covering the Post-Modern theories of Lacan, Derrida, and Kristeva. The “moving in and out of focus” of meaning in *Tender Buttons*, she argues, “functions anti-patriarchally, as presymbolic jouissance and as irreducibly, multiple, fragmented, open-ended articulation of lexical meaning.”⁵ More recently, in *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering* (1992), Ellen E. Berry has defined this same “sense of a world going in and out of focus, of words becoming meaningful and then fading from meaning” as a “postmodern” “new aesthetics of fragmentation and textual wandering.”⁶ Similarly, in a 1998 article about what she calls the “linguistic exoticism and literary alienation” of Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, Mena Mitrano remarks that “[t]he meanings the reader might detect rise, gain momentum, then drop one after the other in a sea of undecidability.”⁷

While each of these critics demonstrates an awareness of a dialectical tension between meaning and non-meaning, the ordered and the disordered in Stein’s text, not one of them attempts an in-depth examination of the dialectic itself. This might have to do with the fact that Stein, as Cyrena Pondrom perceptively remarks,

³Neil Schmitz, “Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist: The Rhetoric of *Tender Buttons*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 3 (1974): 1204, 1203, 1204.

⁴Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 33, 44, 98-99.

⁵Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) 44, 79.

⁶Ellen E. Berry, *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein’s Post-Modernism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992) 18, 9.

⁷Mena Mitrano, “Linguistic Exoticism and Literary Alienation,” *Modern Language Studies* 28.2 (1998): 89.

“recovers for us a dimension of experience routinely suppressed or concealed by the modes of discourse that give priority to consistency, order and coherence.”⁸ Phenomenology brings to light exactly this concealed and usually invisible dimension of experience - a dimension that we hesitate to talk about because it seems beyond the power of words to talk about. This brings us back to Jean Wahl’s letter to Wallace Stevens, referring to the Husserlian “enormous. . . a priori in our minds, an inexhaustible infinity of a priori . . . the approach to the unapproachable“ (*OP*, 194). In this chapter I hope to show that phenomenology offers the appropriate tool for breaking open the much-discussed dialectic of *Tender Buttons*. In drawing upon the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as well as the related thought of Gilles Deleuze, I hope to articulate more clearly the “unapproachable” and still unexplored dimension of Stein’s work and, in continuation of my examination of Woolf’s work, highlight a heretofore overlooked aspect of Modernist aesthetics at large.

Whereas the Steinian critics above mentioned seek to isolate the genre of *Tender Buttons* in terms of its “Post-Modern”, “indeterminate” or “uncertain” qualities, I would rather claim that this work, in a highly phenomenological manner, “restores wonder to the object, and in a quite specific sense.”⁹ In “Portraits and Repetition” Stein writes that her “business as an artist” is “not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is the essence of its going” (“PR,” 102). It is her business, in other words, not to present us with specific destination and result but to reveal the “how” of the destination.¹⁰ The many objects that constitute

⁸ Cyrena N. Pondrom, “Gertrude Stein: From Outlaw to Classic,” *Contemporary Literature* 27 (1986): 105, 104, 113.

⁹ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, x

Tender Buttons are not written to reveal “this or that quality,” in the words of Judith Butler, “but rather the *thatness* of the thing – not what it is, its specific actuality in the world at this place and time, but that it is possible at all.”¹¹ Stein, like Woolf, was a great admirer of Paul Cézanne’s painting and named him “the great master of the realization of the object itself.”¹² Using phenomenology as my tool, I want to show that Stein, much like Cézanne, turns away from objectivism and places emphasis on the subject from which objects, names and clear expressions arise. Despite its baffling, “unordered” and “not resembling” (*TB*, 3) word combinations, it seems to me that the intention of Stein’s dialectical logic is not to charge human consciousness with Post-Modern “agonized isolation” (Schmitz), “instability of emotion and thought” (Perloff) or “alienation” (Mitrano) but to reveal consciousness as the source of the meaning of our world of “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms.”¹³ I thus wish to examine Stein’s text as a constitution of the object through the perceptual act, which is what John Barnet Brough describes as “the product of human praxis. . . the accomplishment of a unique mode of intending subjectivity.”¹⁴ Before turning to my reading of *Tender Buttons*, I must first establish the kinship of method and concern between phenomenology and Stein’s mode of “composition.”

¹⁰ Husserl as quoted in Brough, “Art and Artworld,” 30. Brough writes: “. . . the phenomenologist investigates, on the one hand, the subjective accomplishment through which we have a world and objects in it. . . and, on the other hand, the objects intended – not, however, ‘straightforwardly but rather as objects in respect to their ‘how’ . . . that is the ‘how’ of their manners of givenness” (30).

¹¹ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, x.

¹² Jayne Walker was the first critic to call attention to this statement from Stein’s unpublished writings. See Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from Three Lives to Tender Buttons* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 3.

¹³The three parts that constitute *Tender Buttons* are titled “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms.”

II. Seeing “a fine substance strangely”: *Epoché* as Vision

I have pointed out that Stein once praised Paul Cézanne for “conceiving the idea that in composition one thing is as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole” (“TP”, 15). I have also stressed that phenomenology applies equal value to the part and the whole. What the reduction demonstrates is not a rejection of our habitual world but a fresh starting-point to re-explore the depth of our involvement with it. By adopting the phenomenological attitude through the operation of what Husserl called “bracketing,” the part is highlighted but only to provide a clear view of its implicit relation to the whole framework within which it exists. To illuminate how this adds to our understanding of Stein’s work, let us recapitulate and briefly elaborate the movements of the reduction.

Through the method of “bracketing” objectivity and factuality, the *epoché* lays open the world’s pre-givenness. This is what Husserl called the “misty horizon” (*Ideas*, 102) of experience, a terminology based on what William James, Gertrude Stein’s teacher of experimental psychology, had called “fringe.”¹⁵ Bruce Wilshire adds to our understanding of this concept:

I sit in my room not focally aware of anything outside it; but if I think of the room at all, I think of it as fringed: as having relationships to other rooms, places, and persons, as having a chimney above it and as having

¹⁴ Brough, “Art and Artworld,” 32.

¹⁵ For further details about James’s influence on Stein, see Ronald Bartlett Levinson, “Gertrude Stein, William James and Grammar,” *American Journal of Psychology* 54 (January 1941): 124-28; Allegra Stewart, “Quality of Gertrude Stein’s Creativity,” *American Literature* 28 (January 1957): 488-506; Donald Sutherland, “The Elements,” in *Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work*

stairs leading to and from it. It is that *general kind* of thing. It is only when the horizon or fringe determines expectations that are disappointed - only when I open the door and confront the abyss instead of stairs, or pick up the tea kettle and it flies up in my face - that I become focally aware of what was always on the margin.¹⁶

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty found in Cézanne's painting a paradigm for the *epoché*. Bracketing the habitual, in Cézanne's paintings "expectations" are "disappointed," bringing into focus James's "fringe": "We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities. . . We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakeably. Cézanne's painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself." ("Doubt," 16). Thus, by suspending habits and preconceptions, the task of the phenomenologist is to "[b]are all the roots," as Merleau-Ponty puts it, and bring to light "the science of a pre-science. . . the expression of what is before expression *and sustains it from behind*" (VI, 169, 167). What is recovered in phenomenology, then, is the non-focal "fringe" of our conventional ways of seeing, habits, acts and expression: the pre-scientific and pre-reflective dimension of experience upon which factuality and objectivity rest.

Like William James's flying teakettle, exposing the non-focal "fringe" of perceptual experience, the tilting plates and rolling apples in Cézanne's still life paintings seem to move out of the picture surface. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Cézanne attempts an *epoché*, setting "*out of action*" the "thesis of the natural

(New Haven, 1951); 1-21; and Steven Meyer, "Writing Psychology Over: Gertrude Stein and William James," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 133-163.

¹⁶ Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology*, 122.

attitude" (*Ideas*, 108), that is, common sense and scientific notions about the world. Once again it is necessary to stress, however, that the habitual "thesis" is never rejected through this movement: "It still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket . . . We can also say: The thesis is experience as lived (*Erlebnis*), but we make "no use" of it . . ." (*Ideas*, 108). In Cézanne's painting, gravity is bracketed: we are pushed *off* centre. Our usual "centre" still exists but is made "no use" of.

"Act so that there is no use in a centre" (*TB*, 43), Stein significantly commands in the opening line of "Rooms," the third part of *Tender Buttons*. In this work too the expected is "disappointed."¹⁷ Evoking a reductive shift of attitude, this strange book also radically shifts our attention *off* centre. "What is the custom, the custom is in the centre," (*TB*, 26) Stein tells us in "Breakfast" and usually "A Centre is in a Table" (*TB*, 15): in our daily, organised lives we unite and dine around tables. But although "A table means does it not my dear it means a whole steadiness. Is it likely that a change. A table means more than a glass . . . it means it does mean that there has been a stand, a stand where it did shake" (*TB*, 15). Although we never forget that "the custom is in the centre," the prose poems in "Objects," "Food" and "Rooms" - the three parts of *Tender Buttons* - suspend the "steadiness" of daily habit, "shake" our expectations and trigger a "change" of standpoint. "[W]hy is not disturbing a centre no virtue" (*TB*, 49), Stein ponders in "Rooms." Because it violates her belief in the pre-scientific Cézannian composition in which "[e]ach part is as important as the whole." Likewise, in "A Piece of Coffee" Stein points out: "A

¹⁷ Marguerite S. Murphy stresses a similar aspect of Stein's texts. She speaks of "the subversive aspects of these texts that work against the reader's expectations, and in some respects, against traditional modes of interpretation." But whereas Murphy employs Bakhtinian dialogics to analyse Stein's "multileveled subversion" and thereby shed light on the "lesbian subtext" of her work, I am concerned with showing how Stein's phenomenological suspension of expectations, which, I argue, is tantamount to the shift of standpoint of reduction, is a key to articulate more clearly the

single image is not splendor” (*TB*, 5). Just as phenomenology offers a critique of a pre-conceived and freestanding reality, Stein criticises preconceived ideas about the composition of art. A “portrait” with a preconceived “centre,” giving way to “[a] single image,” would prevent the perceiver from experiencing the object in its “splendor.”¹⁸

Thus, Stein leads us away from the particularities that are usually central to daily life - its “Objects”, “Food” and “Rooms” - and back to the usually non-focal “fringe” of perceptual experience, away from usual modes of expression and back to a pre-structural form of expression *before* the habits of grammar take over, revealing “things seen not as one knows them but as they are when one sees them without remembering having looked at them” (*Picasso*, 15).

What is *usually* done or seen is suspended in Stein’s text: “There is *no use* at all in smell, in taste, in teeth, in toast, in anything” (*TB*, 2; italics mine). “So then the order. . . is it disappointing” (*TB*, 4), Stein asks her reader teasingly in “A Box.” The order *disappoints* and points *away* from our expectations of reality. But, as Stein promises us in “A Carafe that is a Blind Glass,” what we are left with is “not unordered in not resembling” (*TB*, 3) but rather “an arrangement in a system to pointing” (*TB*, 3). *Intendo* is Latin for the verb “to direct” and is best understood in the sense of directing or pointing one’s attention at, which is the meaning of intentionality, the “starting-point and basis” (*Ideas*, 245) of phenomenology and, or so I argue, of the creative processes examined in this study.¹⁹ In intentional

dialectic of *Tender Buttons*. See Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 139, 149, and 7.

¹⁸ See section III of this chapter for a further analysis of Stein’s notion of the “splendid.”

¹⁹ *The Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 72.

experience, “the subject ‘directs’ itself. . . towards the intentional object” (*Ideas*, 121). The shift of attitude occasioned by the reduction brings to light this directionality: all perception is perception *of* something. Similarly, all of Stein’s “Objects,” “Food” and “Rooms” challenge us to re-direct our glance, to point it toward the essential structure of a visible world that we are used to taking for granted. The result is paradoxical. As the philosopher Maurice Natanson puts it in his study on Husserl: “The recognition of the familiar as a structure of experience creates a paradox: As soon as the familiar manifests itself *as* familiar, it is rendered strange. It is a bit like repeating a word over and over again. . . until it begins to sound peculiar and a noise replaces the word.”²⁰ Natanson’s remark recalls Stein’s line “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” from the 1913 poem “Sacred Emily” (*GP*, 187) and the last four lines of “Orange In” in the “Food” section of *Tender Buttons*:

. . . only excreate, only excreate a no since.

A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since
when since a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since,
a no since, a no, a no since a no since, a no since, a no since.

(*TB*, 38)

Thus each of Stein’s “portraits” “excreate[s],” makes strange, and literally turns into *non-sense* (“no since”) what is our *usual* sense.²¹ What we are left with is what “A BOX” calls “see[ing] a fine substance strangely” (*TB*, 4). Exposing what Judith Butler calls the “strangeness” that is “the condition of possibility of the

²⁰ Natanson, Edmund Husserl, 141.

²¹ Stein referred to the prose poems in *Tender Buttons* as “portraits”: “And so I began again to do portraits but this time it was not portraits of men and women and children, it was portraits of anything and so I made portraits of rooms and food. . . .” (“PR”, 113).

ordinary,”²² Stein’s unfamiliar word combinations suspend the ordinary and emulate the extra-ordinary, pre-reflective dimension of experience from which our usual acts of naming and expression arise. Just as the “Nothing” that Wallace Stevens’s “Snow Man” “beholds” (*CP*, 10) suggests not an end but an openness to the world, so does Stein’s “no since”, which, when repeated again and again, sounds like “non-sense,” refer not to an end but to a beginning of sense - a pre-reflective “first” sense of the thing seen.²³

The Cézannian Composition: Part and Whole

Having suspended habituality and objectivity, the phenomenologist begins again. He/she becomes a “perpetual beginner” (*PP*, xiv) by examining his/her consciousness and realising that this is always directed toward some object; it is always consciousness *of*. The consciousness *of* and the object of consciousness form what Husserl called an “intentional unity” (*Ideas*, 131) or “the Thing itself” (*Ideas*, 66). This “Thing itself” is not a thing but a relation: the intentional object only exists together with the subject side of the intentional structure. Thus the intending subject and his/her object-world require each other. Using Stein’s description of Cézanne’s mode of composition, “Each part is as important as the whole.”

The reduction refers to what Husserl calls a “change of standpoint” (*Ideas*, 13), that is to say, a change in our way of looking at the world. The aim of this change of attitude is not to achieve a reduced vision of experience. On the contrary,

²² J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xv.

²³ For a further examination of Stevens’s poem “The Snow Man” see chapter 4 of this study.

as Max van Manen stresses, “reduction is ironically a protest against reductionism.”²⁴ Instead of reducing our vision to an introspective and partial one, it refers to “a new kind of practical outlook” (*Crisis 1*, 169). The method of “bracketing,” then, should not be taken as a rejection of the world as we know it, but as a means towards a fresh starting-point from which to examine our relationship with the world. Through the operation of “bracketing,” the “part” is highlighted but only to provide a clearer view of our involvement with the “whole” framework (“fringe”, “horizon”) within which people and things exist in intentional relations. What phenomenology seeks to achieve is a better understanding of the relationship *between* the marginal and central, the invisible and visible, the pre-reflective and reflective aspects of perceptual experience, only to see clearly how “[e]ach part is as important as the whole”.

Working back from this, it is my aim to show that the phenomenological reduction and its uncovering of the Jamesian “fringe,” the Husserlian “horizon” or Merleau-Ponty’s “science of a pre-science,” allows us to articulate the insufficiently explored dialectic of *Tender Buttons*. Although Wendy Steiner, in *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (1978), notes that “[t]he influence of William James is probably the significant factor in any relation between Stein and the phenomenologists, since he is in part their precursor,”²⁵ it seems odd that the related patterns between phenomenological

²⁴ Manen, [http:// www. phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html](http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html).

²⁵ Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), 54. Likewise, Bruce Wilshire stresses James’s influence on the phenomenologists and points out: “. . . it is startling that [James’] pioneering work in phenomenology and his influence on Husserl went without proper notice for seventy years and has only recently gained recognition”. Despite the fact that “James does not call his method phenomenological,” Wilshire writes, “his actual practice points in the direction of what

thought and Stein's work are still an almost untrodden field in Steinian criticism. Susan E. Hawkins has noted but not examined the fact that Stein's *Tender Buttons* repeats "a kind of phenomenological moment in which consciousness meets (but does not process) perceptual reality. Reality is repetition; the perceiving subject constantly re-enacts this moment."²⁶ In "Læsefrugter," which I find one of the most illuminating articles on Stein's obscure work to date, the Danish critic Tania Ørum suggests that *Tender Buttons* challenges the reader to a "phenomenological-concrete interaction with the object."²⁷ Elsewhere Ørum perceptively remarks but leaves unexplored the fact that "the modernist form of writing could be described as a form of phenomenological reduction."²⁸ My examination of Stein will focus on how *Tender Buttons* attempts such a reduction, exposing the pre-reflective dimension of perceptual experience. I will clarify how the "not resembling" (*TB*, 3) word combinations of this work are, in Merleau-Ponty's terminology, an "expression of what is before expression" (*VI*, 167), bringing to light the equality of the part and the whole; the intending subject and the object as intended; the marginal and the central; the usually invisible and visible aspects of perceptual experience.

If "in composition one thing [is] as important as another thing," the receiver of the composition should be as important as the creator and the creator's intention.

Husserl later explicated." See Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology* 4 and 6; and Jayne L Walker notes that "Stein's years of study with William James enabled her to understand the striking 'distortions' in Cézanne's paintings as faithful models of the multiple and fragmentary signs of immediate visual sensations." Walker briefly refers to Merleau-Ponty after stressing James's influence on Stein but leaves unexplored the connections between Stein and phenomenology. Walker, *The Making of a Modernist*, 11, 9.

²⁶ Susan E. Hawkins, "Sneak Previews: Gertrude Stein's Syntax in *Tender Buttons*," in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, eds. Shirley Neuman and Ira B. Nadel (Basingstoke, Hampshire: The Macmillan Press, 1988), 119.

²⁷ Tania Ørum "Læsefrugter," in *Tæt på Teksten*, ed. Tania Ørum (København: Museum Tusulanum, 1994), 49. All translations of the quoted passages from this article are mine.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology stresses that perception and creation alike are mobile activities, revealing the living experience of the embodied subject:

"Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being" (*PP*, xx). Hence the artwork – visual art or text - is never fixed but perpetually renewed in the space of the perceiver; it "undergoes a continual birth"; "at each instant it is something new" (*Primacy*, 6). What I want to stress is that the reader of *Tender Buttons*, like its creator, is a phenomenological "perpetual beginner," faced with what Stein in "Composition as Explanation" refers to as "[b]eginning again and again [which] is a natural thing" ("CE", 23). In this sense, the "tenderness" of *Tender Buttons* signifies openness to mobility and perpetual renewal of interpretation. Stein underpins this view in *Picasso*: "the framing of life, the need that a picture exists in its frame, remain in its frame was over. A picture remaining in its frame was a thing that always had existed and new pictures commenced to want to leave their frames. . . ." (*Picasso*, 12). Likewise, the prose poems in "Objects," "Food" and "Rooms" "leave their frames." Meaning does not frame Stein's text from the outside but is made and re-made from within through our phenomenological act of reading/perceiving Stein's "word-objects."²⁹

Much Steinian criticism is absorbed with what Norman Weinstein calls "the artist's mind during creation,"³⁰ placing a primary emphasis on the artist's intentional

²⁸ Ørum, "Modernismens realisme," 216-217.

²⁹ The term "word-objects" – a suitable name for Stein's perceptual reconstructions - is Frederick J. Hoffman's. Hoffman as quoted in Bruce F. Kavin, *Telling it Again and Again. Repetition in Literature and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), 127.

³⁰ Norman Weinstein, *Gertrude Stein and The Literature of Modern Consciousness* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970) 6. Similarly, in her study of Stein, Carolyn Faunce Copeland stresses "the struggle of the artist to find the essence of whatever object is being concentrated on at any one moment"; and Randa K. Dubnick emphasises the writer's process of perception, in particular, "the intersection of the real world with the writer's consciousness" and examines the "linguistic moment in the writer's consciousness." See Copeland, *Language & Time &*

process. Charles Caramello, for instance, writes the following about Stein's work: "creative thinking' about literature entailed an equally 'creative' writing, a method of composition in which observation and its statement would *develop* simultaneously."³¹ Caramello's point about the simultaneity of seeing and writing is perceptive but lacks an address to the intending reader, who, as both Herwig Friedl and Krzysztof Ziarek have recently pointed out, is an integral part of the emerging "event" of Stein's composition.³² Stein's texts are "eminently performative," Ziarek remarks, as they "both unfold and spend themselves in the event of writing/reading."³³ What I wish to explore in this chapter is the heretofore overlooked phenomenological aspect of this performativity. The fact that Stein's works "unfold in the event of writing/reading" is underscored by her own concern with unfolding what she again and again refers to as "the thing in itself" ("PR," 113, 119; "PG," 147). What I hope to show is that Stein's "thing in itself," which has little to do with the Kantian concept of "the thing in itself" (*the Ding an Sich*), signifying the object in the world as it exists independently of our experience, refers to the perceiver's immediate, inner perception of the object and can therefore best be examined and clarified through the phenomenological notion of "the thing itself."

We have seen that Husserl, in getting back to "the thing itself," sought to overcome the "crisis of European existence. . . the breakdown of life" (*Crisis* 2, 299).

Gertrude Stein (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979), 82; and Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 30, 31.

³¹ Charles Caramello, "Gertrude Stein as Exemplary Theorist," in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, eds. Shirley Neuman, and Ira B. Nadel (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), 5.

³² Herwig Friedl, "Art and Culture as Emerging Events," in *Emerging Structures in Interdisciplinary Perspective*, eds. Rudi Keller and Karl Menges (Tübingen und Basel: Francke Verlag, 1997): 43-64; and Krzysztof Ziarek, "The Poetics of Event: Stein, the Avant-Garde, and the Aesthetic Turn of Philosophy," *Sagetrieb* 12, part 3 (1993): 125-148.

The philosopher claimed that Western man's unquestioning trust in theoretical notions and pre-conceptions about the world had separated him from the original foundation of knowledge; it had made him lose sight of the fact that consciousness itself was the source of the meaning of the world, that objectivity arises from an intending subjectivity. Only by "bracketing" pre-conceptions could the original data of consciousness - the "thing itself" - be uncovered and man re-engage with the world. What I wish to argue is that Stein, like Woolf, responds to and offers a critique of the "crisis" of early twentieth century culture - a culture which, in *Picasso*, she describes as full of "cracks" (*Picasso*, 49). Just as Woolf's Lily Briscoe wants to "get hold of . . . that very jar on the nerves, the *thing itself* before it has been made anything" (*L*, 260), so can Stein's unfolding of "the thing in itself" be taken as an attempt to depict pre-reflective experience of the thing before this is wrapped up in conventional notions and names. Stein's "thing *in* itself" indicates that our world of visible things is constituted through our invisible, *inside* perceptions of these things. To use the words of critic Eva Meyer, Stein "manages to establish a direct link between the reflecting and the experiencing subject."³⁴ *Tender Buttons*, in other words, presents us with a radical shift of attitude, which uncovers the pre-reflective dimension of experience and takes this as the new "starting-point and basis" (*Ideas*, 245) for creative expression. From what has been discussed, it should now be clear that Husserl's "thing itself" refers not to a thing but a relation between intending subject and object as intended. "Locating the object as thing or as intended phenomenon depends on the

³³ Ziarek, "The Poetics of Event," 132-33.

³⁴ Eva Meyer, "A Matter of Folds," *Parallax* 5, pt. 4 (Oct 1999): 95. Meyer's ideas about Stein are similar to mine but unlike her I call attention to the phenomenological aspect of Stein's logic of unfolding the "thing."

perspective of the inquirer.”³⁵ Similarly, the meaning of each “word-object” in *Tender Buttons* depends on the perspective of the reading/perceiving subject: each is an integral “part” of the “whole” composition. The radical shift of standpoint from reflective to pre-reflective experience that Stein promotes, then, must also be adopted by her reader.

In examining the unfolding of Stein’s text in the space of the reader, I am, once again, influenced by Mieke Bal’s metaphor of the “textual navel,” that fine visual detail in the art work – visual art or text - which “hits the viewer,” and stimulates him/her to re-discover, reflect on, and participate in making the art *work*.³⁶ Stein’s “Buttons,” I want to argue, are emblematic of such navel points, *belly buttons*.³⁷ The infantile term “belly button” sits well with both the pre-linguistic and child-like quality of the language used in *Tender Buttons* and the pre-reflective vision, which phenomenology exposes as the ground of philosophical inquiry. Moreover, the double meaning of Bal’s navel metaphor sheds new light on the much-discussed dialectic encountered in *Tender Buttons*. A belly button or navel is a sign of both dependence on and detachment from the mother. It is, on the one hand, a sign of our primal bond with the pre-reflective dimension of experience (the umbilical cord was once attached), but, on the other hand, it points away from this dimension (the umbilical cord has been cut), thus signifying a point of opening, a new beginning for creation. Thus, *Tender Buttons*, which Stein calls “a system to pointing” (*TB*, 3),

³⁵ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 14.

³⁶ Bal, “Dispersing the Image,” 84.

³⁷ To Harriet Scott Chessman *Tender Buttons* also brings to mind the “belly button” but in a different way. She points out that children themselves, “may be called “buttons” as a term of endearment, just like other loved creatures, or parts of their bodies, as in “button-nose” or “belly-button.” See Chessman, *The Public Is Invited To Dance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989) 91.

points in two directions at once, expressing a tension between attachment and opening, leading the reader into a process of “[b]eginning again and again,” which, according to Stein, is “a natural thing” (“CE,” 23). Like Woolf’s “Mark” and Stevens’s “Notes,” Stein’s “Buttons” can be taken as metaphors for the preliminary phase of creative production. As buttons must be pressed to switch on a process, on the one hand they designate starting-points for a creative process. On the other hand, however, they never allow us to lose sight of the pre-reflective source of this creativity. Stein’s “Buttons,” in other words, signify both the “starting-point and basis” (*Ideas*, 245) for creative production.

In structure, the rest of this chapter is divided into five main sections. The first section, entitled “The ‘Splendour’ Between the Cracks,” underscores my argument that Stein, like the phenomenologists, insists on a shift of attitude to get back to the original (pre-reflective) dimension of perceptual experience. To illustrate this point, I draw on passages from Stein’s essays “Poetry and Grammar,” “Portraits and Repetition,” “Composition as Explanation,” “A Transatlantic Interview,” and the longer work *Picasso*. I offer a close reading of “A BOX” to illustrate how the shift of attitude central to *Tender Buttons* suspends the world of fact and lays bare its essence. This shift of attitude, which requires the attentive “eye” of the reader, reveals a pattern of opening, of phenomenological “perpetual beginning” that is central to Stein’s entire “system to pointing” (*TB*, 3). The section entitled “Orangeness” offers a gradual unfolding of the four “Orange” poems in the “Food” part of *Tender Buttons*. Here I expand on Danish critic Tania Ørum’s analysis of the first of these prose poems, revealing the co-existent emerging processes of reading and “peeling” Stein’s strange fruit, thus underscoring the point that the reader is an

essential “part” of the “whole” of Stein’s composition.³⁸ What I hope to clarify is that these processes are essentially phenomenological, demanding that the reader adopt the shift of attitude of the reduction, leading him back to “that which *antedates* all standpoints” (*Ideas*, 78) prior to pre-conceptions about the object at hand. What I will highlight, in other words, is how Stein’s strange text shifts our attention away from the familiar, named object and directs it toward what is given to consciousness in immediate experience. We are led from what Stein called “the things seen as every one sees them” (*Picasso*, 17) to the invisible and pre-reflective “thing in itself.” Finally, in section five, I underscore my point that Stein’s emphasis falls not on result but on the intentional act of creativity itself. Here I demonstrate that the dialectic central to *Tender Buttons* approximates what Merleau-Ponty calls “hyperdialectic,” a dialectic without synthesis, which is based on “the impossibility of a complete reduction” (*PP*, xiv). Due to this impossibility, we, the readers, can never completely get Stein’s text “on the button” and are always faced with “beginning again”. The impossibility of complete reduction, in other words, is the engine of the re-beginnings in Stein’s Modernist composition. What I propose is that this pattern of continual beginning and opening should not be taken as a sign of Post-Modern indeterminacy, uncertainty or instability of thought, but, rather, as a grounding of thought in pre-reflective intentional experience, embracing the ever-new and constantly possible.

³⁸ Ørum, “Læsefrugter,” in *Tæt på Teksten*, 45-67.

III. The “Splendour” Beneath the Cracks

Just as Woolf’s speculations on “life, spirit, truth or reality, this the essential thing,” (*CD*, 7) were connected with a “change” of “human relations,” taking place “about the year 1910” (*AWE*, 70, 71), *Tender Buttons* evidences a disarray in Modern culture. This work’s radical upheaval of syntax and grammar, changing the relation between reader and text, is in itself an expression of the need for new meaning in a modern world, which, according to Edmund Husserl, suffered from “a radical life-crisis.”³⁹ This “crisis” stemmed from Western man’s “naïve” acceptance of the “objective sciences,” that is to say, all scientific theories, research and knowledge, which would assert an objective, ready-made reality. Pointing out that the world was first and foremost experienced by the subject, the goal of Husserl’s *epoché* was to free the perceiving subject from this objective outlook (*Crisis 1*, 149-92).

In this light, consider the following passage from Stein’s *Picasso*:

The twentieth century has much less reasonableness in its existence than the nineteenth century but reasonableness does not make for splendor . . . So the twentieth century is that, it is a time when everything cracks, where everything is destroyed, everything isolates itself, it is a more splendid thing than a period where everything follows itself. (*Picasso*, 49).

³⁹ David Carr, introduction to *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, by Husserl, xxiv.

The adjective “splendid” stems from the Latin “splendidus,” meaning “bright, shining, *glittering*, brilliant, . . . illustrious, *showy*.”⁴⁰ “Objects,” “Food” and “Rooms,” the three parts that constitute *Tender Buttons*, are full of references to “shows” or the act of showing, spectacles and making something visible (*TB*, 5, 10, 11, 16, 23). “Glazed Glitter” (*TB*, 3), the second poem of “Objects,” tells us that “[t]he change has come” in a twentieth century where “glittering is handsome” (*TB*, 3). Stein’s “splendid” twentieth century, then, suggests a time of cultural crisis and yet positive change and renewal – a time of uncovering the “splendour” of the world that the individual had lost sight of. Just as Woolf attempted to uncover the “hidden . . . pattern” lying behind “the cotton wool of daily life” (*MB*, 72), so did Stein see it as her task to lay bare, through poetry, the invisible ground or roots of a “cracked” twentieth century - a world threatened by what Beckett had called the “breakdown of the object.”

What Stein primarily sought to recover were the forgotten roots of language:

You had to recognize words had lost their value in the Nineteenth Century, particularly towards the end, they had lost much of their variety, and I felt that I could not go on, that I had to recapture the value of the individual word, find out what it meant and act within it.

(“AT,” 17-18)

What Stein offers here is what one might term a secular genesis, attempting to recreate a cracked twentieth century by turning to human language, by “act[ing] within” and restoring “value” to words which had become taken for granted. “Was there not a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names

⁴⁰ *The Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 130.

without naming them" ("PG", 141), she wonders in "Poetry and Grammar." In this essay Stein explores the ways in which she can "act within the word": "I had to feel anything and everything that for me was existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name." ("PG", 145). "And so," says Stein, "I was slowly beginning to know something about what poetry was" ("PG," 145). Poetry, for Stein, is the paradoxical art of naming the unnameable. "I decided," Stein writes, "that if one definitely completely replaced the noun by the thing in itself, it was eventually to be poetry" ("PG", 147). Poetry, in other words, is the art of making language emulate pre-reflective experience without the obstructions of conventional nouns or names, which is what the phenomenologists call "the thing itself." Poetry, like phenomenology, uncovers the primacy of perception before our habitual modes of discourse have concealed it.

Suspending the habitual and factual dimension of experience, the reduction leaves the perceiving subject with the essence of things. He/she is led back to a pre-reflective state of what Merleau-Ponty calls "relearning to look at the world" (*PP*, xx), "before it is a thing one speaks of. . . before it has been reduced to a set of manageable, disposable significations" (*VI*, 102). Looking for the world's essence," Merleau-Ponty writes, "is looking for what it is as a fact for us, *before any thematization*" (*PP*, xv; italics mine). This brings us back to Husserl's motto "*Back to the things themselves*," indicating a return to the way things are originally experienced in consciousness, not as apprehended things but as what the philosopher called "phenomena" or "essences" (*Ideas*, 41, 54-55). Being "simply aspects or

qualities of object-as-intended,”⁴¹ these “essences” are equivalent to the subject’s intentional experience of things, that is to say, his/her prepositional consciousness of them. Although “[i]t *should* be noticed that *intentional* object of a consciousness. . . is by no means to be identified with *apprehended* object” (*Ideas*, 121), it is, nevertheless, inseparable from this apprehended object: “every material thing has its own essential derivatives” (*Ideas*, 53). The essential aspect of the thing, then – the “thing itself” – is not detached from the thing as apprehended and material fact but is its “full correlate” (*Ideas*, 121). As the essence of the thing is what is given to the subject in immediate experience without being covered up by the thematisations of daily habit, it can best be described as the invisible inside of the visible and factual thing. When Stein in “Portraits and Repetition” claims that “my business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going” (“PR,” 117), she offers a similar pattern of thought: The “motor going inside and the car moving. . . are part of the same thing” (“PR”, 102). The inside essence of the thing is in correlation with its factual outside: “each part . . . [is] as important as the whole.”

In *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*, Marianne DeKoven ponders upon Stein’s concern with the “essence” of things in *Tender Buttons*: “Presumably the structures and essence of the subject (an orange, a cloak, Mabel Dodge) are somehow preserved in the shape of the language. But given . . . the impossibility of deriving the subject of a piece from the writing itself without the clue of a title, the question of whether or not the subject is preserved in the shape of the language becomes irrelevant to the reader.”⁴² DeKoven claims that “A Substance

⁴¹ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 14.

in a Cushion”, the third poem in “Objects,” “does not make an interpretable thematic point either about cushions or about substance.”⁴³ Had DeKoven explored sufficiently the meaning of “essence,” however, she would have spotted what I think is a consistent “thematic point” throughout all of *Tender Buttons*. Stein’s point is not to reconstruct the cushion the way we are used to seeing it in its usual “cover” (*TB*, 3), but to emulate the “substance *in* a cushion”, that is to say, the subject’s primary perception of this object before our conventional acts of naming have “covered” it up.

In *Picasso* Stein suggests that Picasso sought to incorporate in his art this primacy of perception. He wanted to re-create “things seen not as one knows them but as they are when one sees them without remembering having looked at them” (*Picasso*, 15.). For instance, “when he ate a tomato the tomato was not everybody’s tomato, not at all and his effort was not to express in his way the things seen as everybody sees them, but to express the thing as he was seeing it. . . .” (*Picasso*, 17.). Whereas various critics have used Stein’s comments about Picasso to place her writing within a cubist context,⁴⁴ I would rather argue that Stein’s preoccupation with Picasso’s attempt to express pre-reflective experience - “things seen not as one knows them but as they are when one sees them without remembering having looked

⁴² DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 78.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁴ Malcolm Brinnin, for instance, characterises Stein’s *Tender Buttons* as “wholly a product of cubist dispensation.” Brinnin, introduction to *Selected Operas and Plays of Gertrude Stein* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970). xii. For other studies that characterise Stein’s work as cubist see Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity*, 31; Michael J. Hoffman, *The Development of Abstractionism in the Writings of Gertrude Stein* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press 1965), 181; Jane P. Bowers, “Experiment in Time and Process of Discovery: Picasso Paints Gertrude Stein; Gertrude Stein Makes Sentence,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 5, pt. 2 (1994): 5-30; and Paul Gabriel, “A Little Bite More About Cubism in *Tender Buttons*,” *Fu-Jen Studies: Literature & Linguistics* 22 (1989): 71-86.

at them” – is the “starting-point and basis” (*Ideas*, 245) of her own aesthetic concerns. In arguing this, I take my bearings from John Ashbery: “Poets when they write about other artists always tend to write about themselves.”⁴⁵

Picasso was a “genius,” Stein points out, a genius being someone who “sees something else, another reality” and who has “another vision than that of the world” (*Picasso*, 43). When Jonathan Levin remarks that the “dialectical complexity” of Stein’s writing is simply “a sign of Stein having been so much at the centre of the diverse, eccentric currents of her age,” but that “[n]one of this makes Stein the odd genius in the midst of mere mortal modernists,”⁴⁶ he seems to rush to a conclusion without exploring sufficiently the logic behind Stein’s concept of “genius.” “[G]eniuses are rare,”⁴⁷ Stein points out: “to complicate things in a new way that is easy, but to see the things in a new way that is really difficult, everything prevents one, habits, schools, daily life, reason, necessities of daily life, indolence, everything prevents one, in fact there are very few geniuses in the world” (*Picasso*, 43). A “genius,” according to Stein’s logic, is not concerned with our habitual world – our “habits, schools, daily life” – but, like the phenomenologist, is interested in its *genesis*, that is to say, the origin of and condition for our habits, acts and expressions. “I was

⁴⁵ John Ashbery, “Gertrude Stein,” *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987*, ed. David Bergman (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1989), 106.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Levin, “Entering the Modern Composition: Gertrude Stein and the Patterns of Modernism,” in *Rereading the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992) 143.

⁴⁷ Stein claimed that she herself belonged to the rarity of “geniuses”: “I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken, and I may say in each case it was before there was any general recognition of the quality of genius in them. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead” (*ABT*, 9). For other analyses of Stein’s concept of “genius” see See Bob Perelman’s *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem of “Genius”* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

alone in understanding [*Picasso*],” Stein stresses, “perhaps because I was expressing the same things in literature” (*Picasso*, 16).

Thus, in *Tender Buttons*, Stein attempts to lay bare the original ground upon which our visible world of objects and names rests: “I discovered everything then and its name,” she points out, “discovered it and its name” (“PG”, 141). Here the verb “to discover” is best understood in the sense of taking the cover *off* in order to expose what Stein in *Picasso* calls the “reality not of things seen but of things that exist” (*Picasso*, 19). Just as the Husserlian “thing itself” remains after the act of bracketing, this unseen reality is what presents itself to consciousness when the cover has been taken off our visible world of things, hence it is “contained within” (“PR”, 121; italics mine) the visible world and becomes the reality of “the thing *in* itself. . . that thing inside in that thing” (“PR,” 113, 119, “PG”, 147; italics mine). Just as the essential and factual parts of an object are inseparable, the invisible reality of our primary perceptions exist within “the things everybody is certain of seeing” (*Picasso*, 19).

What emerges from my discussion so far, then, is that Stein, by virtue of her “unordered” and “not resembling” (*TB*, 3) word combinations, attempts to “[b]are all the roots” (Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 169) upon which our habitual world - our “Objects,” “Food” and “Rooms” - are installed. The overall structure of Stein’s book, which we might call the macro level, suggests a first step towards baring these roots and “act[ing] within [the individual word]” (“AT,” 18). Whereas we usually direct our attention towards “Objects” and internalise the “Food” that we consume, “Rooms” are the spaces that we live within. By internalizing what is usually outside of us, on

this macro level we gradually move towards “act[ing] within” the object.⁴⁸ Whereas objects, food and rooms structure the surface of daily life, Stein wants to uncover these surface details to reveal what structures them. “One of the things that is very interesting to know,” she says in “Poetry and Grammar,” “is how you are feeling inside you to the words that are coming out to be outside you” (“PG”, 125). Thus, in each of her “word-object[s],” Stein challenges us, the readers, to bracket the “outside” names and definitions of things in order to unfold our subjective “inside” perceptions of them. This is what we might term the book’s micro level. All our habits of speech and thought must primarily be put out of play so that a new conceptual and perceptual logic can show itself in all its “splendour” through the cracks of the twentieth century.

Most of the titles of the prose poems that constitute *Tender Buttons* stem from ordinary life: “A Box,” “A Red Stamp,” “Orange,” “A Plate,” “Roastbeef.” The movement from these recognizable titles to their less recognizable content requires an epochal shift of attitude: a suspension of these conventional names. Intending to “mean names without naming them,” (“PG”, 141), Stein lays bare the visible world the way it “is originally rid of a cover” (*TB*, 3). As in Husserl’s reduction, our familiar world of names is not rejected or altered but remains there on the page “like the bracketed in the bracket” (*Ideas*, 108), while emphasis is placed on each “thing in itself,” each object as this is met in immediate experience. No usual order is denied or changed: Stein’s text is “not unordered in not resembling” (*TB*, 3) but is merely suggestive of a phenomenological shift of attitude. Borrowing from Stein’s *Picasso*,

⁴⁸ For this thought I am indebted to Richard Bridgman’s groundbreaking study of Stein. He writes: “However it be interpreted, the book’s tripartite structure is unusually suggestive. “Objects” – what we perceive outside us. “Food” what we absorb. “Rooms” – what enclose us.” See Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 126.

we, the readers, are “not to express. . . the things seen as every one sees them, but to express the thing *as* [we are] seeing it” (*Picasso*, 17).

In “A Long Dress,” for instance, Stein leads our attention not to this concealing garment but to “the movement inside that is of the essence of its going” (“PR,” 117): “What is the current that makes machinery, that makes it crackle, what is the current that presents a long line and a necessary waist. What is this current” (*TB*, 8). “Currents, currents are not in the air and on the floor and in the door and behind it first,” she explains in “Rooms” and yet, “Currents do not show it plainer” (*TB*, 49). The plainness of Stein’s “current” recalls Stevens’s poem “The Plain Sense of Things” (*CP*, 502), referring to the subject’s “plain,” that is to say, immediate and not yet thematised consciousness of the world. We have seen that the flow of consciousness, according to Husserl, is immersed in an infinite horizon of continuity. Stein’s “current” gestures towards the same unapproachable current of existence, which remains in advance of our expressions and acts of naming. Her “desire to express the rhythm of the visible world” (*ABT*, 130) in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a desire to expose this rhythmic current underlying our daily world of objects, food and rooms.

Opening “A Box”

Most clearly in “A Box” (*TB*, 6), Stein exposes “the thing in itself,” that is, the invisible essence that is “contained within” (“PR”, 121) the factual and visible object. Taking the lid off this container, she literally turns our usual apprehension of the object on its head so that strange substances fall out of it:

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of a selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point and to point not to red but to point again.

(*TB*, 4)

The “redness” of blushing or sexual excitement comes “out of” the “kindness” of the giver of gifts (boxes) or the kind caressing of the woman’s “box.” But the same red flushings (the “same question”), which, however, might be flushings of anger, also come out of “rudeness”: a rougher gesture or touch. “Kindness” also brings to mind “kindred,” that is to say, family relationships. Just as children are born out of families, “research” comes out of the reader’s “eye.” After this “eye” has done its research and made its “painful” “selection,” the product (“painful cattle”) is born out of the creative process.⁴⁹ What Stein presents us with, then, is an intertwining of physical and creative conception. “So then the order . . . is it disappointing”? No “it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely” (*TB*, 6). “[R]udimentary” derives from the Latin *rudimentum*, and means “first lesson”, or, as Alison Rieke points out, “from the beginning” or “in the early stages of

⁴⁹ Alison Rieke offers an extremely perceptive reading of the “painful cattle”: “. . . out of an eye comes research because we search with our eyes. What do we search for? We search perhaps to select. But out of “selection” comes “painful cattle.” “Cattle” circles back to “kindness” and “rudeness” because of “kine,” the plural of cow, and the pun of “kind”. . . “Painful cattle” seems to suggest cows giving birth making “kind” or “kindred”. . . But how does “painful cattle” come out of “selection”? “Select” comes from the Latin *se + legere*, to choose or read, so it shares an etymological

development".⁵⁰ Rudiment refers to an imperfect beginning of something undeveloped

and yet to develop such as a bud, a sprout, a child's speech, or the subject's primary instincts at the early stages of "research," or an unborn baby inside that "white way of being round," which, I think, is a suggestion of pregnancy. The colour "white" signifies something pure or still untouched. Stein's *Tender Buttons*, then, could be thought of as "rudimentary" buds, or *tendres boutons*, as others have pointed out, which are not yet ripe and still to unfold through the creative process of researching, reading, and writing.⁵¹ The aspect of writing is implied in the phrase "a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin." The word "pin" is related to the Latin *pinna* associated with *penna*, meaning feather, which is also the source of pen as quill pens used to be made from feathers.⁵²

Like the slater pins in Woolf's story "Moments of Being. Slater's Pins have No Points," however, the "pin" in Stein's "A Box" has "no points." At the end of this "word-object" we are simply told to "point again," leading us in a "round" circle back to the beginning, challenging us to lift the lid off this box once again and embark on new "research." Stein, then, is concerned not with result but with the "how" of the process of pointing itself. As noted, the verb "to point" comes from the

meaning with "kindred": "kine" + "read" = "kindred." When we "research" we also "read." Rieke, *The Senses of Nonsense* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 80.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁵¹ William H. Gass, for instance, point out that *Tender Buttons* is an "etymological narrative" consisting of "buds based on hidden roots." Gass, *The World Within the Word* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1979), 90, 85. Others who speak of Stein's *Tender Buttons* as "buds," "sprouts," or *tendres boutons*, interpreting this as "nipples," include Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 99; and David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 153.

⁵² *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, based on the Oxford English Dictionary and Its Supplements, ed. J.B. Sykes, 6th Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

Latin *intendo*: to aim or direct one's attention at, which is also the meaning of intentionality. Just as the intentional object exists only with the subject side of the intentional structure, the meaning of "A Box", like the meaning of all of *Tender Buttons*, is not fixed (no two readers come up with the same interpretation) but exists only through the present

reader's act of "pointing." In "Composition as explanation" Stein underscores this idea by claiming that all art cannot but exist in the "continuous present" ("CE", 25).

Consider the following passage from this essay:

The composing is the things seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living. . . The time when and the time of and the time in that composition is the natural phenomena of that composition and of that perhaps every one can be certain. ("CE," 24)

Every creative "composition" depends on *who* sees it and on the time during which he/she sees it. It depends on "the things seen by every one living in the living they are doing." *Tender Buttons* makes us reflect on "the single mind that directs an apple. *All the coats have a different shape. . .*" (*TB*, 46). The meaning of Stein's composition, in other words, depends on *how* "the apple" - the object - is directed and as "[a]ll the coats have a different shape," that is to say, as the "single mind" of every reader brings with it a different cultural background, every single mind's "composition" reflects "the composition of the time in which they are living." The whole composition, therefore, cannot be fixed but is always changing. In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein says: "When I first began writing, I felt that writing should go on, I still feel that it should go on" ("PG," 130). What makes Stein's writing "go on,"

making and re-making it in history, are the “contemporary” interpretations of the “single mind” intending the text.

“A Box,” then, offers no resting point, as when the traffic lights are “red,” but ends up inviting us to “point again”: “it is so earnest to have a green point and to point not to red but to point again” (*TB*, 6).”The word “green” derives from the Old English *grene*, which is related to grass, which is, in turn, related to growth.⁵³ Thus, we, the readers, are challenged to reflect on our own growth of perception, which is what Merleau-Ponty calls “the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive” (“Doubt,” 14). Just as “perception is not a state but a mobile activity,” Stein’s “word-object” is never fixed but perpetually renewed in the eyes of the reader.⁵⁴

This pattern of continual renewal or opening is central to the entire “system to pointing” (*TB*, 3) that is *Tender Buttons*. But although we cannot quite pin down one fixed meaning when reading this work, what we are left with is neither “disorder,” “indeterminacy,” “uncertainty” or “fragmentation” as argued by critics such as Schmitz, Perloff, DeKoven and Berry. To elaborate this point, let us briefly turn to “A Piano” from “Objects”: “if the speed is open, if the color is careless. . . if the button holder is held by all the waving color. . . it shuts and it lifts and awkwardly not awkwardly the centre is in standing” (*TB*, 9). The art work or composition – the piano’s “speed” and “waving color” - requires the participation of the “button holder,” the attentive subject engaging in *Tender Buttons*. As it depends on the reader's pressing of the Piano's “buttons,” the composition's “speed” is in constant movement and always opens anew: “it shuts and it lifts” (*TB*, 9) and yet, a composition that always begins again in this way is still concentrated: “the centre is

⁵³ Ibid.

in standing” (*TB*, 9). Stein’s open and open-ended composition, in other words, does not indicate uncertainty or instability but expresses a perpetual amazement at itself, at the “how” of the composition. What we are presented with, is not a form of indeterminacy but, rather, a different form of being determined or “earnest”: “it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point and to point not to red but to point again” (*TB*, 6).” The word “analyse” stems from the Greek “*analyein*,” meaning to break or loosen (*lyein*) up (*ana*).⁵⁵ In order to determine how “[e]ach part is as important as the whole” - and thereby establish the relationship of the parts to each other and to the whole - Stein must first break down the whole into its parts. She must loosen the inner strange “substance” from its outer familiar shell; she must show forth the essential structure of the conventional thing. What is determined in Stein’s phenomenological universe is not some final objective quality belonging to the object that we see, or the poem that we read, but, rather, the “how” of its “manner of givenness” in immediate experience; its essence - “the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing,” as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus calls it.⁵⁶ By intending Stein’s “word-objects” in all their possible manifestations, we are “not to express. . . the things seen as every one sees them, but to express the thing *as* [we are] seeing it” (*Picasso*, 17).

By challenging us “to point again,” then, the end of Stein’s prose poem leaves any hopes of closure or “order” disappointed. The lid is never put back on “A Box”; rather it is taken off again and again, perpetually unfolding the “rudimentary”

⁵⁴ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 85.

⁵⁵ *Merriam-Webster Online*, <http://www.webster.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=analysis> (accessed 20 April 2004).

⁵⁶ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 70

but unfamiliar and therefore strange first perception from which our clear expressions take shape. The fact that the word “box” comes from the Latin *pyxis* meaning “boxwood” or “tree” underscores this notion of opening onto the original roots of perceptual experience.⁵⁷ Stein’s work is constantly reminding us of the source of creativity itself. It never allows us to lose sight of the fact that words, objects and art are “product[s] of human praxis . . . accomplishment[s] of a unique mode of intending subjectivity.”⁵⁸

Marianne DeKoven is right in claiming that there is “no chess game” in *Tender Buttons* as chess games are characterised by fixed rules and a procession of moves working towards one player exhausting the other.⁵⁹ *Tender Buttons* lacks such fixed rules as well as termination and exhaustion, after which the game would usually end. The “respect is mutual” (*TB*, 21) in Stein’s composition in which “each thing [is] as important as the whole.” Although we never forget that [t]he custom is in the centre” (*TB*, 26), each part of the whole will “act so that there is no *use* in a centre” (*TB*, 20), and yet “there is plenty of reason for making an exchange” (*TB*, 10). The usual centre is meaningless. Meaning does not frame Stein’s text from the outside but is made and re-made from within through the phenomenological act of reading itself, the continual “exchange” between text and the reader. The whole meaning of *Tender Buttons* can be grasped only when understanding that “[a] whole is inside a part” (*TB*, 38-39).

“A Box” is just one of Stein’s many portraits that unfold the inside essence of the thing “before it is a thing one speaks of and which is taken for granted, before it

⁵⁷ For this insight I am indebted to Gass, *The World Within the Word*, 90.

⁵⁸ Brough, “Art and Artworld,” 32.

⁵⁹ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 77.

has been reduced to a set of manageable disposable significations” (VI, 102). Just as Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology sought to recover a “first philosophy” of this world, so does Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception seek a language that “first” articulates the experience of the embodied subject. The perception that phenomenology recaptures, then, is perception in its “rudimentary,” first stage of development. The difficulty with all of *Tender Buttons* lies in the fact that it emulates exactly such an undeveloped, “rudimentary” impression of the object at hand. “[M]y only thought,” says Stein in “A Transatlantic Interview”, “is a complicated simplicity” (“TI”, 34). Stein’s work baffles us with its change of attitude and difference from the ordinary: “The change of colour is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared” (TB, 3). Her words seem complicated and yet her attempt is remarkably simple. What Maurice Natanson says about the phenomenologist can be used as a description of Stein’s logic. Like the phenomenologist, who is “returning to the world from which mundanity has become estranged,” Stein’s “phenomenological language appears grotesque. It is a genuine question of where simplicity lies and what power language has for shocking us back into experience.”⁶⁰ By virtue of their “not resembling” (TB, 3) appearance, the “word-objects” that constitute *Tender Button* are “first lessons” in “mean[ing] names without naming them” (“PG”, 141).

⁶⁰ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 92.

IV. Orangeness

Like James' tea kettle, Cézanne's apples, and Picasso's tomato, Stein's "Orange" in *Tender Buttons* is strange and "act[s] so that there is no use in a centre" (TB, 43):

ORANGE

Why is a feel oyster an egg stir. Why is it orange centre.

A show at tick and loosen loosen it so to speak sat.

It was an extra leaker with a see spoon, it was an extra licker with
a see spoon.

(TB, 38)

Thus Stein peels off, or, using Husserl's term, "brackets," our presupposed knowledge of what this word-object is; she "loosen[s] it loosen[s] it so to speak" as if peeling an orange, and lets the object "speak" for itself, as it were.⁶¹ As in "A Box," Stein carries out an "analysis," - a "loosening up" - and breaks down the whole into its component parts. Once again, she undoes our fact-world of names to reveal the essence of *this* "fine substance," not by mentioning the orange in question but by teasing out the possible ways in which this object might feel to us: "Why is a feel oyster and egg stir. Why is it orange centre." What Stein presents us with here is, I think, what Husserl meant by "free variation" or "free fancies" (*Ideas*, 198), the

⁶¹ As pointed out, my account of Stein's "Orange" is indebted to the Danish critic Tania Ørum's essay "Læsefrugter." The essay, the title of which could be translated as "Readerly Fruit," uses "Orange" as an example of the performative quality of Stein's work, arguing that our process of reading the poem is tantamount to the process of peeling the fruit. My specifically phenomenological approach to Stein's work can be regarded as an expansion of Ørum's analysis.

phenomenological thought experiment referred to in the previous chapter.⁶² “Free variation” is related to the “eidetic reduction” (*Ideas*, 55), the shift of standpoint from the world of fact to the world of essence or *eidos*. When the mind deals with essence, there is a concern with the possible rather than the actual. The point of “free variation,” Judith Butler explains, is “not to fix the actuality of the object, but to render its actuality into a possibility,” revealing the object’s essence, “the strangeness of quiddity, that it is rather than not.”⁶³ Thus, Stein’s “Orange” challenges us to tease the possible from the actual object. As Ørum also suggests, an orange might “feel” like an “oyster” or an “egg”: both oysters and oranges have rough surfaces, sometimes an orange has an egg-like shape, and it has a juicy “orange centre,” an “extra leaker.”⁶⁴

These possible variants of Stein’s “Orange” are “loosen[ed]” from the actual through “[a] show at tick.” The word “tick” in this context is, I think, a reference to what the dictionary describes as a “case of a mattress or pillow, in which the filling is contained,”⁶⁵ recalling both “A Substance in a Cushion,” directing our attention to the substance *in* the cushion and to “Nickel” which, is “originally rid of a cover” (*TB*, 3). Stein’s “cases,” covers, concealing garments (“A Long Dress”) or fruit peel, then, refer to our usual mode of discourse - a seal in itself - which must be “loosened loosened” so that the “the thing in itself” (“PR,” 113) - the thing as intended - can “show.”

⁶² Similarly, Marguerite S. Murphy points out that “The reader is led to create contexts, to imagine associations, to ‘free-associate’ as freely as Stein would have done.” See Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion*, 145. Unlike Murphy, I suggest that Husserl’s “free variation,” which is part of the eidetic reduction, allows us to articulate this process of association more clearly.

⁶³ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xii.

⁶⁴ Ørum, “Læsefrugter,” 48.

Apart from transforming the real into variants of the possible, Husserl's "imaginary variation," Judith Butler explains, "also lays out the temporality of the object. . . the specific time of its unfolding".⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty refers to this temporality when pointing out that Cézanne's paintings represent "the impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes" ("Doubt", 14). Similarly, Stein's focus in *Tender Buttons* is not the factual (thematized) outside of objects - "the things seen as every one sees them" (*Picasso*, 17) - but the object's manner of appearing to the individual subject, the "inside" unfolding of the object as intended. In "Portraits and Repetition" she, significantly, speaks of "The thing in itself folded itself up inside itself like you might fold a thing up to be another thing which is that thing inside in that thing" ("PR", 119). "How was anything contained within itself" ("PR", 121), she wonders.

In order to visualise this "matter of folds,"⁶⁷ she advises us to "think how you fold things or make a boat or anything else out of paper or getting anything to be inside anything, the hole in the doughnut or the apple in the dumpling" ("PR", 120). The reductive shift of attention that must be adopted by the reader of Stein's text, leading us away from our usual acts of expression and naming and back to a pre-reflective awareness of the thing, makes us "fold" in upon ourselves, as it were, reflect on our own perceptual process, and examine the essence or "whatness" of the thing. Looking for the world's essence," Merleau-Ponty taught us "is looking for what it is as a fact for us, before any thematization" (*PP*, xv). It is in this sense that Stein attempts to make us "see . . . fine substance[s] strangely," placing emphasis on

⁶⁵ *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English*, ed. A.P. Cowie, 4th Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁶⁶ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xii.

the inside essence of things before these are folded up inside habitual forms of expression: “the hole in the doughnut or the apple in the dumpling,” the “substance in a cushion,” the things in “a box” or the “orange centre” within the orange peel. When Stein speaks of “the thing in itself,” then, her focus is not on the object “in itself” but on the way in which the object presents itself to the perceiver in immediate experience.

The “composition” of “Orange,” in other words, once again underscores the inseparability of the essential and the factual, the invisible and the visible, the object as intended and the object as named: “Each part is as important as the whole.” Once again Stein’s notion of the “thing in itself,” then, approximates the Husserlian notion of the “thing itself,” signifying the “intentional unity” (*Ideas*, 131) between the intending subject and the object as-intended.

Using a “see spoon” (*TB*, 38) to feed us her unusual food for thought, like a mother feeds her child, Stein exposes us to “Orange” as if we have never experienced it before. Not only does she make us sense its egg- or oyster-like shape, but also its taste and leaking texture: “It was an extra leaker with a see spoon, it was an extra licker with a see spoon” (*TB*, 38). Considering Stein’s German origins, the words “licker” and “leaker” are puns on the German “lecker,” meaning delicious and referring to the sensation of the reader who, as Tania Ørum has suggested, is eating from Stein’s spoon and licking him/herself through her words.⁶⁷ Reading is made equivalent to touching, peeling and consuming. What Stein presents us with has, I think, much in common with Gilles Deleuze’s explanation of the notion of “sensation,” which, he argues, was given “unprecedented status” by Paul Cézanne:

⁶⁷ I have borrowed the term “matter of folds” from Meyer, “A Matter of Folds.”

⁶⁸ Ørum, “Læsefrugter”, 49.

Sensation is the opposite of the facile and the ready-made, the cliché, but also of the “sensational,” the spontaneous, etc. Sensation . . . has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation. As a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed. This was Cézanne’s lesson against the Impressionists: sensation is not the “free” or disembodied play of light and color (impressions): on the contrary, it is in the body, even the body of an apple . . . Sensation is what is painted. What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation (what [D.H.] Lawrence, speaking of Cézanne, called “the appleyness of the apple”).⁶⁹

Much like Cézanne’s “appleyness,” Stein presents us with the “orangeness” of the “orange,” the bodily sensation of the object prior to the object as named. In “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein writes: “I began to wonder . . . just what one saw when one looked at anything really looked at anything. Did one see sound and what was the relation between colour and sound did it make itself by description by a word that meant it or did it make itself by a word in itself” (“PR”, 114). Applying

Cézanne's notion of "sensation" to the work of Francis Bacon, Deleuze seems to provide a response to Stein's question:

Between a color, a taste, a touch, a smell, a noise, a weight, there would be an existential communication that would constitute the "pathic" (nonrepresentative) moment of *the* sensation. In Bacon's bullfights, for example, we hear the noise of the beast's hooves . . . and each time meat is represented, we touch it, smell it, eat it . . . The painter would make visible a kind of original unity of the senses, and would make a multisensible Figure appear visually.⁷⁰

It is like this in Stein's "Orange". Not as spectators but as readers of her work, we "experience the sensation only by entering" the portrait of this fruit. By means of the "see spoon," suggesting at once the acts of seeing and tasting, we experience the "nonrepresentative" and "multisensible" manner of the object's appearing: we peel, eat, lick the leaking "orange centre". This "button's" unfolding lies in the reader's embodied perception of it.

Peeling, Unfolding, Ripening

To recapitulate what has been discussed so far, just as the macro level of *Tender Buttons* suggests a movement from looking at "Objects" through internalising "Food" to looking out from the inside of "Rooms," so are our intertwined acts of reading and peeling Stein's "Orange," until we reach its leaking juicy centre, a movement towards what Stein termed "act[ing] within" the word. This is the "first

⁶⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 34-35.

lesson” that Stein teaches us. She makes us unfold and see clearly “the thing in itself” (“PR,” 113), which is usually concealed by our conventional ways of seeing and naming. As “A Mounted Umbrella” reminds us, “[t]he lesson is to learn that it does show, that it shows it” (*TB*, 10).

The “Orange” portrait that we have looked at is the first in a series of four. Offering us her “see spoon,” Stein challenges us to unfold the orangeness of “Orange.” But to “spoon” is also old-fashioned slang for engaging in amorous (tender) behaviour, such as caressing. Through “spooning” or tenderly caressing this object with our eyes, we reach the “extra” leaking juices of the fruit. This “spooning” interaction takes on a tone of sexual pleasure in the second portrait in the series:

ORANGE

A type oh oh new new nor no nor knealer knealer of old show
beefsteak, neither, neither.

(*TB*, 38)

The result of which is:

ORANGES

Build is all right.

(*TB*, 38)

Sexual pleasure can lead to the birth of more “Oranges”, to being “Build”, that is to say, to becoming more numerous. We are once again faced with the idea of conception and pregnancy suggested in the “white way of being round” (*TB*, 4) that “A Box” referred to. This finally leads to:

ORANGE IN

Go lack go lack use to her

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal

Whist bottom whist close, whist clothes, woodling.

Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal.

Pain soup, suppose it is question, suppose it is butter, real is, real

in only, only excreate, only excreate a no since.

A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since

when since a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since, a

no since, a no , a no since a no since, a no since, a no since.

(*TB*, 38)

The repeated lines “Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal” in this “Tender Button” bear resemblance to nursery rhymes or children’s songs. I have noted that the “rudimentary,” undeveloped language of *Tender Buttons*, which might remind the reader of child’s speech, sits well with the pre-reflective way of seeing, which phenomenology exposes as the ground for philosophical inquiry. Still open to the essence of this world, the child looks at the world in wonder. His /her understanding of things is still pre-reflective. It should be clear from my discussion that the aim of Husserl’s *epoché* was to recapture the wonder of this world overlooked by Modern man’s preconceptions and presuppositions.⁷¹ “Wonder in the face of the world,” Merleau-Ponty stresses, is “the best formulation of the reduction” (*PP*, xiii). In other words, the world exposed by wonder, by a more “rudimentary” way of seeing, and the attitude shift occasioned by it, are central to both phenomenology and Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. The reader, who plays an important part in the phenomenological process of Stein’s composition, must also adopt this shift of attitude. In order to

⁷¹ For an in-depth examination of the *epoché* as a return to “wonder” see Kingswell, “Husserl’s Sense of Wonder.”

engage in a more “rudimentary” way of seeing, he/she must suspend his conventional “clear” expressions.

Hence, in “Orange In,” we move from “*clear* soup” to “[p]ain soup” (*TB*, 38; italics mine), which might be a reference to labour pain - the pain that is felt when a pregnant woman’s waters break (a soupy fluid). From this emerges a long stream of varying combinations of the words “a no since when since,” which burst forth and bear resemblance to intense contractions: “only excreate, only excreate a no since. A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since a no since when since, a no since . . .” Thus, Stein’s portrait “excreat[es]” – puts out of play - our conventional description of “orange,” turning into non-sense (“no since”) what is our usual sense, but only to promote a form of re-creation of the thing as it is met with in immediate experience. I began my discussion by emphasising that poetry, according to Stein, comes into being by “replac[ing] the noun by the thing in itself” (“PG”, 147). Poetry, for Stein, is the art of making language emulate the primacy of perception, which is what the phenomenologists call “the thing itself.” In “Orange In,” as in “A Box,” the participation of our eyes is, once again, required to give birth, as it were, to our inside perception of this object. The “Orange *In*,” the “thing *in* itself” can only be brought into being through the accomplishment of the intending subjectivity: the reader intending the text. Like the phenomenologist, Stein is “restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning . . . an expression of experience by experience” (*VI*, 155). Underscoring the aspect of opening examined in “A Box,” Stein’s “Orange” portraits do not lead to closure but open up the ground from which expression stems.

What emerges from my discussion so far is this. The emphasis in *Tender Buttons* falls not on result but on articulating the “unapproachable” source of creative

production. Stein's "business as an artist [is] not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going" ("PR," 117). It is her business, in other words, not to offer a specific destination but to focus on the "how" of the destination, bringing to light the usually invisible essence of our world of "Food" and "Objects." The point of her work is not to reveal a "specific actuality" of the objects in question but rather "the *thatness* of the thing . . . that it is possible at all."⁷² Thus, in a phenomenological manner, *Tender Buttons* turns away from objectivity and turns, instead, to the intending subject from which objectivity arises. As subjects intending Stein's text, we, the readers, are invited to adopt the phenomenological attitude by suspending our conventional ways of seeing and forms of expression. *Tender Buttons* demands of us to "act so that there is no use in a centre" and re-learn to read/look at "word-objects" as these are met in immediate experience. The process of reading this strange text involves an ex-creation - an uncovering or peeling - of the conventional thing as named and a recreation through "mean[ing] names without naming them" ("PG," 141), which is tantamount to "replacing" them by "the thing in itself." In my discussion of Stein's "Orange" portraits I hope to have shown that meaning comes into being as the possible is teased from the actual, as the immediate perception of "the thing in itself" is teased from the factual thing as named, and as the invisible is unfolded from within the visible. Just as Woolf's "hidden . . . pattern" with which we are all connected is visible only if we look behind "the cotton wool of daily life" (*MB*, 72), Stein's "word-objects" are presented as containers that must be opened ("A Box"), cushions that must be uncovered ("A Substance in a Cushion"), fruit that must be peeled ("Orange"), or "dirt" that must be removed by what "Glazed Glitter" calls "perhaps

⁷² J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, x

washing and polishing” (*TB*, 3). Hence Stein’s “see spoon” (*TB*, 38), her new tool for uncovering the hidden essence of these objects in a twentieth century that in *Picasso* she describes as “crack[ed]” yet “splendid” (*Picasso*, 49), that is, glittering, showy. Feeding us her unusual food for thought and making us “see . . . fine substance[s] strangely,” Stein’s “see spoon” shows forth the forgotten roots of this century and opens onto the division of experience that phenomenology brings to light: the division between “what is given” and “what is presupposed in order for the giving to occur.”⁷³

V. The Space of Differentiation

So far the purpose of this chapter has been to show that the phenomenological reduction, exposing what James called the “fringe” of experience, allows us to articulate the insufficiently explored dialectic of Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. I finally want to demonstrate that the difficulty of this text lies in the fact that it operates as a perpetual oscillation between the pre-reflective and the reflective, the pre-objective perceptual experience of what Stein called “the thing in itself” and the factual, named object. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “There remains the problem of the passage from the perceptual meaning to the language meaning” (*VI*, 176).

We have seen how Stein in *Tender Buttons* challenges us to “mean names without naming them” (“PG”, 141), to bracket factuality and objectivity, thus making us see “fine substance[s] strangely.” In “Rooms,” the last part of this book, Stein

⁷³ Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 288.

invites us into an unfamiliar territory, which, like a room, is “a wide place stranger, a wideness makes an active centre” (*TB*, 52). As our usual “centre” is bracketed and meaning is made through the act of reading itself, the new “centre” is both “wide” and “active.” “Why is the name changed,” (*TB*, 48) Stein ponders: “The name is changed because in the little space there is a tree. . . in every space there is a hint of more, all this causes the decision” (*TB*, 48). The “tree” brings us back to the patterns of conception incorporated in Stein’s “A Box,” for, as William Gass perceptively remarks, “the root of box is tree (the boxwood). A family tree, the Tree of knowledge.”⁷⁴ The “little space” that Stein’s “Rooms” exposes is, as I will now clarify, the space where “the difference is spreading” (*TB*, 3), that is to say, the space of difference from which meaning and knowledge arise and which, therefore, “causes the decision.”

Differentiation is what Merleau-Ponty thought of as “*écart*” (*VI*, 197, 198, 201). Although we perpetually seek to grasp the real through acts of naming or expressions, the gap between immediate intentional experience and our speaking about it can never be closed, for “[b]etween experience and its own [*propre*] truth, there is always a certain . . . temporal displacement, . . . an *écart*, or ‘spacing,’ of a temporal nature, this distantiation being itself a necessary condition for the production of meaning.”⁷⁵ Just as “the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membrure*)” (*VI*, 215-216), language has a silent centre, a “core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape” (*PP*, xv). In other words, all our acts and our clear expressions arise from this “distantiation” or separation

⁷⁴ Gass, *The World within the Word*, 90.

⁷⁵ G.B. Madison, “Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: La différance,” in *Écart and Différance: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*, ed. M.C. Dillon (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997), 104.

between the invisible and the visible, between the primacy of perception and the articulation of the perceived. Although “[t]his *separation* (écart) . . . forms meaning” (VI, 216), we do not perceive it as it is prior to our ability to reflect on and speak about the world.⁷⁶

What I want to argue is that Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, paradoxically, articulates this usually unperceived divergence between “mute” meaning and language meaning. Her preoccupation with “mean[ing] names without naming them” suggests that our language of distinct ideas and names arises from a more primordial language, from the expression of things as “essence”, or, as Deleuze argues, the “pathic” (nonrepresentative) moment of *the* sensation.” As demonstrated above, Stein’s “Orange” arises from orangeness, that is to say, the intending subject’s primary sensation of this “extra leaker.” Similarly in “A Long Dress” (TB, 8), the dress as concealing garment is a reference to language as a seal. Here Stein uncovers the ongoing “current” (TB, 8) beneath the seal, which always underlies our daily fact-world, thus exposing the fine line between the pre-predicative dimension of experience and our apprehended world; a more primordial meaning and the imposed meaning of our operative language: “A line distinguishes it. A line just distinguishes it” (TB, 8). Likewise, in “Rooms,” Stein writes: “This which is mastered has so thin a space to build it all that there is plenty of room and yet it is quarrelling” (TB, 49). Here Stein opens onto that “thin,” insubstantial in-between “room” of divergence and “quarrelling,” “a narrow footpath” (TB, 14) where “[t]he difference is spreading” (TB, 3). This is the “difference” that forms meaning.

⁷⁶ See Seigel, “A Unique Way of Existing: Merleau-Ponty and the Subject,” 475.

Expanding upon Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that although we have the power to practise "free variation" and emulate a more primordial vision of the world, this emulation, paradoxically enough, relies on the virtues of a language that is always already a belated version of this vision. Thus, there is no point at which full reduction, that is to say, pure self-reflection in the moment of perceiving, can be achieved. As "the thing itself" can never be completely grasped, the space of difference (*écart*) between "perceptual meaning" and "language meaning" cannot be closed. It always remains open. From this enigma emerges Merleau-Ponty's formulation of the "fate of perception": "If the thing itself were reached, . . . [i]t would cease to exist as a thing at the very moment when we thought to possess it. What makes the 'reality' of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp" (*PP*, 233).

This perpetual movement toward but lack of grasp of the object in the perceptual process is also central to Derrida's notion of "différance," a combination of "to differ" and "to defer," implying that every sign is a set of differences and that meaning is produced exactly through the material of the different signifiers. Whenever we grasp one signifier, we move on to another, hence a stable meaning or "signified" is always deferred. In a recent article, Jennifer Ashton offers a critique of the "law of indeterminacy" in Stein's work embraced by critics such as Marjorie Perloff, Neil Schmitz and Marianne DeKoven. "Deriving their methodological authority from post-Saussurian linguistics and deconstruction," Ashton points out, "such approaches customarily argue for indeterminacy as a means of displacing various idealized forms of representation, including that of a rigid correspondence

between sign and referent.”⁷⁷ Derrida is the key figure in such Post-Modern speculations about indeterminacy. In order fully to understand the implications of the phenomenological “fate of perception,” which, I argue, lies central to the dialectic of *Tender Buttons*, a brief clarification of the difference between Derrida and Merleau-Ponty’s projects will prove useful.

Whereas philosophers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Rodolphe Gasché have described Merleau-Ponty as a precursor of Derrida’s project and drawn parallels between Merleau-Ponty’s “écart” and Derrida’s “différance,”⁷⁸ recent philosophers have emphasized an important difference between the two philosophers’ inquiries. As Derrida is a grammatologist and Merleau-Ponty an ontologist, the philosophers’ projects do not stem from the same source. M.C. Dillon narrows down their differences: “For Derrida seeing reduces to reading as the seen reduces to text, whereas for Merleau-Ponty the reading of a text is derived from a primordial vision of the world, in the sense that any interpretation or understanding is a kind of perception.”⁷⁹

For Derrida, “it is in words and language that things first come into being and are,” hence “there is no meaning apart from signification and apart from

⁷⁷ Jennifer Ashton, “‘Rose is a Rose’: Gertrude Stein and the Critique of Indeterminacy,” *Modernism / Modernity* 9, no. 4 (2002): 593.

⁷⁸ See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discourse, figure* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1978); and Rodolphe Gasché, “Deconstruction as Criticism,” *Glyph* 6 (1979): 127-215.

⁷⁹ M.C. Dillon, “Introduction: Écart & Différance,” in *Ecart & Différance*, 6. Joseph Margolis writes on the same topic: “Derrida proceeds by mimicking discourse at a (would-be) postulated point, at which it cannot possibly function in the way it mimes: that is what deconstruction both ‘does’ and exposes. Merleau-Ponty reconstructs, by way of a mythical (not fictional) conjecture, our sense of the condition of infancy from which (and continuously through which) we must have emerged as the perceiving and thinking being we are.” See Margolis, “Philosophical Extravagance in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida,” in *Écart & Différance*, 121-122. For other elaborations of this topic see Hugh Silverman, “Reading Postmodernism as Interruption (between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida),” in *Écart and Différance*, 208-219 and “Is Merleau-Ponty Inside or Outside the History of Philosophy,” in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, 131-143.

signifiers.”⁸⁰ As his concept of *différance* operates exclusively within the domain of signifiers, “the bar between signifier and signified. . . bars access to the perceptual domain,” revealing a gap of “difference without identity. . . , groundlessness, total absence of foundations.”⁸¹ It is this pattern of thought that lies behind the “multiple, fragmented, open-ended articulation of lexical meaning”⁸² that Marianne DeKoven assigns to *Tender Buttons*, the “agonized isolation”⁸³ of the subject that, according to Neil Schmitz, is central to Stein, and “the instability of emotion and thought,” which, according to Marjorie Perloff, pervades Stein’s work: “The gap between signifier and signified is repeatedly emphasized,” she stresses, “a gap that leaves room for continuous verbal play.”⁸⁴

Merleau-Ponty’s *écart* also refers to a gap, but instead of “bar[ring] access to the perceptual domain,” it represents a passage of continual “exchange between me and the world,”⁸⁵ underscoring the point that perception is always grounded in a carnal being in the world. Although the gap (*écart*) between “perceptual meaning” and “language meaning” can never be closed, the reduction nevertheless teaches us that the primacy of perception is assigned to the “flesh” of the body. Therefore “[t]he most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (*PP*, xiv) for

⁸⁰ Dillon, “Introduction: Écart & Différance,” 3, 6.

⁸¹ Ibid. 13, 14.

⁸² DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 79.

⁸³ Schmitz, “Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist,” 1204.

⁸⁴ Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 98-99. Elsewhere Perloff points out that she in referring to “Indeterminacy” she “take[s] issue with Derridean theory.” Ibid., 17.

⁸⁵ Dillon, “Introduction: Écart and Différance,” 3, 4, 6, 7.

“the incompleteness of the reduction. . . is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself, the rediscovery of vertical being” (VI, 178). In other words, the reduction perpetually rediscovers the embodied subject’s “first” experience of the object, thus constantly highlighting the source from which language comes into being.

The incompleteness of the reduction, exposing the passage between the primacy of perception and language meaning, brings to light the paradox of the eye/I. On the one hand we are immersed in the world as perceiving beings but, on the other hand, we are detached from it through our expressive language; on the one hand every perceptual moment is grounded in the pre-predicative dimension of experience - James’s “fringe” or Husserl’s “horizon” – but, on the other hand, every reflective moment is a new beginning and an opening towards new meaning. It is this paradox that lies behind Merleau-Ponty’s later notion of “hyperdialectic,” a “dialectic without synthesis,” which, the philosopher stresses is “the only good dialectic” (VI, 94, 95-96, 94):

The bad dialectic begins almost with the dialectic, and there is no good dialectic but that which criticizes itself and surpasses itself as a separate statement . . . The bad dialectic is that which thinks it recomposes by being a thetic thought, by an assemblage of statements, by thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; the good dialectic is that which is conscious of the fact that every *thesis* is an idealization, that Being is not made up of idealizations or of things said, as the old logic believed but of bound holes . . . (VI, 95-96)

This dialectic without synthesis, central to which lies the impossibility of complete reduction, “is not a surpassing centered upon finality,” Merleau-

Ponty stresses elsewhere, but “a ‘perpetual genesis’ to ‘a plurality of levels of orders.’”⁸⁶ A lack of synthesis or closure, in other words, should not be taken as a sign of inconclusiveness or groundlessness but as a “perpetual genesis” of creativity. We learned from *Phenomenology of Perception* that an emphasis on perpetual genesis can be found in the work of artists like Proust and Cézanne. Their “kind of attentiveness and wonder” and their “will to seize the meaning of the world. . . as that meaning comes into being (*PP*, xxi) is, Merleau-Ponty argues, a characteristic of Modernist aesthetics at large. He calls it “the general effort of modern thought” (*PP*, xxi). Hence, the Modern thinker is a “perpetual beginner” and his creative process is “a renewed experience of its own beginning, it consists entirely in describing that beginning” (*PP*, ix).

There is, or so I suggest, a striking similarity between Merleau-Ponty’s “hyperdialectic” and what Ellen E. Berry, in her study of Stein, calls “a paradoxical split of attention - a relaxed hyperattention, an unconscious hyperconsciousness, a borderline state of awareness a little like insomnia” which, she claims, is required in order to read the Stein text.⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical speculations allow us to articulate more clearly this “split” attentiveness that the reader must adjust himself to in order to read Stein’s work. In proposing this I once again take my bearing from Max van Manen’s claim that phenomenology is “not only a research method, it is also a phenomenological attitude that must be adopted by anyone who wishes to participate in the questions that a certain project pursues.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty as quoted in Jacques Terminiaux, “From Dialectic to Hyperdialectic,” *Research in Phenomenology* 10 (1980): 74.

⁸⁷ Berry, *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering*, 18.

⁸⁸ Manen, [http:// www. phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html](http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html).

Merleau-Ponty's "hyperdialectic," which, as shown above, is an elaboration of an embodied sign-system, sheds new light on the "hyper" oscillation in *Tender Buttons*: an oscillation between the pre-reflective and the reflective, between the almost pre-linguistic form of language used in Stein's strange portraits and ordinary language, evoking in the reader a feeling of "[b]eginning again and again" ("CE," 23). A clue to my argument lies in the title *Tender Buttons*. Metaphorically speaking, Stein's "Buttons" are gaps or cleavages, which simultaneously differentiate and join. The central knot of our body, the "belly button," is such a cleavage. It is at once a sign of the subject's detachment from and dependence on the mother, signifying a creative opening (birth), while, simultaneously, pointing back to the pre-reflective dimension of experience when the umbilical cord was still attached. In proposing this idea I, once more, take my bearings from Mieke Bal's suggestion of the "textual navel." Bal's "navel" is a metaphor of the fine detail in the artwork, attracting the viewer's attention, thus leading him/her to participate in making the art *work*. In this sense, on the one hand Stein's "Buttons" designate starting points for creative production - buttons must be pressed to switch on a process - but on the other hand, they are points of return to the source of this creativity: the pre-reflective dimension of experience beneath the "cover" of habituality.

The double meaning of Stein's "Buttons" is, moreover, underscored by the word "Tender," which, when understood as the verb "to tender" (meaning to "offer or present formally") derives from the Latin *tendere*,⁸⁹ meaning on the one hand "to stretch out, extend" or, on the other hand, to "direct one's course" at, underscoring the theme of intentionality, which is both the "starting-point and basis" (*Ideas*, 245) of

⁸⁹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*.

the creative processes examined in this thesis.⁹⁰ If we place the verb “to stretch” next to “button,” the result is a process of oscillation, of continual stretching through switching on or switching off, opening or fastening. Stein’s “Buttons” are “Tender” because they, through our necessary participation as readers, are stretched back and forth between the pre-reflective and the reflective, the “thing in itself” and the object as named, “perceptual meaning,” as Merleau-Ponty calls it, and “language meaning” (VI, 176): “every time there is a division there is a dividing” (TB, 21).

Beginning Again and Again

I have argued that the world exposed by wonder, and the attitude shift occasioned by it, are central to both phenomenology and Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Still open to the essence of this world, the child looks at the world in wonder. “[T]he only thing that is spontaneously poetic is children,” Stein says in “A Transatlantic Interview”: “[c]hildren themselves are poetry” (“TI,” 23). When repeated quickly, the “no since” in “Orange In” (“A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since. . . “ (TB, 38)) does not only sound like “non-sense” but also as “nuisance.” The “nuisance” felt by the reader when faced with the continually oscillating meaning of *Tender Buttons* recalls the despair of Lewis Carroll’s little Alice when in “Wool and Water,” the most surreal scene of *Alice in Wonderland*, she cannot reach the most beautiful of a bunch of “darling scented rushes”:

“I hope the boat won’t tipple over!” she said to herself. “Oh, *what* a lovely one! Only I couldn’t quite reach it.” And it certainly *did* seem a

⁹⁰ *The Pocket Latin Dictionary*, 137.

little provoking (“almost as if it happened on purpose,” she thought) that, though she managed to pick plenty of beautiful rushes as the boat glided by, there was always, a more lovely one that she couldn’t reach.

“The prettiest are always further!”⁹¹

“What makes the ‘reality’ of the thing is . . . precisely what snatches it from our grasp” (*PP*, 233). Alice is in *Wonderland*, a land where philosophy begins again and again; where wonder at the world is constantly renewed through phenomenological reduction and expansion. *Wonderland* can only be reached through the act of passing through: Alice falls through a long tunnel in order to get there and she stays there by virtue of perpetual shrinking and stretching.

As readers of *Tender Buttons* we experience a similar oscillation between shrinking and stretching, reduction and expansion of meaning. The interconnected patterns of “excreation” – peeling, uncovering, washing – and re-creation in this book stretch us back and forth through the passage between child-like “[w]onder in the face of the world” and habituality. Although we are continually yearning for some kind of synthesis, the passage cannot be closed, hence we never escape the fate of what Stein in “Composition as Explanation” calls “Beginning again”: “Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing,” (“CE,” 23). Her work guides us to such perpetual activity so that reading itself becomes “a renewed experience of its own beginning, it consists entirely in describing that beginning” (*PP*, ix). Like the phenomenologists, in other words, we become “perpetual beginner[s]” (*PP*, xiv) and are faced with an ultimate deferral of

⁹¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 177-78.

getting Stein's text "on the button." The reality of Stein's "thing in itself" is "precisely what snatches it from our grasp."

What I am claiming, then, is that the process of reading *Tender Buttons* is emblematic of the "fate of perception" articulated by Merleau-Ponty. In her analysis of Stein's first "Orange," Tania Ørum points out that the shift from the present tense "is" in this button's first line to the past tense "was" in the third line ("Why *is* a feel oyster and egg stir" to "It *was* an extra leaker with a sea spoon" (*TB*, 38; italics mine) implies that the fruit has been both peeled and consumed during the process of reading. Once a clear image of this "word-object" has appeared, Ørum suggests, the fruit is eaten and the text will already be read.⁹² Our immediate experience of the object is not thought until it has become a reflective imitation of something already experienced. Similarly, in "A Piece of Coffee" from "Objects" we learn: "The time to show a message is when too late" (*TB*, 5). Once the full "message" regarding the perceived is crystallized it is already "too late," In this light, consider "Malachite" from the "Objects" section:

The sudden spoon is the same in no size. The sudden spoon is
the wound in the decision.

(*TB*, 12)

Stein's "see spoon," feeding us the primary sensation of the object, does make us see clearly but not until after we have made our interpretive "decision." As it is the temporal displacement of the passage from primary perception to language meaning that "causes the decision" (*TB*, 48), our final "decision" about the thing seen might suddenly differ from what was originally perceived. Hence Stein's "see spoon"

⁹² Ørum, *Læsefrugter*, p. 49

becomes a “sudden spoon.” This is the “fate of perception” and the fate of the intentional act of reading, the tender “wound in the decision.” We never stop feeling the “hurt” (*TB*, 3) of this “wound” and yet this is what makes us “go on” (“PG,” 130) and create again and again.

The tenderness of our grasp of reality is the painful and yet pleasurable reality of Stein's perceptual reconstructions. Buds become flowers, which flourish and fade only to develop new buds. In the words of Wallace Stevens, “Life is always new, it is always beginning. The fiction is part of this beginning” (Stevens, *Letters*, 434). Likewise, for Stein, “Beginning again and again” is “a natural thing” (“CE,” 23). This recursive pattern, embedded in every part of the “composition” of *Tender Buttons*, is “as important as the whole”: it corresponds with the continuity and repetition of the whole world within which we exist. In “Portraits and Repetitions” Stein writes,

I became conscious of these things, I suppose anybody does when they first really know that the stars are worlds and that everything is moving, that is the first conscious feeling of necessary repetition, and it comes to one and it is very disconcerting. (“PR,” 101)

Stein's *Tender Buttons* shows us that the daily acts of perceiving, eating, and even digesting “Objects” and “Food” are conditioned by this underlying pattern of repetition, “[an] a priori repetition,” in phenomenological terms, “which is axial to everyday reality.”⁹³ The multisensible experience of reading *Tender Buttons* (by reading we touch, we peel, we lick, we consume) is followed by an abrupt digestion: “the kind of show is made by squeezing” (*TB*, 11). In this light, consider “A Brown”

⁹³ Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 15.

from "Objects": "A brown which is not liquid not so more is relaxed and yet there is a change, a news is pressing" (*TB*, 14). This hinting at the processing of excrement underscores the tenderness and constantly changing shapes of Stein's strange portraits. As soon as a substance appears, revealed from underneath its "cover," it liquefies, becomes "tender," and fades. "Beginning again and again and again. . . is a natural thing" ("CE," 23).

Like the acts of perceiving objects and eating and digesting food, desire – both physical and creative – is part of a world which always "begins again." In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein writes:

Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. It is doing that always doing that and doing nothing but that. Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns ("PG," 138).

In *Tender Buttons* we are exactly faced with these continual oscillations between "losing" and "wanting," "avoiding" and "adoring" the object. The relationship between reader and text takes shape as a love relationship, recalling the "spooning" interaction between the reader and Stein's "Orange." The experience of Stein's poetry is tantamount to unreachable desire for the object: our grasp of it remains "tender." Desire, in other words, is revealed as the gap between the invisible "thing in itself" and "the things seen as every one sees them" (*Picasso*, 17). The closure of this gap would mean the end of desire and the end of creativity, which would violate what Stein told us in "Poetry and Grammar": "When I first began writing, I felt that writing should go on, I still feel that it should go on" ("PG," 130). The impossibility

of complete reduction, then, our “slippery hold” of Stein’s “thing in itself,” keeps the creative processes of both writing and reading alive – it makes them “go on.”⁹⁴

All in all, the difficulty of Stein's dialectic lies in realising, again and again, what “Rooms” tells us: “The conclusion came when there was no arrangement” (*TB*, 44). *Tender Buttons* opens onto the division of perceptual experience, hence the “conclusion” is not one of synthesis, “arrangement” and fixity but one of betweenness, openness and difference: “Is there pleasure when there is a passage, there is when every room is open” (*TB*, 44). Although Stein wants to “mean names without naming them” (“PG”, 141), the dialectical tensions central to *Tender Buttons* demonstrate that we can never fully accomplish such a reductive shift of attitude. Just as the phenomenological “thing itself” cannot be reached, a full grasp of what Stein calls “the really visible things” or “[t]he thing in itself” cannot be attained.

I have argued that Stein, in reconstructing this tenderness of our hold on reality, does not anticipate a Post-Modern poetics of indeterminacy, fragmentation or disorder. Although her portraits in “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms” are “not ordinary,” these are “*not* unordered in not resembling” (*TB*, 3; italics mine). This is underscored in “Rooms”: the “paper shows no disorder, it shows no desertion” (*TB*, 47). What Stein’s “paper” – her text - does show, however, is a shift of attitude, which is intended to make us re-learn to look at the world. Despite the fact that her “word-objects” are always snatched away from our grasp, her intention with *Tender Buttons* is “still concentrated, setting out over and over again, amazed at itself.”⁹⁵

⁹⁴ For the terminology “slippery hold” in connection with the impossibility of complete reduction, I am indebted to Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, “The Value of Flesh: Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy and the Modernism/Postmodernism Debate,” introduction to *Chiasms*, 9.

⁹⁵ Raynova, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Turning Point,” 243.

This work challenges us constantly to look at our object-world anew, to “Dance a clean dream . . . and translate more than the authority” (*TB*, 51). What is “translated” in *Tender Buttons* is not some authoritative version of the independent object but the “thatness of the thing . . . that it is possible at all.”⁹⁶ Stein’s dialectical work “show[s] the choice. . . This means clearness” (*TB*, 51), shedding light, again and again, on the expression of things in their essence from which our clear ideas and choices arise. Meaning for Stein lies in the “spreading” of “difference” (*TB*, 3). By opening onto the invisible within our visible fact-world and onto the primacy of perception inhabiting the words that signify this fact-world, her obscure portraits tell us that meaning *is* difference. In an examination of Merleau-Ponty’s “hyperdialectic,” Jacques Terminiaux points out that the meaning of the word dialectic is found in “the most ancient *dialegein*: to welcome the difference.”⁹⁷ Thus, recalling the “incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again” (*W*, 234) of Bernard’s creative cycle in Woolf’s *The Waves*, and anticipating what Stevens calls the poet’s “never-ending meditation” (*CP*, 465), it seems reasonable to suggest that the dialectic of *Tender Buttons* embraces the possibility of creative production itself, stresses perpetual opening and welcomes the difference.

⁹⁶ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, x.

⁹⁷ Jacques Terminiaux, “Merleau-Ponty: From Dialectic to Hyperdialectic,” 76.

CHAPTER 4

**REMOVING THE “VARNISH AND DIRT”:
THE “IDEA” OF WALLACE STEVENS**

Poetry has to be something more than a conception of the mind.

It has to be a revelation of nature. Conceptions are artificial.

Perceptions are essential.

—Wallace Stevens, *OP* (191)

I. Phenomenology and Stevens Criticism

For more than forty years there has been what one might call a phenomenological camp in Stevensian criticism.¹ Oddly enough, this has resulted in only one published book-length study on the subject, namely Thomas J. Hines’s *The Later Poetry of*

¹ Apart from the critics discussed in this section, the list of Stevens criticism drawing on phenomenology goes as far back as James Baird, “Transvaluation in the Poetics of Wallace Stevens,” *Tennessee Studies in Literature, Special Number; Studies in Honor of John C. Hodges and Alwin Thaler* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1961), 166-67; and Glauco Cambon, *The Inclusive Flame: Studies in American Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963): 237. Critics that approach aspects of Stevens through Husserlian phenomenology in particular include R.D. Ackerman, “Believing in a Fiction: Wallace Stevens at the Limits of Phenomenology,” *Philosophy and Literature* 3, no.1 (Spring 1979): 79-90; Richard Macksey, “The Climates of Wallace Stevens,” in *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, eds. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), 192-93; George S. Lensing, *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 34-37 and 81-82; Simon Critchley, “The Philosophical Significance of a Poem (on Wallace Stevens),” *Proceedings of The Aristotelian Society* 96 (1996): 269 – 291; and Paul Kenneth Naylor, “‘The Idea of It’: Wallace Stevens and Edmund Husserl,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12 (Spring, 1998): 44-55.

Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger (1976).² Disturbingly, many of the phenomenological readings of Stevens, including Hines's, do not explore sufficiently the implications of the phenomenological reduction, hence missing the point of the intentionality of consciousness, "the main phenomenological theme" (*Ideas*, 241). This has led to either misleading parallels or accusations of a lack of fit between Stevens's poetry and phenomenology. This chapter is an attempt to straighten out these misleading parallels. In contrast to Hines's claim that Husserl's phenomenology is "inadequate for [Stevens's] aesthetic purposes,"³ which is echoed by James S. Leonard and Christine E. Wharton's more recent description of Husserl's thought as "antiaesthetic,"⁴ but in agreement with Kevin Hart's position that "[Husserl's] broodings over the reduction speak . . . vividly of something central to art,"⁵ I hope to show that the reduction allows us to articulate not only Stevens's aesthetics but also Modernist aesthetics at large. To establish a foundation for my argument, I will set out by looking at previous phenomenological approaches to Stevens's work, beginning with Hines's book.

While devoting the first part of his study to a purely Husserlian account of Stevens's early poems from *Harmonium* (1923), *Ideas of Order* (1935), and *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), and the second part to a Heideggerian approach to Stevens's later works (*Parts of a World* (1942), *Transport to Summer* (1947), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), and *The Rock* (1954)), Hines argues for a sharp division

² Thomas J. Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976). The only other book-length study on the subject is Thirunavukarasu Balan's PhD dissertation "Wallace Stevens and Phenomenology" (PhD diss., The University of Toledo, 1994).

³ Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 27

⁴ Leonard and Wharton, "Wallace Stevens as Phenomenologist," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26 (1984): 331

⁵ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 286.

between the poetic inquiries of an early and a late Stevens. The goal of Husserl's phenomenological reduction, Hines writes, was "[t]o reject all universal Ideas. . . to eliminate the intellectual preconceptions that had plagued philosophical investigation since Plato's ideal." The "poetic procedure" of Stevens's early poems, Hines argues "is like the process of phenomenological reduction," a "process of destruction wherein the ancient orders are reduced to nothing" or "thrown out."⁶ In an analysis of "The Idea of Order at Key West," Hines points out that "Stevens's process of reduction is again at work as the speaker separates mind and world" - a separation which is rejected by the late, more Heideggerian Stevens:

As Stevens rejects the division between mind and world, he also finds that the clear perceptions that were available through the processes of reduction that he had developed in *Ideas of Order* and *The Man with the Blue Guitar* were inadequate for his aesthetic purposes. As the gap between subject and object is closed in several of the poems in *Parts of the World* (1942), the poet discovers a new relation of self and world.⁷

By using terms such as "reject," "eliminate," "destruction" and "thrown out," Hines's description implies that the outcome of both Husserl's process of reduction and its equivalent in Stevens's early poems is a complete removal of preconception and common sense notions about the world, leading to a *division* between mind and world. This viewpoint recalls Glauco Cambon's much earlier statement that "both Husserl and Stevens aim at a focused apprehension of the *essence* of things . . . by a process of 'stripping' or 'unhusking' . . . , which Stevens calls 'abstraction' and

⁶ Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 31, 46, 47, 48

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52, 26-27.

which appears in so many of his poems as a kind of preliminary negation of the given object, or of our construed interpretations.”⁸ But, when insisting on the *epoché* as a means to return to a “first philosophy,” Husserl never suggests an elimination or negation of the existing world. On the contrary, he argues: “Our phenomenological idealism does *not* deny the positive existence of the real (realen) world and of Nature. . . . Its sole task and service is to clarify the meaning of this world” (*Ideas*, 21; italics mine). To recapitulate, in *epoché* our preconceived, theoretical ideas and practical considerations about the world are never denied, but merely pushed off centre, as it were: “*We do not abandon the thesis we have adopted, we make no change in our conviction . . . And yet the thesis undergoes a modification . . . we set it as it were ‘out of action,’ we ‘disconnect it,’ ‘bracket it’ . . . We can also say: The thesis is experience as lived [Erlebnis], but we make ‘no use’ of it.*” The “thesis we have adopted” – our uncritical preconceptions - thus remains there “like the bracketed in the bracket” (Husserl, *Ideas*, 108); it is never abandoned but simply not made use of. Thus, as the *epoché* is “a mere change of standpoint” (*Ideas*, 15) it does not change, eliminate or reject anything. On the contrary, after the operation of “bracketing,” Husserl stresses, “[w]e have literally lost nothing” (*Ideas*, 15, 154). In claiming that the Husserlian method of reduction is an “inadequate” tool for examining the “relation of self and world” in the aesthetics of the later Stevens, Hines ironically misses the point that *epoché* brings into clarity this exact “relation,” which is “the essence of *consciousness in general*” (*Ideas*, 113). All “acts of consciousness” are “intentional,” intentionality being “the unique peculiarity of experiences ‘to be the consciousness of something’” (*Ideas*, 112, 242). Let us, once again, quote Judith Butler’s clarifying explanation of the concept of intentionality:

⁸ Cambon, *The Inclusive Flame*, 237.

“The notion that consciousness belongs solely to the domain of subjectivity thus misses the phenomenological point that subjectivity always belongs to the world . . . Consciousness is, thus, in its very structure, in an implicit relation to the world it seeks to know.”⁹

The *epoché* thus occasions not “the division between mind and world,” as Hines suggests, but their implicit relation or primordial bond. The consciousness of and the object of consciousness form what Husserl called an “intentional unity” (*Ideas*, 131) or “the Thing itself” (*Ideas*, 66): the intentional object only exists together with the subject side of the intentional structure. When Stevens in “Of Modern Poetry” speaks of “the poem of the act of the mind” (*CP*, 240), he implies that poetry is built up through intentional acts of consciousness, which are always implicitly related to reality: “It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential” (*NA*, 33). Again and again Stevens underlines this intentional aspect of poetry: “Poetry is not the same thing as the imagination taken alone. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations and interactions” (*OP*, 163); “In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality” (*OP*, 161).¹⁰

Unfortunately, other critical studies of Stevens which, like Hines’s, argue for an “early” Stevens, separating the mind from the real, misread Stevens’s gestures toward the implicit bond between subject and object-world, which constitutes the intentional “act of the mind” (*CP*, 240). Bernard Heringman writes: “in most of

⁹ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, x.

¹⁰ Another elaborate description of the intentionality in Stevens is offered by Richard A. Macksey. “For Stevens, as for Husserl,” he writes, “‘the world’ is an irreducible component of the given: consciousness is relational and not substantial, not so much mental as ‘*weltlich*.’ Moods suffuse and penetrate the moving chaos of the outer world, an enormous field of intentional relations.” See Macksey, “The Climates of Wallace Stevens,” 192-193.

Stevens's work, poetry is either located in the realm of imagination, or, less frequently, in reality,"¹¹ and J. Hillis Miller argues: "Imagination is the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world. . . Stevens's problem is to reconcile the two. But such a reconciliation turns out to be impossible."¹² This lack of "reconciliation" is also the focus of Helen Regueiro's interpretation of Stevens's early poems of "order" (*Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*). Constructing his poems out of "a recognition of [their] intentionality," Regueiro writes, the "intentional structure of the poetic imagination" undercuts any correspondence with the real: "Distanced from the natural world . . . by the poetry that constructs an intentional landscape," the poet is "den[ied] the possibility of experience" and left in a dark and "imprisoned" space. Thus, in her reading of Stevens, Regueiro uses the concept of "intentionality" as an implication of the poet's purely subjective, imaginative creation, completely isolating the mind from the objective world: "the poetic act is an act of the mind, and as such an act of enclosure."¹³ But, to repeat Anthony J. Steinbeck's words, "describing intentionality in terms of 'subjective' and 'objective' correlates can be misleading if they are taken as independent entities": "intentionality is not a thing, but a relation."¹⁴ Like Hines, Regueiro also argues for a difference between an "early" and "late" Stevens. While the Stevens of the early poems of "order" suggests an interiorisation of the ordering mind, the poet gradually

¹¹ Bernard Heringman, "Wallace Stevens: The Use of Poetry," in *The Act of the Mind*, 3.

¹² J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens's Poetry of Being," in *The Act of the Mind*, 145.

¹³ Helen Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 38, 151, 27, 149, 148, and 164.

¹⁴ Steinbeck, "Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and Saturated Intentionality," in *Rereading Merleau-Ponty*, 55.

recognizes the “limits” of his own imagination and “begins . . . to redescend into reality.”¹⁵

In another attempt to clarify the relationship between mind and world in Stevens’s work, Alan Perlis also draws on the reduction. Like Hines, Perlis assumes that the reduction separates mind from world and yet his reading of Stevens is entirely different from Hines’s: “phenomenology . . . is the most outspoken in refusing to connect particulars and to contrive synthesis; it abdicates point of view or inclusive position, in favour of microscopic observation and exclusive vision. Yet Stevens continually argues that an object, to be properly perceived, must be held in relation to its environment.”¹⁶ Thus, like Hines, Perlis reads the phenomenological concept of reduction as a method which cancels rather than suspends our fact-world, isolating the “microscopic” mind from any relation with the outside world, while he, unlike Hines, stresses Stevens’s promotion of the necessary relation between subject and object-world. Due to his unfortunate description of phenomenology’s central theme, despite his emphasis of intentionality in Stevens, Perlis fails to see the connection between phenomenology and the poet’s work, leading him to emphasise “the dangers inherent in trying either to connect Stevens’s poems to a philosophy or to call Stevens himself a philosopher.”¹⁷

Such “danger” is also sensed by James S. Leonard and Christine E. Wharton. Comparisons between Stevens and Husserl or Heidegger, they argue, “tend to distort both the philosophical and the poetic material (characterizing Stevens’s view as nonaesthetic, or even antiaesthetic).” Drawing on Stevens’s words that “[p]oetry . . .

¹⁵ Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination*, 190

¹⁶ Perlis, *Wallace Stevens*, 78.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it" (*NA*, 77), Leonard and Wharton seem to jump to the conclusion that Stevens's "view of art – or imaginative acts in general – as enhancement of reality is well beyond the sphere of Husserlian phenomenology," which they see as "antiaesthetic."¹⁸ Stevens's work, they stress elsewhere, is "foreign to Husserl's 'phenomenological science'": it "clears the way for new interpretations, not for a Husserlian apprehension of essence; and Stevens's use of the 'object' displaces Husserl's reductive program."¹⁹

In her more recent study *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens* (1997), Patricia Rae uses the Husserlian *epoché* to read Stevens as a poet not of fictions, which, she claims, "is an important and damaging simplification," but as a poet of hypothesis. Rae writes:

[Stevens] places his vatic figures within ironically circumscribed spaces – jars, crystals, and mirrors, and huts and houses – or in spaces midway between the earth and the sky. These "epochal" settings, as Husserl might call them, are tantamount to phenomenological brackets.²⁰

Stevens's "epochal spaces", she points out, "stress the lack of interaction between phenomenologically reduced experience and the outer world." Taking her bearings from Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of 'As If,'* Rae claims that a fiction is always "known to be false," whereas the hypothesis "seeks to coincide with objective reality

¹⁸ Leonard and Wharton, "Wallace Stevens as Phenomenologist," 331, 334, and 340.

¹⁹ James S. Leonard and Christince E. Wharton, *The Fluent Mundo: Wallace Stevens and the Structure of Reality* (Athens, Ga.:University of Georgia Press, 1988), 90, 89.

²⁰ Patricia Rae, *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens*. (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 15,

and will fall apart when ‘the facts of experience’ appear to contradict it.”²¹

According to Rae, Stevens is a poet of hypothesis because the poet’s enclosed “epochal spaces,” enclosed “shelters” of “peace” and retreat, “emphasiz[ing] the middleness of [Stevens’s] expressive landscapes,” fall apart when the forces of reality “enter the poetry,” thus “profoundly disturbing the carefully balanced epoché Stevens otherwise works so hard to preserve.”²² Although I agree that the *epoché* is a useful tool to examine the important “middleness” of Stevens’s landscapes, Rae fails to note that the phenomenological act of “bracketing” is not an act of preservation or “retreat,” protecting the poetic mind and denying enhancement of the real; rather, it provides access to the intentionality of consciousness, which, as we have seen, means that the imagination is always, already, in an implicit relation to the real.²³ Much like Hines and Regueiro, Rae finally distinguishes the poetic inquiries of the early Stevens from those of the late Stevens. Her Stevens also gradually comes to realise “that one is part of everything,” hence his “will to sustain the *epoche* weakens,” and the poet can re-unite with the world.²⁴

II. Epoché as Aesthetic Tool

The most recurrent assumption among the critics mentioned is that Stevens’s early works separate subject and object or the mind’s poetic constructions from the outside

²¹ Ibid., 155, 172.

²² Ibid., 150, 165, 164, 154.

²³ For an elaboration of this point please see the final subsection of this chapter entitled “A Half-Way State.”

²⁴ Rae, *The Practical Muse*, 165.

world. "In fact," Anca Rosu stresses, "it has become an almost ritual gesture to recall such a dichotomy in any discussion of Stevens's poetry."²⁵ She, too, suggests that the method of phenomenological reduction, which is often used to shed light on this dichotomy, rejects everyday reality, thus separating the subject from his familiar world: "The main reason (and proof) for the associations between Stevens's *Ideas* about reality and the *Ideas* promoted by Husserl or Heidegger is a certain manner his poems have . . . of seeming to advance perception by cancelling previous representations of the real."²⁶ In this chapter I hope to offer both an entirely different reading of this mind/world relationship and a clarification of the phenomenological aspect of Stevens work.²⁷

Before turning to an in-depth reading of Stevens's work, however, it will be helpful to recapitulate the phenomenological context for my argument. In this section and the following ("The Cézannian Composition: Part and Whole"), I will map out this context and point out how Stevens's poetic inquiry can be read in continuation from Woolf and Stein's phenomenological compositions.

It is ironic that the majority of the critics mentioned charge the method of "bracketing" with a denial of interaction with the ordinary, leading to a mind/world

²⁵ Anca Rosu, *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1995), 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁷ Taking his bearings from Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, in his PhD dissertation Thirunavukarasu Balan also bases a phenomenological discussion of Stevens on "the ways in which wrong assumptions about phenomenology and reality/mind polarization have misled Stevens studies." See Balan, "Wallace Stevens and Phenomenology," iv. Like Balan I am concerned with clarifying the relation between mind and world in Stevens through phenomenology, but unlike Balan, I use Husserl's *epoché*, and Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the concept, as my guiding theme. Knowing that "[p]henomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method" (*PP*, viii), and that no phenomenological text is accessible without adopting the shift of standpoint of the reduction, I promote the reduction as a suitable tool for investigating Stevens's phenomenological poetry.

split, whereas “[n]othing is denied in epoché and nothing is forgotten.”²⁸ Maurice Natanson explains:

Another misunderstanding of epoché presents the phenomenologist as a recluse of his ego. With the abstention from existential positing, it is assumed that all that is left to the individual is the pulsation of his own consciousness: a residuum which no longer has any connection with reality. The trouble here is that Husserl never suggested that placing one’s believing in the world in abeyance means that what is so placed is neglected, let alone denied . . . Instead . . . the phenomenologist remains as much in the world as he ever was, retains all of his interests and knowledge . . . The only change (and it is a crucial one to be sure) is that he reflects selectively on what he had hitherto simply lived, though both the reflecting and the living continue, side by side, in the life of consciousness. Rather than a residuum of nothing, the world in its entirety is retained, and if you like, regained.²⁹

Thus, rather than implying a rejection or cancellation of preconceived notions, leading to introspection or self-enclosure, the epochal shift of attitude, which, I claim, lies central to Stevens’s poetics, “enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it” (*NA*, 77). In stark contrast with Rae’s suggestion that the later Stevens gives up the *epoché* after realising “that one is part of everything,” the reduction in fact uncovers “that one *is* part of everything,” or, borrowing from Stevens’s “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” “[p]art of the res and not about it” (*CP*, 473).

²⁸ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 58-59

However, from what has been said about the *epoché* so far, it can hardly be denied that the method of “bracketing” brings to light a relationship between part and whole, subject and world which is neither completely dichotomous nor completely unitary; rather, it points to something in between. In the words of Mark Kingswell, the reduction “does not take me out of the world. Instead it serves to point out a central paradox in human experience as Husserl explores it. How is it that I am both a subject experiencing the world and an object within the world?”³⁰ In drawing upon the work of both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, I hope to show that Stevens’ early as well as late works reveal neither a mind/world dichotomy, nor a complete unity; rather, his “poem[s] of the act of the mind” (*CP*, 442) are at once distinguished from and defined by their context.

Whereas literary critics tend to stress “the dangers inherent in trying either to connect Stevens’s poems to a philosophy,” underlining that Stevens “had read . . . almost every modern philosopher and, except in a very general sense, understood almost none,”³¹ many philosophers and theorists take Stevens’s work as a paradigm for phenomenological speculation. In an essay examining the “philosophical significance” of Stevens’s early poem of order “The Idea of Order at Key West,” philosopher Simon Critchley describes Stevens as “philosophically [the] most profound of modern poets,” who “advocates a phenomenological sense of the real as that pre-theoretical meaningful context for our practical involvement with things.” Just as philosopher and theorist Kevin Hart, in an essay on poetry and the implications of the phenomenological reduction uses Stevens’s work as an example of his main argument, so does theorist Mark C. Taylor never question the

³⁰ Kingswell, “Husserl’s Sense of Wonder,” 99.

³¹ Perlis, *Wallace Stevens*, 78; Josep N. Riddell, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1965), 37.

philosophical implications of Stevens, as, rather than applying phenomenology to Stevens's work, he clarifies a point about Heidegger by means of Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar." Both Judith Butler and philosopher Maurice Natanson use Stevens's poetics as an example of phenomenology in *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* (1998), and in "The Idea of It: Wallace Stevens and Edmund Husserl" (1998), Paul Kenneth Naylor offers an illuminating examination and comparison of Husserl and Stevens's notions of "the idea."³²

In joining forces with these readings, I do not argue that Stevens was directly influenced by the work of Husserl. Rather, I agree with Maurice Natanson's remark: "the poetry of Wallace Stevens is surely philosophical; it should be suggested, however, that it is philosophical – without self-consciousness or deliberation – in a phenomenological way."³³ I have pointed out that this is not a study of influence but an intertextual examination, highlighting the kinship of method and concern between phenomenology and the aesthetics of Woolf, Stein and Stevens. What I hope to show is that Stevens, like Woolf and Stein, evidences a breakdown of common notions of "reality" and a change of relations within Modern civilisation. His work also implies that the cure to what Husserl called the "crisis" of Modern Culture can be found in a "change of standpoint," the main purpose of which is to expose the world as phenomenon and lay bare its essential structure. The result of this is to reveal that the primordial bond between consciousness and world - the "thing itself" - is the "starting-point and basis" (*Ideas*, 245) for all inquiry. Stevens gestures toward this structure, when in *The Necessary Angel* he claims: "if we desire to formulate an

³² See Simon Critchley, "The Philosophical Significance of a Poem," 271, 281; Mark C. Taylor, *Notes* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 112; Kevin Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 300; J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xiv-xiv; Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 5-7; and Paul Kenneth Naylor, "'The Idea of It': Wallace Stevens and Edmund Husserl."

³³ Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 8.

accurate theory of poetry, we find it necessary to examine the structure of reality, because reality is the central reference for poetry" (NA, 71). "[P]oetic truth is an agreement with reality" (NA, 54).

In previous phenomenological approaches to Stevens's work, parallels have been drawn between the method of reduction and Stevens's famous notion of "decreation." In "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," Stevens writes:

Simone Weil in *La Pesanteur et La Grâce* has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever fields we discover it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything. Poets and painters alike today make that assumption. (NA, 174-175)

Although I agree with R. D. Ackerman, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Thomas J. Hines that the concept of "decreation" is similar to that of the reduction, this is not because, "decreation," "like Husserl's methods of reduction and intuition," "moves from the destruction of old constructs to creation of new ones."³⁴ Nothing is destroyed or negated in either the reduction or Stevens's poetry. The reduction is a "change of standpoint," the aim of which is to regain sight of the obscured fact that consciousness itself is the source of the meaning of the world. Likewise, Stevens's

³⁴ Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 26;

Also see R.D. Ackerman, "Believing in a Fiction: Wallace Stevens at the Limits of Phenomenology," 79; Roy Harvey Pearce, "Toward Decreation: Stevens and the 'Theory of Poetry,'" in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, eds. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 286-307.

“decreation” makes the intentional act of consciousness - “the act of the mind” (*CP*, 240) - the subject of his poetry, the result of which is to point out that “the precious portents of our own powers,” that is to say, consciousness itself, is the source of “truth” or meaning. In my emphasis on the kinship between the reduction and Stevens’s poetic inquiry, then, my focal point is not the poet’s notion of “decreation” but his perpetual reflection on the primordial ground from which creativity arises.

As mentioned above, the term *re-ducere* means to lead or bring back. What the phenomenologist is led back to through the reduction is the pre-reflective dimension of experience from which our reflections stem: “we start from that which *antedates* all standpoints: from the totality of the intuitively self-given which is prior to any theorizing reflection” (Husserl, *Ideas*, 86). *Epoché* opens onto intentionality, to the fact that consciousness is always already in an implicit relation to the real, hence it cannot possibly demonstrate separation of the mind and the real. Thus, “reduction is ironically a protest against reductionism”:³⁵ instead of reducing our perceptual experience to “microscopic vision,” as Perlis calls it, by rejecting or negating our familiar world, it refers to “a new kind of practical outlook” (*Crisis 1*, 169), which is not a rejection of the world as we know it, but a fresh starting-point to see clearly the depth of our involvement with the world, to see it “clearly in the idea of it” (*CP*, 380) as Stevens puts it in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.”³⁶

Part of my argument in this chapter, then, lies in the awareness that intentionality, laid bare through the reduction, is central to both Stevens’s early and late poetic inquiries, automatically ruling out the sharp division between an early Stevens, who separates or isolates mind from world, and a late Stevens, who

³⁵ See Manen, [http:// www. phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html](http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html).

³⁶ “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” is hereafter abbreviated as “Notes.”

“discovers a new relation of self and world.”³⁷ “I am aware,” George Lensing writes in a recent study on *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, “that Stevens underwent certain modifications – often divided as *Harmonium* and post-*Harmonium* . . . But it is my contention that there is far more continuity in Stevens’s work than reinvention and redirection.”³⁸ I agree that there is both important and overlooked intertextuality and continuity across Stevens’s oeuvre, but whereas Lensing uses the cyclical pattern of the seasons in Stevens as a trope to illuminate the “coherent and inclusive wholeness” of his work,³⁹ I am concerned with showing that the meaning of intentionality, which can only be understood through the reduction, helps us understand the “interrelations and interactions” (*OP*, 163) of Stevens’s work.

The Cézannian Composition: Part and Whole

We have seen that Stein once praised Cézanne for conceiving “the idea of each part of a composition being as important as the whole.” Phenomenology too ascribes equal importance to the part and the whole. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of Cézanne’s painting, in the first chapter of this thesis I demonstrated how this equal balance between part and whole is implied in Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers* and Woolf’s *The Waves*. In the previous chapter we saw how the same balance pervades the “composition” of Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Evoking reduction – a shift of attitude - *Tender Buttons* radically shifts our attention off centre, commanding us to “[a]ct so that there is no use in a centre” (*TB*, 43).

³⁷ Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 27.

³⁸ Lensing, *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Stein's strange "portraits" suspend the particularities of our fact-world – its "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms" – to uncover their constitutive essence; they put out of play common sense grammatical structures to emulate the experience of "fine substance[s] strangely" (*TB*, 4), that is to say, the pre-reflective, immediate experience of things seen. In Stein's "composition," the marginal and the central, the invisible and visible, the pre-reflective and the reflective are given equal balance: "each part of [the] composition [is] as important as the whole."

This is also true of Stevens's poetry. The fifth stanza of "A Primitive Like an Orb" illustrates how our uncritical objectivism about the world is "bracketed," or "ma[de] 'no use' of" (*Ideas*, 108), to use Husserl's words, and redefined through a process of reduction, bringing to light the equality of aspect and whole, single poem and world:

... the used-to earth and sky, and the tree
 And cloud, the used-to tree and the used-to cloud,
 Lose the old uses that they made of them,
 And they: these men, and earth and sky, inform
 Each other by sharp informations, sharp,
 Free knowledges, secreted until then,
 Breaches of that which held them fast. It is
 As if the central poem became the world,

 And the world the central poem, each one the mate
 Of the other. . . .

The central poem is the poem of the whole,
 The poem of the composition of the whole,
 The composition of blue sea and of green,
 Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems,
 And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,
 Not merely into a whole, but a poem of
 The whole, the essential compact of the parts,
 The roundness that pulls tight the final ring
 (CP, 441-442)

“The central poem, is the poem of the whole, / The poem of the composition of the whole” (CP, 442) - a “composition” which is as essential to the poet as the painter: “Poetry and painting alike create through composition” (NA, 163). This statement from “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting” recalls a 1938 letter written by Stevens to his friend Wilson E. Taylor:

When I stop to think that Cézanne has been the source of all painting of any interest during the last 20 years, say, it becomes pretty clear that there is something wrong about calling the damn things [his watercolours] monstrosities. It is the way he composes, as one might say to a bar tender.⁴⁰

For Stevens, as for Cézanne, the “composition” of poetry “does not mean slavishly copying the object: it means perceiving harmony among numerous relationships. . . .”⁴¹. Just as the reduction is a “mere change of standpoint” (*Ideas*, 15) which lays

⁴⁰ Wallace Stevens as cited by Wilson E. Taylor, “Of A Remembered Time,” in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, 101.

⁴¹ Paul Cézanne, *Cézanne By Himself*, ed. Richard Kendall (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 298.

bare the relation between part and whole, subject and world, so does Stevens's poetry highlight the "interrelations and interactions" of the poem and the outside world, the unit and horizon, the single "note" and the entire "harmony." In the "Notes," the Canon Aspirin realises that the two parts of this relationship are not mutually exclusive:

He had to choose. But it was not a choice
 Between excluding things. It was a not a choice

 Between, but of. He chose to include the things
 That in each other are included, the whole
 The complicate, the amassing harmony.
 (CP, 403)

"[I]nclud[ing] the things / That in each other are included," each of Stevens's poems is as much a "poem of the act of the mind" as a "poem of the composition of the whole" (CP, 442), a synecdoche for the creation of both art and life. In "A Primitive Like an Orb," the poet writes: "One poem proves another and the whole" (CP, 441) - poetry is always in an implicit relation to the frame within which it exists. "There is," he stresses elsewhere, "a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live" (NA, p. 319). This recalls Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*: "fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners" (ROO, 43). Just as the single perceptions of Woolf's six subjects in *The Waves* change in accordance with the natural scenes that frame their voices, so is each of Stevens's poems framed by the larger body of his poetry, which is, in turn, framed by the cyclical pattern of life within which it comes into being: "Why should

a poem not change in sense when there is a fluctuation of the whole of appearance?” (*OP*, 213).

These interrelated cyclical patterns of the perceiving mind and the world are central to phenomenology. In seeking to penetrate to “the philosophy of the Beginning” (*Ideas*, 16), Husserl pointed out that the philosopher too would be a “beginner as he reflects upon himself” (*Ideas*, 17). Continually enacting the reduction, “beginning” for Husserl, was both the permanent state of the philosopher and the cause of his essentially incomplete phenomenological project (*Ideas*, 29). It is this incompleteness that Merleau-Ponty responds to and takes to be the central theme of phenomenology itself.

The “pre-reflective contact of self with self” that the reduction aims at achieving is, according to Merleau-Ponty, “impossible”: “To have the idea of ‘thinking’ (in the sense of the ‘thought of seeing and of feeling’), to make the ‘reduction,’ to return to immanence and to the consciousness of . . . it is necessary to have words” (*VI*, 171). Since description of pre-reflective intentionality, paradoxically enough, relies on the virtues of our reflective language there is, of course, no point at which full reduction can be completed. Hence from his *Phenomenology of Perception* to *The Invisible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty gives the impossibility of complete reduction a dialectical placement as a point of departure and point of return for his philosophy. Just as the world is “displayed only gradually and never ‘in its entirety’” (*PP*, 208), “[t]he philosopher is a perpetual beginner. . . . It means also that philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning; that it consists wholly in the description of this beginning” (*PP*, xiv.). What I will show in this chapter is that Stevens’s work, like that of his contemporaries Woolf and Stein, gives poetic voice to this pattern of re-beginnings.

Again and again his “poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea” (*CP*, 382), creating what the poet calls a “never-ending meditation” (*CP*, 465) or the “endlessly elaborating poem” (*CP*, 486).⁴²

Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on “the impossibility of the reduction” – the reason behind the “perpetual beginning” of the creator – not only sheds new light on the cyclical patterns in Stevens’s poetry, but is also a means of putting a stop to the much discussed imagination/reality polarisation in Stevens, a polarisation which is “too late,”⁴³ as pre-reflective intentionality - the fact that consciousness is *of* the world - is always, already presupposed. Stevens’s “Notes” sums it up:

Two things of opposite nature seem to depend

On one another, as a man depends

On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.

(*CP*, 392)

“Two things of opposite nature”: the mind and the world or “the imagined” and “the real” are not mutually exclusive but are always already interdependent parts of one whole. Thus, creative production can never lie solely within the enclosed space of the poet’s mind, as claimed by several of the critics mentioned, but depends on what Stevens in the *Necessary Angel* calls “the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from which poetry springs” (*NA*, 217), the ongoing “transaction” *between* “[t]wo things of opposite nature,” between what the poet calls

⁴² For my suggestion of the connection between Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the impossibility of reduction and the recursive pattern in Stevens’s poetry, I am indebted to Hart, “The Experience of Poetry.”

⁴³ Balan, “Wallace Stevens and Phenomenology,” 32.

his “first idea” (*Stevens, Letters*, 426-427) – his primal, pre-objective experience of the “the thing itself” - and an articulated (objective) reality. Seen in this light, Stevens’s “central poem” is “central” because it lays bare this space of betweenness. This poet too “state[s] the space,” to use Beckett’s terminology, between him and the world, thus calling attention to the space or blank page where creative production takes place. His “poem of the act of the mind” is concerned not with “the reflection of a pre-existing truth” (*PP*, xx) but with the very “act of bringing truth into being.” (*PP*, xx).

Now that a general overview of what I claim are misleading examinations of the phenomenological concepts of reduction and/or intentionality in Stevens’s poetry has been given, and the context for my phenomenological approach to Stevens has been specified, we are finally ready to turn to a more in-depth study of the poet’s work. In structure the rest of this chapter is divided into three overall parts. In the next section entitled “The Horizon,” a brief examination of Husserl’s philosophical notion of the “horizon” and Stevens’s equivalent notion of the “infinity of the world” will lay the foundation from which to examine the poet’s concerns with aesthetic production. Arguing against the widely held view that Stevens’s early poems of “order” (*Harmonium* (1923) – *Ideas of Order* (1935)) suggest an order imposed upon the outer world by an enclosed poetic mind, thus implying a post-reflective polarisation of the subjective and the objective,⁴⁴ I will set out by showing that intentionality – the fact that subjectivity is already implicitly related to the world – is

⁴⁴ See Helen Regueiro’s essay “The Ordered World” in her chapter on Stevens in *The Limits of Imagination*, 165-178; Bonnie Costello also suggests that Stevens’s early poems are imbued with the theme of the poetic mind ordering the world. In *Parts of a World* Stevens “began a new approach to the genre, in which landscapes become parts of a world rather than ways of summarily ordering a world of parts.” Costello “Wallace Stevens: The Adequacy of Landscape,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 211. For a discussion of other critics arguing for this imposition of human order upon the world in “The Idea of Order at Key West” in particular, see the part of this section entitled “Muddy Centre.”

the “starting-point and basis” (*Ideas*, 245) of Stevens’s early and late poetic inquiry. In section IV entitled “The Essence of Order,” which includes four subsections, I will sharpen this point in a reading of one of the most famous poems of “order”: “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Phenomenology is, as mentioned, “the study of essences, and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences” (*PP*, vii). I will show that Stevens’s “Idea of Order” brings to light not an order imposed on the world from the outside but an “essence” of order existing within it. By continually juxtaposing my reading with passages from the “Notes,” and by highlighting my argument by means of the 1955 poem “Of Mere Being” (*OP*), the early *Harmonium* (1923) poems “The Snow Man” and “Anecdote of the Jar,” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” from *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), I will demonstrate important and overlooked intertextuality across Stevens’s oeuvre. While doing this I hope to induce in my reader a state of phenomenological clarity, an awareness of the pre-reflective dimension of experience that is the “starting-point and basis” for both phenomenological investigation and creative production in Stevens’s work. As in the previous chapters it is assumed that the reduction is “not only a research method, it is also a phenomenological attitude that must be adopted by anyone who wishes to participate in the questions that a certain project pursues.”⁴⁵ Like the nail and hole that Mieke Bal spots in Vermeer’s “Woman Holding a Balance”, Steven’s poetic “notes” are “traces of the *work* of art, in all senses of that word,”⁴⁶ proclaiming both the production of art and of how the reader is a necessary part of that production.

In the final section, entitled “A ‘Total-Double-Thing’: The Fate of Perception,” my focus is on the in-between space of creative production itself or

⁴⁵ Manen, <http://phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/10.html>.

⁴⁶ Bal, “Dispersing the Image”, 77.

what Stevens terms “the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from which poetry springs” (*NA*, 217). Taking my bearings from Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “hyperdialectic,” his dialectic without synthesis introduced in the previous chapter, I show that the cyclical patterns in Stevens’s poems, leading poet and reader into perpetual beginning or “never-ending meditation[s]” (*CP*, 465), is guided not only by the theme of reduction but by the impossibility of complete reduction. This final section is developed with the support of passages from “Notes” and an amalgamation of other late poems.

In my interpretations of Stevens’s poems, I refer to sections from the essays in *The Necessary Angel* (1951) and frequently draw on his *Adagia*, notebook aphorisms which appear in the *Opus Posthumous* (1957). My choice to use the long poem “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” as a continual point of reference throughout the chapter is not only based on the fact that, in agreement with Paul Kenneth Naylor, I find this “the most Husserlian of Stevens’s poems,”⁴⁷ but also lies in the symbolic implications of the poem’s title. Stevens’s “Notes” not only suggest the musical notation of the “exceeding music” (*CP*, 167) that in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” “must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns” (*CP*, 167) but are, like Woolf’s “mark on the wall” and Stein’s “buttons,” metaphors for the preliminary note-taking phase of creative production. “Notes,” “marks” and “buttons” are representative of what Mieke Bal terms “textual navels”: fissures, which simultaneously divide and join. Like Woolf’s “mark” and Stein’s “Buttons,” Stevens’s poetic “Notes” reflect on the division of perceptual experience which phenomenology uncovers: “not only are we dealing with what is given but also with

⁴⁷ Naylor, “The Idea of It”, 45.

what is presupposed for the giving to occur.”⁴⁸ In this sense, on the one hand they designate starting points – preparatory notes or scribbles – for creative production, but, on the other hand, they uncover a more primordial dimension of experience as the ever-present ground of creativity. Thus, I will once again be using the double meaning of Bal’s “navel” to illuminate the ways in which intentionality is the “starting-point and basis” of Stevens’s poetic inquiry. On the one hand his “Notes” signify creative birth and beginning -the umbilical cord has been cut, as it were - but, on the other hand, they never allow us to lose sight of the primordial relation between subject and world. This ongoing interplay between creative opening and a primordial attachment to what Merleau-Ponty calls “a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present” (*PP*, 242), results in the perpetual beginning of Steven’s “never-ending meditation[s]” (*CP*, 465).

III. The Horizon

Suspending what we, according to habit, believe to be real, the reduction brings to light the world as phenomenon, laying bare its essential structure, which has been obscured by the surface of our everyday fact-world. In other words, the roots of our usual notions about the world are uncovered. The reduction, which, as noted above, is often misread as a method leading to reductionism and introspection, does not imply abandonment of one world for another but a shift of attention, leading us away from our world of facts and back to its underlying ground. Thus, Husserl, “direct[s]

⁴⁸ Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 288.

our attention to the fact that phenomenological epoché lays open. . . *an infinite realm of being of a new kind*” (CM, 27):

. . . a dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality . . .
 an empty mist of dim indeterminacy gets studded over with intuitive possibilities, or presumptions, and only the “form” of the world as “world” is foretokened. Moreover, the zone of indeterminacy is infinite. The misty horizon that can never be completely outlined remains necessarily there. (*Ideas*, 102)

Husserl’s “misty horizon” of “indeterminacy,” based on what William James, before him, had called “fringe,” is a figure of the continuity and repetition of the world which underlie all our determinate expressions, but which we take for granted.⁴⁹ The task of phenomenology, the aim of which was to come upon a new certainty of roots,⁵⁰ is exactly “to penetrate to th[is] primal ground”(Husserl Short, 10), which is “always already there, existing in advance for us, the ‘ground’ of all praxis.”⁵¹ It is in this fundamental ground of experience that “the immediate *a priori phenomenology*, the ‘first philosophy’” (*Ideas*, 16) takes root. This brings us to the often mentioned and only reference to Husserl in Stevens’s writings:⁵²

Jean Wahl wrote to me, saying “I am just now reading the *Méditations Cartésiennes* by Husserl. Very dry. But he affirms that there is an enormous (ungeheueres) *a priori* in our minds, an inexhaustible infinity of *a priori*. He speaks of the *approach of the*

⁴⁹ Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology*, 120 and 122.

⁵⁰ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl* 53.

⁵¹ Husserl as quoted in Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 44.

⁵² See Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 23.

unapproachable.” This enormous a priori is potentially as poetic a concept as the idea of infinity of the world.

(*OP*, 194; italics mine)

Commenting on the same passage, Maurice Natanson points out: “Wahl was a careful and knowledgeable reader of Husserl,” and as “Stevens read French with ease, he should have had the time to discover phenomenology.” But whether or not the poet was familiar with phenomenological thought, Natanson stresses that his work always “hovered at its edges.”⁵³ I must agree with Natanson that the “infinity of a priori. . . the approach of the unapproachable” to which Wahl refers exists throughout Stevens’s oeuvre as the underlying condition for the creation of poetry; it is at once the “starting-point and basis” (*Ideas*, 245) for creative production. When Stevens in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” defines poetry as an “unofficial view of being” (*NA*, 41), he directs us toward the phenomenal features of this world - the infinity of the world and the intentionality of consciousness - which we take for granted, but which, nevertheless, remain the basis for our official view of being: our conventional acts and modes of discourse.⁵⁴ In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” the poet most clearly shifts the direction of our attention away from our official or “ordinary” outlook on daily life to the a priori and extra-ordinary dimension of experience: “A blank underlies the trials of device / The dominant blank, the unapproachable” (*CP*, 477). “Poetry,” he claims in the *Adagia*, “is a search for the inexplicable” (*OP*, 173).

Just as Husserl, by means of the reduction, sought access to “‘pure’ consciousness,” that is, an experience of the world before it is touched by our

⁵³ Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 8.

⁵⁴ For this insight I am indebted to J. Butler’s introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xiv-xiv.

“theorizing reflection” (*Ideas*, 114), so does Stevens, in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” seek,

The poem of pure reality, untouched
 By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
 Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
 Transfixing by being purely what it is,
 (CP, 471)

“The poem of pure reality” is the invisible but nevertheless essential half of the visible poem on the page, which has been touched by “trope or deviation”: “Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea within the poem of the words” (OP, 174)

A “pure,” pre-reflective consciousness of the world – that is to say, intentionality- is the starting point of philosophical inquiry. “True philosophy,” Merleau-Ponty tells us, “consists in relearning to look at the world,” (PP, xx). We are reminded of Woolf’s Lily Briscoe who, in her painting, yearns to capture a state of pre-objective freshness “before habits had spun themselves across the surface,” a point of pure intentionality prior to habit and reason: “it was not knowledge but unity she desired. . . nothing that could be written in any language known to men” (L, 258, 70). The previous chapter shed light on Stein’s paradoxical attempt in *Tender Buttons* to make written language emulate the pre-reflective experience of objects; to “see . . . fine substance[s] strangely” (TB, 4) and express this experience “in writing without at all necessarily using its name” (“PG,” 145). Just as Woolf and Stein are concerned with bringing into words the insubstantial shapes of pre-semantic

experience, so does Steven ponder on how “[the rational mind] finds. . . the unknown always behind and beyond the known” (*OP*, 228): “Is there a poem that never reaches words . . . ?” (*CP*, 396).

Stevens’s “poem of pure reality,” the ideal “poem that never reaches words,” is connected with what he terms “the first idea”: “If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea” (*Stevens, Letters*, 426-427). The return to this “first idea” is also pondered on throughout the first section of Stevens’s “Notes” (*CP*, 381, 382, 383, 387), which is, significantly, titled “It Must Be Abstract.”⁵⁵ The “abstract” is that dimension of experience exposed to the subject when the shift of attitude of the reduction is adopted, that is to say, when the “varnish and dirt” of preconceived notions about reality are “bracketed.” Just as Stein in *Tender Buttons* emulates a more direct experience of things before these are covered or wrapped up by conventional forms of expression and symbolises this attempt by opening boxes, uncovering cushions, and peeling fruit, so does Stevens scrape the varnish and dirt off the world to see it “with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it” (*CP*, 380). The “anti-master-man” of “Landscape with Boat” yearns for a world “without its varnish and dirt”:

He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
 Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still
 The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
 He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
 And not be touched by blue.

(*CP*, 241)

⁵⁵ I will return to several of the passages in the “Notes” that ponder on the “first idea” throughout this chapter.

Thus, in this poem-painting, Stevens's "anti-master-man" unpaints reality as it were. He too attempts an *epoché* - an abstention from conventional ways of seeing - in order to get closer to "[t]he poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation" prior to reflection. As "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" puts it, he wants to see "through the certain eye, / The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight / Of simple seeing, without reflection" (CP, 471). This approach approximates what Husserl in the *Ideas* refers to as "*Immediate 'seeing' (Sehen)*, not merely the sensory seeing of experience, but *seeing in general as primordial data consciousness of any kind whatsoever* [which] is the ultimate source of justification for all rational statements" (*Ideas*, 84). "Poetry must be irrational" (OP, 162) says Stevens in the *Adagia*: it opens onto the source of the rational.

In "A Collect of Philosophy" Stevens claims that "poetry is to a large extent an art of perception and . . . the problems of perception as they are developed in philosophy resemble similar problems in poetry" (OP, 191). Both Husserl's "first philosophy" and Stevens's "first idea" are such "problem[s] of perception." In order to perceive this "first philosophy" (within which philosophy is grounded) or to be a thinker of the "first idea" (within which poetry is grounded) one must begin by shifting the direction of one's attention from the reflective to the pre-reflective dimension of experience.⁵⁶

When Maurice Natanson claims that Stevens's work is phenomenological "without self-consciousness," he refers to this primordial aspect of Stevens's poetic inquiry, which is, or so I argue, as much part of his early as late poems. In the early poems from *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*, Stevens never allows his reader to lose

⁵⁶ "Phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method" (PP, viii), writes Merleau-Ponty. The "method" he refers to is, of course, the reduction. Likewise, any phenomenological text (and most of Stevens's poems are phenomenological) is accessible only through the reduction.

sight of the horizon of continuity within which what is given appears. Like the sea in “The paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage,” (*CP*, 5) and “Infanta Marina” (*CP*, 8) and the “Timeless Mother” in “In the Carolinas” (*CP*, 4), Stevens’s “river” in “The River of Rivers in Connecticut” (*CP*, 533) is a gesture towards this horizon, the presupposed stream of existence:

There is a great river this side of Stygia,
 Before one comes to the first black cataracts
 And trees that lack the intelligence of trees

 No shadow walks. The river is fateful,
 Like the last one. But there is no ferryman.

 Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing,

 Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore
 Of each of the senses; call it, again and again,
 The river that flows nowhere, like a sea.

 (*CP*, 533)

Thus Stevens makes us aware that “[i]ntentionality is a flow, a river which consciousness is immersed in, making it unnecessary to say that one can ‘step’ into the river; one *is* the river.”⁵⁷ Stevens’s “river” is “fateful”: it is full of our fate as it always underlies our living acts and expressions. The trees by this river “lack the intelligence of trees” - they are representative of the unintelligible and “unapproachable” horizon to which all our acts relate. Its flowing is “unnamed” as it

⁵⁷ Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 25.

always already exists before we even learn to name and impose meaning upon it.

“The meanings are our own,” writes Stevens in “Things of August,” as they create “a text that we shall be needing”: “A text of intelligent men / At the centre of the unintelligible” (CP, 493). Our objective texts try to make existence meaningful, making it flow somewhere. Stevens’s river, however, “flows nowhere” and “there is no ferryman.”

What emerges from my discussion, then, is that in examining the kinship of method between phenomenology and creative production in the poetry of Stevens, the emphasis falls less on result than on approach and attitude. Like Husserl’s “first philosophy,” Stevens’s “first idea” is rooted in the underlying “river” of experience, which can only be laid open through a change of attitude. Much like the “current” in Stein’s “A Long Dress” or the ongoing rhythm of the waves in Woolf’s *The Waves*, Stevens’s “river” refers to the Husserlian horizon of continuity - the “a priori repetition,” which is immanent to daily life and remains in advance of our acts and expressions.⁵⁸ In the words of Kevin Hart, “not only are we dealing with what is given but also with what is presupposed in order for the giving to occur.”⁵⁹ Like the phenomenologist, then, Stevens steps back into *epoché*, exposes the world in its pregivenness and the implicit relation of consciousness to it. Challenging Modern thought to reflect on the ground from which it descends, the poet starts from scratch and uncovers the intentionality of consciousness as a “starting-point and basis” for the creation of poetry. In what follows I hope to demonstrate that this radical shift of attitude sheds a clarifying light on the much discussed imagination/reality dilemma in Stevens’s work.

⁵⁸ Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 15.

⁵⁹ Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 288.

IV. The Essence of Order

It should be clear from what I have already said that there are two inter-related terms at work in our discussion: horizon and intentionality. We have seen that just as intentionality - our perceptions *of things* - manifests itself against a horizon of continuity, the perceptions of the six perceivers in Woolf's *The Waves* manifest themselves against the cyclical pattern of nature in the interludes: the rising and setting of the sun, the singing of the birds, and the continual breaking of the waves. Although Woolf's voices try to impose private orders upon a world of flux, they are, inevitably, "made of the same stuff" (*Primacy*, 163) and caught up in the same world of "flesh." Although each wants to sing a song of his/her own, they are all connected by "the singing of the real world."⁶⁰ In a similar manner, the singer in Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West" is "the maker" (*CP*, 129) of her own song and yet, at the periphery of her intentional creation, her "poem of the act of the mind" (*CP*, 240), lies a horizon of continuity, the singing of the sea:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea
 The water never formed to mind or voice,
 Like a body wholly body, fluttering
 Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
 Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
 That was not ours although we understood,

⁶⁰ I have taken this expression from one of Woolf's diary entries : "If I could catch the feeling, I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world. . ." (*Diary 3*, 260).

Inhuman of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.

The song and water were not medleyed sound

Even if what she sang was what she heard,

Since what she sang was uttered word by word.

(CP, 128)

Stevens scholars have often noted that the singing woman, who is the object of the poet's eye, recalls the singer in Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper."⁶¹ There are, however, significant differences between the two poems, a clarification of which will add to our understanding of the phenomenology of perception that Stevens's work promotes.

For the Romantic poet, poetry was an "imitatress of nature," a "reconcilement of the external with the internal."⁶² The poet's encounter with nature would open the way to the poet's mystical and at times divine moments of vision, which would transcend the common world. Although the Romantic poet would claim a close relationship with other men, he would actually stand apart from them by virtue of his higher vision. He was, on the one hand, "a man speaking to men" in that he would "thin[k] and fee[l] in the spirit of human passions," but on the other hand, he was "endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness."⁶³ Hence the Romantic moment of vision would be that of the poet and

⁶¹ Several scholars have drawn parallels between these two poems. See Louis L. Martz, "Wallace Stevens: The Skeptical Music," in *The Poem of the Mind: Essays on Poetry, English and American*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 192; Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination*, 84-85; Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 102-103.

⁶² Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 131

⁶³ Wordsworth as quoted in Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 107, 108, 102.

never really that of his reader. As David Walker has pointed out, this distance between reader and poem is echoed by a similar distance between poet and object-world. Despite his yearning for an ultimate reconciliation with the natural world, the Romantic poet “paradoxically affirms the ultimate separation implicit in his act of consciousness.”⁶⁴ Whereas the poet in “The Solitary Reaper” bears the “music” of the reaper’s song in his “heart” “[l]ong after it was heard no more,” thus expressing a “powerful. . . emotion recollected in tranquillity” and stressing a gap between the poet and the scene that his inner eye beholds,⁶⁵ Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West” casts light on the immediacy of perceptual experience. From what has been said so far, it should be clear that the phenomenological reduction, apart from being a “research method,” is a specific shift of attention that must be practised by the reader of a phenomenological text. In what follows, I indicate that Stevens, by virtue of a phenomenological shift of attitude, rejects the divine aspect of Romantic poetry, offers a closer relation between seer and seen, poet and singer, reader and text, thus “stat[ing] the space,” in Beckett’s terminology, that the Romantics were incapable of stating.

In Stevens’s song about a song, his poem about poetry, a woman “sing[s] *beyond* the genius of the sea,” implying a distance between her song and the ever-present world (the sea), which is a “genius,” that is to say, the original ground of her creation. Although the “empty” and “fluttering” “body” of the sea “[m]ade *constant* cry, caused *constantly* a cry” and is thus the “constant” occasion for the singer’s creative notes, its singing stands apart from her human song: “The song and water were not medleyed sound.” Although the woman sings about her experience of the

⁶⁴ David Walker, *The Transparent Lyric: Reading and Meaning in the Poetry of Stevens and Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 7.

⁶⁵ Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works*, 192.

world, she can never fully grasp this experience in words. “The water never form[s] to mind or voice” because the meaning of her song relies on the virtues of a language, of an “utter[ing] word by word,” that is always, already later than her immediate intentional experience of the world. As Husserl claims in the *Ideas*: “we do not *see* what we are actually experiencing” (*Ideas*, 459), and as Stevens puts it in “A Collect of Philosophy”:

According to the traditional views of sensory perception, we do not see the world immediately but only as a result of a process of seeing and after the completion of that process, that is to say, we never see the world except the moment after. Thus we are constantly observing the past. Here is an idea, not the result of poetic thinking and entirely without poetic intention, which instantly changes the face of the world. (*OP*, 190)

Recalling Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *écart*, the temporal “distantiation” between the primacy of perception and articulation, Stevens’s singer at Key West is “observing the past,” reflecting on the world and singing a song that cannot but be “beyond” (later than) the “genius” of the sea, which is, nevertheless, the original ground of her song. Thus, like Woolf and Stein, Stevens opens onto the gap between pre-reflective and reflective experience, between the immediate “act of the mind” of intentional experience and “the moment after” of the fully thought and verbalised expression.

In this sense, Stevens entitles one of the poems from *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) “What We See is What We Think” (*CP*, 259) and claims elsewhere that “The tongue is an eye” (*OP*, 167), suggesting that our everyday reality, based on our own reason and “tongue” is, in fact, “A little different from reality” (*CP*, 344). This daily

reality is what “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” calls “Reality as a thing seen by the mind, // Not that which is but that which is apprehended” (*CP*, 468). Hence the paradox of “This Solitude of Cataracts”: “There was so much that was real that was not real at all” (*CP*, 424).

Stevens’s singer offers an interesting parallel to a passage from Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). In the chapter significantly called “Proteus” – a reference to the shape-shifting God of the sea who stands for the stream of existence – Stephen Dedalus walks along the sea-shore between the fixed and the unfixed, between definite and indefinite. Having broken his glasses the day before, he is essentially short-sighted, tests the “reality” of his inner eye - “Shut your eyes and see” - and realises that it is the incessant activity of perceptual experience that shapes objective reality.⁶⁶

The singer at Key West, then, sings the world as “[n]ot that which is but that which is apprehended.” Recalling the earlier *Harmonium* poem “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” in which the sea’s “golden ointment” and “blowing hymns” (*CP*, 65) rain out of the speaker’s mind and are made by his ears, respectively, the singer herself becomes “the compass of that sea” (*CP*, 65):

It was her own voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

⁶⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 37.

It may be that in all her phrases stirred
 The grinding water and the gasping wind
 But it was she and not the sea we heard.

(CP, 129)

While the two onlookers, the poet and his friend Ramon Fernandez (CP, 130), can only fully grasp the singer's song as this is "uttered word by word" in a language that they are familiar with, they are, nevertheless, aware that "[t]he grinding water and the gasping wind" "sti[r]" within the song. Just as consciousness is always *of* something, the woman can only sing if she has something to sing *of*. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in *Phenomenology of Perception*: "reflection does not grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present" (PP, 242). Although the woman herself does not perceive it, the meaning of her song presupposes and is dependent on "the meaningless plungings of water and the wind" (CP, 129), "meaningless" referring to the fact that it is not of human meaning. The human meaning of her song signifies inasmuch as it opens onto a more original "wild meaning" (VI, 155) inhabiting it. The crying sea is "not a mask [and] No more was she" (CP, 128): both sea and singer – the singer of "the real world" and the singer of "the artificial world" (CP, 252) - are equally real and equally important parts of the whole meaning of the song.

"Muddy Centre"

The singer at Key West thus shapes her song out of the "meaningless" sea (CP, 129): her singing adds what the "Notes" calls "sweeping meaning" (CP, 384) to its

“fluttering” sounds. Hence critics have stressed that the point of the poem’s title is the mind’s “idea of order” imposed upon the chaos of reality, implying both a struggle between and separation of mind and world. Helen Vendler claims that “Stevens decides or appears to decide, that the human voice, given its powerful effects, is of a greater order of magnitude than the voice of the ocean; he consequently must decide how to represent the greater magnitude of the singer’s power.”⁶⁷ Denis Donoghue, too, emphasises the power of the singer’s voice, arguing that the woman “imposes upon reality her own imagination, until reality is taken up into her song and there is nothing but the song.”⁶⁸ The polarisation of the human and the natural is also brought into focus by Thomas J. Hines, who claims that “the order that is suggested to the observer by the woman’s song is not part of or in unison with the surrounding reality represented by the sea. In fact, the poem describes the process of the ordering imagination in terms that continually stress the difference between the idea (the created song) and the sea (physical reality).”⁶⁹ For Joseph N. Riddell, however, the “idea of order” is the belated “realized moment of order” of the onlooking poet: “The poet receives the impression of a drama, and translates the song into the sound of words, which become at once a projection of and comment on experience. (Note that the poem is three removes from the girl’s sense of order; it has become an ‘idea.’)”⁷⁰ But when considering that Stevens in the “Notes” tells us “Never [to] suppose an inventing mind as source / Of this *idea*” (*CP*, 381; italics mine) and that “[t]he first idea was not to shape the clouds / In imitation. The clouds

⁶⁷ Helen Vendler, *Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 68.

⁶⁸ Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry* (London: Faber, 1965), 190.

⁶⁹ Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 51.

⁷⁰ Riddell, *The Clairvoyant Eye*, 118.

preceded us” (*CP*, 383), the “idea of order” seems to be of neither the “inventing” singer, “shap[ing]” the world “[i]n imitation,” nor of the poet. But what, then, is it of? Once again Stevens’s “Notes” provides an answer:

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.

There was a myth before the myth began,

Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place

That is not our own, and, much more, not ourselves

And hard it is in spite of blazoned days

We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues

The air is not a mirror but a bare board,

(*CP*, 384)

Thus, over against Vendler’s emphasis on “the greater order of magnitude” of the human voice, it seems to me that Stevens’s singer is but a “mimic” and “the outer voice of sky / And cloud” (*CP*, 129) are her “pedagogues.” Just as the phenomenological “horizon” or Stevens’s “infinity of the world” is “the background from which all acts stand out” (*PP*, xi), the sea and clouds constitute the background from which the singer’s song “springs” (*CP*, 383).

We describe the world to make it our own, but as we “live in a place / That is not our own” (*CP*, 383), this is merely “description without place. It is a sense // To which we refer experience” (*CP*, 343), hence “[t]he first idea, is not [the singer’s] own” (*CP*, 383).

“[B]efore we breathed,” before we could even think and sing of the world, “[t]here was a muddy centre.” Stevens suggests that our ability to speak of and “shape the clouds /In imitation” has germinated from this “muddy centre”, which, much like Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “*écart*,” is “a principle of differentiation” existing within being.⁷¹ “Meaning is invisible,” Merleau-Ponty told us, “but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework” (VI, 215). Just as our visible perceptions are conditioned by a pre-existing but unperceived ground or “horizon,” our clear expressions are conditioned by a “core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape” (PP, xv). Our ability to perceive, differentiate objects, and impose order upon the world, then, rests on a not yet differentiated “muddiness” within being itself. It is from this same muddiness that Stevens’s “first idea” arises.⁷²

In “On Poetic Truth,” Stevens claims: “the essence in art is insight of a special kind into reality” (OP, 238). This insight reveals that “[w]e live in concepts of the imagination *before* the reason has established them. . . reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination” (NA, 154; italics mine). Significantly, “Phenomenology is the study of essences,” and “[l]ooking for the world’s essence,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “. . . is looking for what it is as a fact for us, *before* any thematization” (PP, vii, xv; italics mine).⁷³ The usually invisible and yet essential

⁷¹ The term “principle of differentiation” is Jerrold Seigel’s, “A Unique way of Existing,” 475.

⁷² For the pattern of thought in this passage I am indebted to David Lavery, “The More Than Rational Distortion in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 8 (1983): 1-7.

⁷³ Paul Kenneth Naylor uses Erazim’s Kohak’s clarifying and demystifying explanation of “essence” in his article on Husserl and Stevens. Kohak writes: “We usually think of ‘essence’ as a hidden inner core, which has to be abstracted by an operation of the active intellect, by a mystical intuition. . . By contrast, ‘Wesen,’ derived from the old Germanic verb for ‘to be,’ suggests something directly presented in experience.” See Naylor, “The Idea of It,” 50.

“muddy centre” around which our rational thoughts and thematisations take shape can only be revealed to the perceiver when he/she is “ignorant” of that world: “Ignorance is one of the sources of poetry” (*OP*, 173). Thus Stevens challenges us in the “Notes”: “You must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it” (*CP*, 380). A “thinker of the first idea,” then, is someone who finds creative inspiration from the already “[v]enerable and articulate and complete” (*CP*, 383) “muddy centre” that our “artificial world” (*CP*, 252) has lost sight of.

When Leonard and Wharton in *The Fluent Mundo* argue that “Stevens is drawn less to the ‘essence of things’ than to a fictionality,”⁷⁴ they stress that “Stevens returns, not with a cognitive but with a sensuous vision, to the ‘first idea’ of ‘Notes’ – the idea of ‘this invented world, / The inconceivable idea of the sun’ (*CP*, 380),” which, in their view, is “foreign to” Husserl’s phenomenological study of essences.⁷⁵ What Leonard and Wharton fail to note, however, is that a vision of the world “in the idea of it,” in Stevens’s terms, is tantamount to a vision of its “essence.” Consider Husserl’s *Ideas*:

At first “essence” indicated that which in the intimate self-being of an individual discloses to us “what” it is. But every such what can be “set out as Idea”. Empirical or individual intuition can be transformed into *essential insight* (ideation) – a possibility which is itself not to be understood as empirical but as essential possibility. The object of such insight is then the corresponding *pure* essence or eidos.

⁷⁴ Leonard and Wharton, *The Fluent Mundo*, 90.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 92 and 90.

On quite similar lines essential intuition is the consciousness of something of an “object,”...(*Ideas*, 54-55)⁷⁶

The “essence” of a thing, “disclos[ing] to us ‘what’ it is,” recalls “The scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing” that Stephen Dedalus refers to in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*⁷⁷ - a whatness that Stevens ponders on in the essay “On Poetic Truth”: “there is a unity rooted in the individuality of objects and discovered in a different way from the apprehension of rational connections” (*OP*, 237). “[P]ure essence or *eidos*” (*idea*) is what is left of the individual object after its “rational connections” - its “varnish and dirt” - have been “bracketed.” Thus, the poet shifts the direction of our attention from fact to essence, from sight to insight: “the essence in art is insight of a special kind into reality” (*OP*, 238).

This insight is not imposed upon the world, that is, added to it by an independent imagination; rather, it is taken from within the “muddy centre” of this world and is thus part of it: “The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res and not about it. / The poet speaks the poem as it is, . . . He speaks / By sight and insight as they are” (*CP*, 473). As pointed out in the previous chapter, the essence or “idea” of an object is not detached from but always “corresponding” (*Ideas*, 55) with the factual object in the world: it is the perceiver’s prepositional consciousness *of* this object and thus exists within it: “Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea within the poem of the words” (*OP*, 174). Thus, using Stein’s description of Cézanne’s mode of composition, “[e]ach part is as important as the whole.” The visible and the invisible, fact and idea/essence, the reality of what is “apprehended” and the “poem of pure reality” are interdependent and equally important parts of what the “Notes”

⁷⁶ For noting this passage in particular, I am indebted to Naylor, who draws on it in “The Idea of It,” 44-55.

⁷⁷ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 70.

calls “an *intrinsic* couple” (*CP*, 392; italics mine), a couple that already exists within being. “Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another”:

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
 A passion that we feel, not understand.
 Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple
 And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
 That walk away as one in the greenest body.

(*CP*, 392).

As noted above, Leonard and Wharton claim that Stevens’s return to “the idea of “this *invented* world, / The inconceivable idea of the sun” (*CP*, 380; italics mine) is a “sensuous vision” different from the phenomenological study of essences. Paul Kenneth Naylor, however, offers an entirely different reading and suggests that a clue to the meaning of Stevens’s “idea” and its equivalence with phenomenological “essence” lies in the poet’s use of the word “invention”:⁷⁸

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
 Of this invention, this invented world,
 The inconceivable idea of the sun.

(*CP*, 380)

As Naylor also suggests - although he uses the translation “to come upon” or “to disclose”⁷⁹ - the word “invention” refers not to the art of making up but should be understood in terms of the Latin “*invenire*,” which means to find, manage to get, or

⁷⁸ Naylor, “The Idea of It,” 51.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

discover.⁸⁰ When Stevens in the “Notes” claims that man “imposes order as he thinks of them,” “builds capitols,” and “establishes statues of reasonable men” (*CP*, 403), he shakes his head and stresses,

But to impose is not
 To discover. To discover an order as of
 A season, to discover summer and know it,

 To discover winter and know it well, to find,
 Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
 Out of nothing to have come upon major weather,

 It is possible, possible, possible. It must
 Be possible.
 (*CP*, 403-404)

“[T]o impose is not / To discover”: imposing order upon the world is *not* the same as discovering an order existing within it, an “intrinsic” order. Stevens’s point here is in agreement with Husserl’s critique of Modern man’s naive acceptance of preconceptions and theoretical notions, which would assert an objective, ready-made reality. Likewise, the poet’s emphasis on discovering an order hidden within our artificial, imposed orders is tantamount to Husserl’s insistence on getting back to the original ground from which objectivity arises. What emerges from our discussion, then, is that “The Idea of Order at Key West” implies not a human idea of order imposed upon the world by an independent mind, but refers to an immanent essence

⁸⁰ *The Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 74.

(eidos) of order, a permanently present “order as of /A season” (*CP*, 403) - something wholly other that is discovered by the two onlookers:

Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
 It was the spirit that we sought and knew
 That we should ask this as often as she sang.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
 That rose, or even colored by many waves;
 If it was only the outer voice of sky
 And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
 However clear, it would have been deep air, a summer sound
 Repeated in a summer without end
 And sound alone. *But it was more than that,*
 More even than her voice and ours, among
 The meaningless plungings of water and the wind.

(*CP*, 129; italics mine)

“But *it was more than that*” (italics mine). Recalling the repeated “it” in Woolf’s *The Waves* and “A Haunted House,” “it”, the essential “spirit,” is “more” than “sound alone” as it is “‘already there’ before reflection begins” (Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, vii.), before our ability to perceive the sound of it, reflect on and sing about it. We have seen that Stevens distinguishes between our “apprehended” reality of the “moment after” -“a thing seen by the mind, // Not that which is but that which is apprehended” (*CP*, 468)) - and a more “real” reality of immediate sense perception. For this poet, “Reality is the beginning not the end” (*CP*, 469); “Reality is the *spirit’s* true centre” (*OP*, 176; italics mine). In this manner, the “spirit” (*CP*, 129) that the on-looking

poets seek is that pre-verbal “muddy centre,” which precedes our “apprehended” version of the real, and which is the source of the poet’s “first idea.”

What finally emerges from my discussion, then, is that “The Idea of Order at Key West” speaks not of a human order imposed upon the world but shifts our attention to the usually unseen “*essence* of order” – an “essence” which is presupposed for the singer’s human song to occur. The “[b]lessed rage for order” that the on-looking poet refers to in the poem’s final stanza stands in contrast with the essence of order that the poem celebrates:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
 The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
 And of ourselves and of our origins,
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds
 (*CP*, 130)

“The maker’s rage to order words of the sea” (*CP*, 130) refers to man’s “rage” for objective order and meaning, recalling the “lights in the fishing boats” (*CP*, 130), which, in the previous stanza, “mastered the night and portioned out the sea” (*CP*, 130). The “words of the sea, / . . . of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred” (*CP*, 130), however, are not just of the sea, the poet points out, but also “of ourselves and of our origins” (*CP*, 130), as they, ironically, are the original foundation (the presupposition) for this “rage.” Stevens’s raging maker brings us back to what Husserl called the “sickness” of Modern man (*Crisis I*, 153) - a “sickness” of the spirit due to man’s separation from the ultimate source of meaning and order: the “first idea.”

Gigantic "Giant"

The "first idea" belongs to what Stevens in the "Notes" calls "the giant" (*CP*, 386) and nevertheless his singer at Key West sings because "[i]t feels good as it is without the giant, / A thinker of the first idea" (*CP*, 386). So, what, then, does Stevens mean by this "giant"? Rajeev S. Parke has argued that "the giant may be a reflection of an aspiration within us, but it is not among Stevens's more successful figurations: partly because it is empty of figurative content, and partly because the evocation of this figure sets up no kind of resonance of meaning or significance within the poem."⁸¹ In contrast to Parke's claim, I do think that Stevens's repeated use of the giant spins a web of significations, which "interrelat[e] and interac[t]" (*OP*, 163) with his notions of the "infinity of the world" and the "muddy centre."

In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the poet's "few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet-" (*CP*, 465), referring to the "perpetual beginning" of his poetic inquiry, will always be "part of the never-ending meditation, / Part of the question that is the giant himself" (*CP*, 465), and "A Primitive Like an Orb" speaks of "[a] giant, on the horizon, glistening" (*CP*, 442). Just as Stein in *Tender Buttons* describes her "Orange" by what it is not, turning actuality into possibility, fact into essence, Stevens's "pineapple" in "Poem written at Morning" is "a leather fruit, / A fruit for pewter, thorned and palmed and blue" (*CP*, 219). "The truth must be," Stevens concludes in this short poem, "That you do not see, you experience, you feel, / That the buxom eye brings merely its element / To the total thing, a shapeless

⁸¹ Rajeev S. Parke, *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 150.

giant forced /Upward.” The “shapeless giant” (*CP*, 219) and the “giant on the horizon, glistening” (*CP*, 442) are figures for the insubstantial shapes of pre-semantic experience, which the “buxom eye” fixes in poetic trope. Stevens’s “giant” reminds us of the “gigantic conversation” (*Diary 3*, 285) that was to become Woolf’s *The Waves*. The six voices in this book “melt into each other with phrases . . . are edged with mist. . . [and] make an unsubstantial territory” (*W*, 14). Like the Husserlian “misty horizon,” Stevens’s idea of the “giant” is “gigantic” as well as “unsubstantial”: it can never be fully expressed in words and yet remains the foundation of all reasoning and expression. “[I]t is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy” (*OP*, 118), Stevens writes in his 1955 poem “Of Mere Being” and guides our attention to the same “queer region” from which Woolf’s “fin . . . passing far out” (*Diary 3*, 239; 191) - her primary impulse to write - stems.

In “Of Mere Being,” a “palm at the end of the mind” is situated “Beyond the last thought [and] rises / In the bronze distance” (*OP*, 117). The palm stands “on the edge of space” and in it “A gold-feathered bird / Sings. . . without human meaning, / without human feeling, a foreign song,” recalling the “meaningless” singing of the sea in “The Idea of Order at Key West.” This bird too is “singing of the real world,” in the words of Woolf: its song is prior to “human meaning.” Just as the “giant on the horizon [is] glistening” (*CP*, 442), the bird’s “feathers shine” “in the bronze distance,” at the edge of visibility from which the primary impulse to create arises. Offering a pun on the famous opening stanza from Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence”: “Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour,”⁸² Stevens’s “*palm* at the end of the mind / Beyond the last thought” also refers to the palm of the

⁸² The entire stanza reads: “O see a world in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour.” William Blake, *The Poetical Works of William Blake* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891), 180.

writer's hand, where the pen, translating the bird's "foreign song" into reason, rests. The "bird" whose "fire-fangled feathers dangle down" could be a figure for the sun, that "bird of paradise, reborn each century, created in flames to perish in flames" that is Hans Christian Andersen's illustration of "The Bird Phoenix."⁸³ We recall how the speaker of the "Notes" tells us to perceive "[t]he inconceivable idea of the sun (CP, 380) after having suspended the "varnish and dirt" imposed upon the world: "How clean the sun when seen in its idea, / Washed in its remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images" (CP, 381). There is no poetry without first seeing the world "in its idea" and "[f]or that the poet is always in the sun" (CP, 407). In this sense, the "fire-fangled" "bird" singing in the "palm at the end of the mind" symbolises the perpetual creation and re-creation of poetry itself, which is always interlinked with the rising and setting sun, marking the perpetual re-birth of the world: "the never-ending meditation, / . . .that is the giant himself" (CP, 465).

"Ecstatic Identities"

To be of *mere* being is to be of *bare* being, a being that belongs to the world of pure sense prior to the "varnish and dirt" that our reason has imposed upon it. This understanding of the word "mere" sheds new light on Stevens's singer at Key West, to whom the sea is "*merely* a place by which she walked to sing" (CP, 129; italics mine): it is the bare being from which her song originates and onto which it writes

⁸³ Hans Christian Andersen, *The Penguin Complete Fairy Tales and Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*, trans. Erik Christian Haugaard (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1997), 375. One might also argue that Stevens's 1955 poem alludes to Yeats's 1930 poem "Byzantium," which gives us another image of the Bird Phoenix: "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork, / Planted on the star-lit golden bough." Yeats's bird is also "Dying into a dance, / An agony of trance, / An agony of flame. . ." See William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, ed. Timothy Webb (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 173.

itself. This barrenness recalls “the same bare place” (*CP*, 10) which is the home of Stevens’s “Snow Man.” “The Snow Man,” an early version of the “ignorant man” (*CP*, 380) that Stevens urges us to become in the “Notes,” is emblematic of the “first idea”: that creative point of eternal return when the world is seen clearly in “its essential barrenness” (*CP*, 373). Stevens’s description of creative production by means of winter imagery recalls Woolf’s claim in “On Being Ill” that illness gives access to “the snowfield of the mind” (*CD*, 48), a fresh and thus “colder” starting-point for creativity: “There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds’ feet is unknown.” (*CD*, 46). In an 1896 conversation with Joachim Gasquet, Paul Cézanne characterises aesthetic experience by a similar mutuality of physical landscape and consciousness:

The landscape becomes reflective, human, and thinks itself through me. I make it an object, let it project itself and endure within my painting . . . I become the subjective consciousness of the landscape, and my painting becomes its objective consciousness.⁸⁴

It is this reciprocity of “subjective” and “objective” consciousnesses that Stevens has in mind in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet”: “The mind of the poet describes itself as constantly in his poems as the mind of the sculptor describes itself in his forms, or as the mind of Cézanne described itself in his ‘psychological landscapes’” (*NA*, 46).⁸⁵ Stevens, too, displays the cycle of creativity as a world with seasons and

⁸⁴ Cézanne as quoted in Medina, *Cézanne and Modernism*, 2.

⁸⁵ “What we have under observation,” in these “psychological landscapes,” Stevens points out, “is the creative process, the personality of the poet, his individuality, as an element in the creative process; and by process of the personality of the poet we mean. . . the incidence of the nervous sensitivity of the poet in the act of creating the poem . . .” (*NA*, 48).

cycles of lives. The poet “live[s] in the centre of a physical poetry” (*NA*, 65).⁸⁶ Thus, in “The Snow Man,” the winter landscape and the central consciousness exist mutually and reciprocally: “One must have a mind of winter / To regard the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow” (*CP*, 9). Still “untouched/ By trope or deviation” (*CP*, 471), like Stevens’s “poem of pure reality,” the “Snow Man,” who “nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (*CP*, 10), “antedates all standpoints” (Husserl, *Ideas*, 78), re-articulating the world from a “Nothing,” which is not an end but anticipates the preliminary “cold” referred to in “An Ordinary Evening In New Haven.” In this poem, too, the landscape is “psychological,” as the “exterior [is] made / Interior,” (*CP*, 481),

With the inhalation of original cold
 And of original earliness. Yet the sense
 Of cold and earliness is a daily sense,

 Not the predicate of a bright origin.
 Creation is not renewed by images
 Of lone wanderers. To re-create, to use

 The cold and earliness and bright origin
 Is to search . . .

 (*CP*, 481)

“The sense / Of cold and earliness” “is a daily sense”: it belongs to the “[c]reation” and “re-creation” of the poet’s “search,” that “search for the inexplicable” (*OP*, 173),

⁸⁶ For a recent examination of the importance of the seasons in Stevens’s work see Lensing, *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*.

which remains the poet's task: "A poem need not have meaning and like most things in nature often does not have" (OP, 176).

The interdependence of internal and external seasons recalls the nineteenth century Transcendentalists, the fathers of the "deep spring" of American optimism in the context of whom Stevens is often read.⁸⁷ For Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman society was a barrier to "Self-Reliance."⁸⁸ Man's spiritual awakening could only take place within the cyclical patterns of the natural world outside of civilisation. By moving nature inside the imagination, the poet could "front only the essential facts of life," "[d]irect [his] eye right inward," find harmony within the self and "rise to a higher and more ethereal life."⁸⁹ In direct opposition to this, however, Stevens's poetry is essentially non-spiritual. The poet's aim is "to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilisation" (NA, 116), thus indicating that poem and self are "parts of a world."⁹⁰ As it is part of a world that is always becoming, poetry is a living act of creation which "Must Change" (CP, 389)⁹¹: it "has to be living, to learn the speech of the place. / It has to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time" (CP, 240). Just as phenomenology exposes intentional consciousness as the ground of objectivity and factuality, so does Stevens suggest that the "first idea" is the source of the meaning of civilisation.

⁸⁷ See for instance Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*; J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 390-422.

⁸⁸ See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Best of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New York: D. van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1941), 119-146.

⁸⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), 81, 285, 37.

⁹⁰ *Parts of a World* (1942) is the title of Stevens's fourth collection of poetry.

⁹¹ "It Must Change," is the title of the second part of Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

The metamorphosis of winter landscape and man in "The Snow Man" anticipates what Stevens in his later poem "Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" speaks of as "Ecstatic identities /Between one's self and the weather and the things /Of the weather. . ." (*CP*, 258). Once more this recalls Cézanne:

As for me, I want to be a child and I delight in seeing, hearing, breathing, in being an *ecstatic* sensibility which seeks to express itself on canvas. . . I no more imitated Pissaro and Monet than I did the masters in the Louvre. I tried to produce work which was my own, work which was sincere, naïve. . . Yes I am the primitive of a new art. (italics mine)⁹²

In its etymology, the Greek "ecstasy" refers to a "standing outside,"⁹³ that is to say, a standing outside of one's conventional, "static" attitude to daily life, as it were. By "bracketing" the habitual schemata of poetry and painting, Stevens and Cézanne challenge us to become "an ignorant man" or "the primitive of a new art," respectively. We remember that Husserl's method of "bracketing" refers not to a rejection of the world, followed by isolation of the subject, but to a change of attitude. In a similar manner, Stevens and Cézanne insist that the perceiving subject must step out of the taken for granted world in order to see it clearly and thus regain it. Significantly, one of Stevens's letters points out that the poem "The Plain Sense of Things" is "an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand and enjoy it" (*Stevens, Letters*, 464). The "plain sense of things" - another term for the epochal barrenness of the "first idea" - is highlighted but only to stress that our objective "apprehended" reality is grounded in pre-reflective

⁹² Cézanne, *Cézanne By Himself*, 291-92.

⁹³ *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 114.

(“ignorant”) intentionality. Stevens’s work, then, promotes the interdependence between essential subjective experience and objectivity; it stresses the “Ecstatic identities / Between one’s self and the weather.”

We have already seen that phenomenological reduction lays open Husserl’s “misty horizon”. In a further elaboration of the Husserlian “horizon,” Martin Heidegger says,

The concept “horizon” in the vulgar sense presupposes precisely what we are designating as the ecstatic horizon. There would not be something like a horizon for us if there were not an ecstatic being-open-for . . . ⁹⁴

In this sense, moments of “Ecstatic Identities/ Between one’s self and the weather” are moments of openness to the horizon, which underlies all our objective acts and expressions.

Working back from this, Stevens’s “Snow Man,” who “beholds / Nothing that is not there” is not as Regueiro reads it, “blinded to both the inner and outer worlds,”⁹⁵ but suggests such an “ecstatic” openness to the world. He is open to everything and can see clearly the relationship between the pre-reflective and the reflective, internal and external realities, *because* he is filled with nothing: he “beholds / Nothing” only to see all; he is “the self that opens to the world and opens the world itself.”⁹⁶

Whereas Woolf terms such moments of ecstatic openness “moments of being,” Stevens refers to them as “crystallisations of freshness” (*NA*, 66) as they

⁹⁴ Martin Heidegger as quoted in David Farrell Krell, *Intimations of Mortality: Time, Truth, and Finitude in Heidegger’s Thinking of Being* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 68.

⁹⁵ Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination*, 148.

⁹⁶ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 42.

crystallise what is both visible and invisible, objective and subjective. Consider the “Notes”:

It must be visible or invisible,

Invisible or visible or both:

A seeing and unseeing in the eye

The weather and the giant of the weather,

Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:

An abstraction blooded, as man by thought.

(*CP*, 385)

Recalling Merleau-Ponty’s “invisible inner framework” (*VI*, 215-216) on which visibility rests, in Stevens’s creative landscape the visible and the invisible, like the factual and the essential, are equally important parts of “an intrinsic couple” (*CP*, 392). The visible world - “the weather” - rests on “the giant of the weather,” the invisible but ever-present ground of continuity, which Stevens, in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” describes as the “never-ending meditation, / . . .that is the giant himself” (*CP*, 465). Like the man in “Contrary Theses(II)”, in his poetry Stevens again and again “walk[s] toward / An abstract, of which the sun, the dog, the boy, / Were contours“ (*CP*, 270), and brings into focus the invisible inner framework of our world’s visible contour:

The less legible meaning of sound, the little reds

Not often realised, the lighter words

In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men

Behind the outer shields, the sheet of music

In the strokes of thunder . . .

(*CP*, 488)

Standing at once inside and outside his/her usual position, open to both “contour” and “abstract,” objective fact-world and subjective experience, the “ecstatic” subject “sees” and “unsees” the world “[b]y sight and insight as they are” (*CP*, 473), hence the visible world is exposed as suddenly strange and standing out, as

. . . when we look at the sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry . . . (*NA*, 65-66)

Stevens’s words recall Stein’s description of Picasso: “No one had ever tried to express things seen as one knows them but as they are when one sees them without remembering having looked at them” (*Picasso*, 15) and Woolf’s Bernard, who, upon Percival’s death, sees the world with the eyes of a child, “as on the first day of creation” (*W*, 220). Thus, regaining sight of the “wonder in the face of the world,” which Merleau-Ponty has called “the best formulation of the reduction” (*PP*, xiii), the “ecstatic” subject clearly sees his/her placement within both the visible and the invisible, the factual and the essential dimensions of experience. Once again we are presented with the paradox of perceptual experience – the paradox of the “eye/I” - that phenomenology brings to light: “How is it that I am both a subject experiencing the world and an object within the world?”⁹⁷

This paradox sheds a clarifying light on our discussion of “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Although Stevens’s singer does not perceive that the meaning of her song presupposes “the meaningless plungings” (*CP*, 129) of the sea, referring to a

⁹⁷ Kingswell, “Husserl’s Sense of Wonder,” 99.

primordial “wild meaning” from which our clear expressions arise, the on-looking poet and his friend have a clearer view. They realise that singer and song are, as Stevens puts it in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” “amassed in a total double-thing” (*CP*, 472), “double” because the human meaning of the song is both different from and an integral part of the “meaningless” stream of existence (the sea). The singer’s song is at once distinguished from and defined by its context. This, we recall, is also “Cézanne’s enigma”: “Man absent from but entirely within the landscape.”⁹⁸

Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of this enigma adds another element to Stevens’s “double-thing”: “The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen” (“Eye,” 162). The philosopher’s “idea that every perception is doubled with counterperception . . . , is an act with two faces.” (*VI*, 264), laying bare the reversibility and reciprocity of “flesh” between our “passive/active (visible-seeing)” (*VI*, 271) bodies, is clearly presented in the way in which Stevens has framed “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The woman thinks she sings for herself but is, in fact, seen and heard by the two onlookers. In turn, all three of them are seen/read by us. Perception, in other words, both frames and is framed. The phenomenological shift of attitude employed in Stevens’s poem, then, emphasises the immediacy of perceptual experience and “states the space” between seer and seen, poet and object-world, reader and text.

⁹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 169.

Grasping the "Jar" on the Nerves.

The paradox of perceptual experience laid open through the reduction also sheds new light on Stevens's early *Harmonium* poem "Anecdote of the Jar." Patricia Rae has pointed out that Stevens's "epochal spaces" are enclosed "shelters," "ironically circumscribed spaces - jars, crystals, and mirrors, and huts and houses - or. . . spaces midway between the earth and the sky," which "stress the lack of interaction between phenomenologically reduced experience and the outer world."⁹⁹ However, bearing in mind that the phenomenological "reduction," ironically enough, is not a method leading to reductionism or introspection, denying interaction with the outer world, but to a clearer insight into the depth of our involvement with the world, it seems more reasonable to suggest that Stevens's "Anecdote," like "The Idea of Order at Key West," does not "stress the lack of interaction" between inner and outer worlds, but is what Stevens in *Opus Posthumous* calls "a statement of a relation between man and world" (*OP*, 172). In the first stanza of the "Anecdote," the jar - a figure of the poet's intentional creation, another "poem of the act of the mind" (*CP*, 240) - is placed "upon a hill" "in Tennessee" and "mak[es] the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill" (*CP*, 76). The fact that the "wilderness" is "slovenly," that is to say, careless or dirty, recalls "the varnish and dirt of generations" that Stevens suggests should be taken "off a picture" to see it in its intentional "first idea" (*Stevens, Letters*, 426-27). Step by step, the "Anecdote" too incorporates this movement of reduction. In the next stanza we are told that "[t]he wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild," while the jar remains "upon the ground / And tall and of a port in air" (*CP*, 76), that is to say of an *opening* "in air".

⁹⁹ Rae, *The Practical Muse*, 165, 155.

What Stevens's poem suggests is that the "wilderness" of preconceived knowledge and uncritical objectivity, which has grown for "generations," covering up the original, bare ground beneath, is put out of play, and intentionality is opened up. Much like "The Snow Man", the jar "opens to the world and opens the world itself."¹⁰⁰ What is brought into focus, then, is not the "circumscribed spac[e]" of the jar, to use Rae's words, denying interaction with the ground on which it is placed, but the interchange between the essentially *open* jar and this ground.¹⁰¹ "There is," as Stevens writes in a letter, "a constant reference from the abstract to the real, to and fro" (*Stevens, Letters*, 434). Consider the final stanza of the "Anecdote":

It took dominion everywhere
 The jar was gray and bare
 It did not give of bird and bush,
 Like nothing else in Tennessee.
 (CP, 76)

In yet another reading of Stevens's poem, Helen Reguiero argues that "the jar in Tennessee imposes itself on reality. . . It draws reality into its ordered realm. . . But unlike everything else in Tennessee, it cannot bring the world into being, it cannot 'give of bird and bush.'"¹⁰² On the basis of my discussion throughout this chapter, I want to stress an entirely different aspect of the poem and suggest that Stevens's open "jar," like "The Snow Man," "behold[ing]/ Nothing" only to see all, lays "bare" that "gray" and "muddy" ground where all forms of creation, including the "giv[ing] of bird and bush" (CP, 76), take root. Stevens's jar is both "gray and bare" (CP, 76),

¹⁰⁰ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 42.

¹⁰¹ Rae, *The Practical Muse*, 155

¹⁰² Reguiero, *The Limits of Imagination*, 165.

anticipating the “gray particular of man’s life, / The stone from which he rises” (*CP*, 528), which Stevens speaks of in the late poem “The Rock.” By opening up the bare ground from which man’s acts and creations rise, Stevens gets back to the “thing itself,” in Husserl’s words. The “thing itself,” we have observed, is not a thing but a relation. Once again, then, the poet steps back into *epoché*, exposes the world in its pregivenness and stresses the implicit relation of consciousness to it. Stevens’s “jar,” a figure for the poet’s intentional creation,” “t[akes] dominion everywhere” because it, like consciousness itself, belongs to the world. It is in implicit relation to the “gray particular” which always, already underlies everything.

What I am claiming, then, is that Stevens’s jar is representative of “the thing itself.” Much like Woolf’s Lily Briscoe, the poet attempts to “get hold of. . . that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything” (*L*, 260).¹⁰³ Significantly, the “nerves” in glass jars signify at once the separation and the joining of two halves, the idea of which sits well with both the paradox of Stevens’s “total double thing” and what I have suggested is the double meaning of Bal’s navel metaphor - that starting point for creative birth, which both points away from and back to the pre-reflective dimension of experience. Once again Stevens challenges us to reflect on this pre-reflective and plain ground from which the act of creation arises. In the words of Simon Critchley, Stevens’s poetry “returns us to the plainness of the ordinary . . . And yet poetry returns us to the ordinary as something extraordinary, strange and uncanny.”¹⁰⁴ The reduction, we have learned, makes our familiar world seem strange and cold, bare and plain, but, as Judith Butler taught us

¹⁰³ For my pattern of thought in this section I am indebted to Mark C. Taylor’s reading of Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar” as a paradigm for Heidegger’s thought on the origin of the work of art. See Taylor, *Notes*, 112-114.

¹⁰⁴ Critchley, “The Philosophical Significance of a Poem,” 282.

“that strangeness is *exposed* as the condition of possibility of the ordinary” (italics mine).¹⁰⁵ Hence in Stevens’s “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: “The barrenness that appears is an *exposing*. / It is *not* part of what is absent, a halt / For farewells, as sad hanging on for remembrances. //It is a coming and a coming forth” (CP, 487; italics mine). Thus it seems reasonable to argue that the poet’s inter-related images of “barrenness,” “original cold” and ignorance are representative of “a zero of being which is not nothingness” (VI, 260) but that intentional relation with the world which is at once the “starting-point and basis” for creativity.

Just as phenomenology, the “first philosophy,” presupposes the reduction, for Stevens, creative production, which will always start anew with the “first idea,” presupposes a “mere,” “bare” or “cold” zero-point, a white page:

The paper is whiter
 For these black lines
 It glares beneath the webs
 Of wire, the designs of ink,
 The planes that ought to have genius
 The volumes like marble ruins
 Outlined and having alphabetical
 Notations and footnotes
 The paper is whiter.
 (CP, 221)

¹⁰⁵ J. Butler, introduction to *The Erotic Bird*, xv.

V. A “Total Double-Thing”: The Fate of Perception

To sum up what we have discussed so far, Stevens, like Woolf and Stein, dares to question the rational and open up the gigantic “a priori” dimension of experience. The poet points out that poetry, like philosophy, is “an art of perception.” Hence the “Notes” challenges us to a shift of attitude, to “become an ignorant man again” and return to the primacy of perception, which is “[a] little different from reality” (*CP*, 344). This shift of attitude exposes to the subject the world as phenomenon, laying bare the horizon – the “a priori” framework – from which creativity, “the poem of the act of the mind,” comes into being.

Whereas critics Helen Regueiro, Thomas J. Hines, Bernard Heringman, and Patricia Rae, in different ways, suggest that Stevens’s early poems stress a separation of mind and world but that his later works promote a closer relation between the two, I have shown that Stevens’s “act of the mind,” even in poems from the early collections *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*, is not enclosed or isolated but implicitly in and of the world. Not at any stage does the poet change his mind about a crucial point made clearly in *The Necessary Angel*: “The real is constantly being engulfed in the unreal . . . [Poetry] is an illumination of a surface, the movement of a self in the rock.” Borrowing from Stevens’s “The Rock,” the singer’s song in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” and the “jar” in “Anecdote of the Jar” “mak[e] meaning of the / rock” (*CP*, 527), that “gray particular of man’s life, / The stone from which he rises” (528). In calling attention to the relation between surface and “rock,” fact and essence (*idea*), our “artificial world” (*CP*, 252) and its underlying gigantic ground,

Stevens's poems open onto a central paradox of human experience: "not only are we dealing with what is given but also with what is presupposed in order for the giving to occur."¹⁰⁶ Stevens's poetry is phenomenological, although "without deliberation,"¹⁰⁷ because it makes visible this usually invisible ground of acts and expressions, the "unreal" context without which the "real" would not exist: "Real and unreal are two in one" (*CP*, 485).

In my discussion I have consistently called attention to the fact that intentionality – the fact that subjectivity is already in an implicit relation to the world – is at once the "starting-point and basis" (*Ideas*, 245) of Stevens's aesthetic concerns. In accordance with the double meaning of Bal's navel metaphor, signifying at once a breaking away from and a pointing back to the origin of creation, his poems simultaneously highlight the "starting-point" for an open-ended creative process and point back to the "basis" from which the poet's "first idea" arises: "meaningless" and "barren" landscapes or cold wintry "nothingness." Rather than describing a separation of mind and world, then, the complexities of Stevens's poems lie in a "total double-thing" (*CP*, 472) and stress the simultaneous differentiation and co-operation of mind and world, aspect and whole, unit and horizon, single note and "amassing harmony" (*CP*, 403).

Stevens's "total double-thing" is further compounded in the above mentioned distinction between immediate (pre-reflective) sensory perception and "the moment after" (*OP*, 190) of the fully thought verbal expression. When demonstrating that Husserl's "concern in the phenomenological reduction was not so much with the

¹⁰⁶ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 288.

¹⁰⁷ Natanson, *The Erotic Bird*, 8.

objects of consciousness as with the structure of conscious experience,” Suzanne Cunningham expands on this idea:

Husserl’s position is seen most clearly in relation to an object which has obvious temporal aspects, like a musical piece. The listener can constitute a symphony only by constituting individually perceived notes into a unity. As soon as the first note has been heard it passes, making way for the next . . . What is true of auditory perception, Husserl wants to claim, is true of perception in general. A temporal synthesis is required in order to interpret sensations of any sort as meaningful.¹⁰⁸

Seen in this light, “The whole / The complicate, the amassing harmony” (*CP*, 403) that the Canon Aspirin seeks in Stevens’s “Notes” can only be fully realised and interpreted as meaningful when the individually perceived “notes” have passed. “What makes the ‘reality’ of the thing” explains Merleau-Ponty, “is . . . precisely what snatches it from our grasp.” (*PP*, 233). Immediate perception is not meaningful until it has become an imitation of something already experienced. In this section I hope to clarify how this “fate of perception” lies at the core of the patterns of re-beginning - the “never-ending meditation” (*CP*, 465) - of Stevens’s poetry.

In the previous chapters, we have seen that the “fate of perception,” that is, our body’s “slippery hold” on reality, is evoked in Lily and Bernard’s creative processes in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, respectively, and in both the composition and reading process of Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Similarly, Stevens gestures toward the perceiver’s slippery hold on things in “A Primitive Like an Orb”:

“It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is. In the instant of speech, / The breadth of an

¹⁰⁸ Suzanne Cunningham, *Language and the Phenomenological Reduction* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1976), 8, 44-45.

accelerando moves, / Captives the being, widens – and *was there*” (CP, 440; italics mine). Just as Husserl’s “‘pure’ consciousness” - immediate perception before it is touched by our “theorizing reflection” (*Ideas*, 114) – can never be fully perceived, so can Stevens’s “poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation” (CP, 471) never be completely grasped by the poet’s written “notes.” As “the tongue is an eye” (OP, 167), it will always be too late for that: “we never see the world except the moment after.” His “notes,” in other words, will always be moving “*toward*” but never reaching a “Supreme Fiction.”

As already pointed out, it is this fate of perception that lies behind Merleau-Ponty’s most crucial insight: “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.” (PP, xiv). Due to this “impossibility,” the philosopher will aim for reduction again and again, hence he is a “perpetual beginner” whose “philosophy is an ever-renewed experience in making its own beginning” (PP, xiv). From this creative process of re-beginnings emerges what the late Merleau-Ponty terms “hyperdialectic,” the dialectic without synthesis discussed in the previous chapter, which he also terms

the good dialectic . . . which is conscious of the fact that every *thesis* is an idealization . . . The point to be noted is this: that the dialectic without synthesis of which we speak is not . . . scepticism . . . what we seek is a dialectical definition of being . . . that must rediscover the being that lies before the cleavage operated by reflection, about it, on its horizon, not outside of us and not in us, but there where the two movements cross, there where “there is” something. (VI, 94-95)

“Hyper-dialectic” is “hyper” because the “cleavage” between the pre-reflective and the reflective (due to our ability to reflect) cannot be closed: there is no “thesis.” Yet,

the philosopher stresses, whereas, “[t]he dialectic become *thesis* (statement) is no longer dialectical,” “[t]he failure of the thesis . . . discloses the *Source of theses* . . . to which we have to return . . . [t]o recommence perception“ (Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 175). “[F]ailure” of the reduction, in other words, is a necessity for the phenomenologist as it is a perpetual reminder of the pre-reflective dimension of experience, which is the ground of all thought and meaning. Phenomenology never allows the perceiving subject to lose sight of the “Source of the theses” from which all forms of expression, including creativity, stem.

I shall leave Stevens by pointing out how this dialectical process without synthesis reveals a new aspect of the “[m]ere repetitions” (*CP*, 405) or “never-ending meditation[s]” (*CP*, 465) that pervade his poems. As illuminated throughout this chapter, his poetry is perpetually disclosing the “source” of its own making, the “muddy centre” or the “giant.” Perpetually amazed at itself and at the world,

The poem refreshes life so that we share,

For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies

Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,

To an immaculate end. We move between these

Points:

From that ever-early candor to its late plural.

(*CP*, 382)

This passage from the “Notes” echoes “The Man with the Blue Guitar”:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,

From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,

Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality

(*CP*, 176)

R.D. Ackerman has argued that Stevens's "'Notes' leaves us finally with either discovery without fulfilment or fulfilment without discovery and no way in between," hence the poet is "at the limits of phenomenology."¹⁰⁹ As already noted, however, in Stevens's creative processes, the emphasis falls less on result than on a shift of attitude. In stressing that "[w]e move *between* these points" (italics mine), it rather seems to me that Stevens directs our attention to the space of betweenness itself: the space "[b]etween issue and return" (*CP*, 17,6) which is "absent[t] in reality," that is to say, overlooked in our rational "apprehended" (*CP*, 468) reality. But, as "Poetry must be irrational" (*OP*, 162) and as "Poetry is the subject of the poem," the poet highlights this usually invisible space of creative production itself, poised between the pre-verbal "gibberish" (*CP*, 395) of the "muddy centre" (*CP*, 383) and our "apprehended" (*CP*, 468) language. "We move between these / points: / From that ever-early candor to its late plural" (*CP*, 382).

¹⁰⁹ Ackerman, "Believing in a Fiction," 79, 83.

A Half-Way State

Having reached the middle space of creative production itself, I will, once again, return to Patricia Rae's claim that Stevens's "epochal spaces", which "emphasize the middleness of his expressive landscapes," "stress the lack of interaction between phenomenologically reduced experience and the outer world."¹¹⁰ Although the *epoché* is a useful tool for describing this important "middleness," I disagree that Stevens's middle landscapes are vacuum-like spaces of "peace" or "retreat" with "borders" that isolate the poetic creation from the outside world.¹¹¹ Once again it should be stressed that the *epoché* has no borders: it refers to a "mere change of standpoint," providing a clear view and better understanding of our engagement with the world. Just as phenomenological analysis begins with the reduction, so does creative production for Stevens begin with the "first idea." Just as "intentionality [is] . . . is understandable only through the reduction" (*PP*, xvii), so are Stevens's middle spaces – his intentional creations or "poems of the act of the mind" – accessible only through a shift of standpoint, that is to say, through a suspension of the "varnish and dirt" that obscures the perceiver's outlook. In the previous chapter I stressed the point that Stein's "A Box" from *Tender Buttons* does not signify enclosure but opening in that it opens up a more original, "rudimentary" way of seeing. In a similar manner, the middleness of Stevens's "central" poetry does not close off the world, detaching the subject's intentional creation from it; rather, it takes the subject more deeply into it. Rather than stressing a lack of interaction with the world, then, the "epochal spaces" in Stevens's work, open onto the world!

¹¹⁰ Rae, *The Practical Muse*, 154, 155.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 165, 215, 163.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the “middleness” of Stevens’s poems presuppose the reduction and is indicative of the open and open-ended space of creative production itself – a space which Merleau-Ponty thinks of as the “passage from the perceptual meaning to the language meaning” (VI, 176). The essential openness of this passage is, as we saw earlier, hinted at in “Anecdote of the Jar”: the “jar” - a figure of “the poem of the act of the mind” – is open: it is “tall and of a port in air” (CP, 76), allowing an interchange with the world where poetry is embedded. In “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” Stevens refers to this interchange as the “transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from which poetry springs” (NA, 217). This “transaction” takes place, again and again, between the “moment after” of our “apprehended” (CP, 468) reality and the “moment before,” as it were, when the “poem of pure reality” is still “untouched / By trope” (CP, 471) but has nevertheless touched the poet’s “sensibility,” “an *ecstatic* sensibility,” in the words of Cézanne, “which seeks to express itself.”¹¹²

To return to the phenomenological theme of perpetual beginning, for Stevens “Life is always new, it is always beginning. The fiction is part of this beginning” (Stevens, *Letters*, 434). For this Modernist, “the central poem, is the poem of the whole, / The poem of the composition of the whole” (CP, 442), a “composition” in which every “poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res and not about it” (CP, 473). Being “Part of the res,” that is, in *medias res* or in the middle of things, Stevens’s poems call attention to “a total double-thing” (CP, 472): they highlight their own process of becoming in the middle of the “giant,” which is always becoming. Hence Stevens’s emphasis on betweenness and passing states. Consider “The Glass of Water”:

¹¹² Cézanne, *Cézanne By Himself*, 291-92.

That the glass would melt in heat,
 That the water would freeze in cold
 Shows that this object is merely a state
 One of many between two poles.

(*CP*, 197)

The poet's "Notes" can only ever reflect "merely a state / One of many between two poles." For, as Kevin Hart reminds us, "Everything begins with the reduction, but never so that it escapes the trial of beginning again and again."¹¹³ As soon as the "a priori. . . the unapproachable" has been approached through language, the poet's original "first idea," the "thing itself," will already be in the past and the poet must begin again. The "poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation", then, always remains beyond the poet's grasp; it remains what Merleau-Ponty calls "a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present" (*PP*, 242).

Like Stein's "buttons" and Woolf's "mark," then, Stevens's poetic "notes" are fissures, which simultaneously divide and join, bringing to light the passage of creative production itself – that passage between pre-reflective intentionality (the "first idea") and articulation; between the "poem of the idea" and "the poem of the words" (*OP*, 174). On the one hand, they open up a creative process but, on the other hand, they always point back to the pre-communicative source of this creativity. Stevens's "Notes" lie in the perpetual movement "toward a Supreme Fiction," in between what Merleau-Ponty calls "an original past. . . which has never been present" (*PP*, 242) and what is always still to become. In the final stanza of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," we learn: "It is not in the premise that reality / Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade" (*CP*,

¹¹³ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 289.

489). Poetry, Stevens tells us, “has to be living” (*CP*, 240). It has to reflect the “living” experience of a world of perpetual change. Hence, “Supreme Fiction,” which is part of the fluctuation of the whole of reality, can never be a “solid.” “Supreme Fiction” lies neither in the written nor the unwritten, but in the living movement between mute perception and words, and ongoing movement *toward*, unfinished and infinite, between “that ever-early candor” of the epochal “first idea” and the “late plural” of poetic trope. Although we try to totalise and making meaning of the world, this world is incomplete, hence all “art[s] of perception” (*OP*, 191) are never complete. Although our intentional acts are what Stevens in “Of Modern Poetry” calls “poem[s] of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice,” (*CP*, 239), sufficiency cannot be reached.

I have used Merleau-Ponty’s related notions of “interworld” and “flesh” to shed a new light on the “mist” and spaces of betweenness that create the “unsubstantial territory” of Woolf’s *The Waves*. “Flesh” is the unsubstantial phenomenon between seer and thing which is “not an obstacle between them; it is their means of communication” (*VI*, 135). The structure of flesh, I have stressed, is chiasmatic: it refers neither to a dichotomy nor a unity between seer and seen, the invisible and the visible, mute perception and speech, but something in between.

The imagery of in between or half-way states that pervade Stevens’s poetry highlight a similar event that is both dichotomous and unitary. Like Stevens’s “Supreme Fiction,” the “Angel” in “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” is “half a figure of a sort, / A figure half seen for a moment” (*CP*, 497): neither wholly “thing” nor wholly “idea,” half fact and half essence, it is only ever half-caught before “quickly, too quickly” (*CP*, 497) it is gone. Likewise, the woman in “So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch,” “floats in the contention, the flux // Between the thing as idea and / The

idea as thing" (*CP*, 295) and in "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream," a poem which, like *The Waves*, could have been a poetic response to Cézanne's *Bathers* paintings, Stevens presents us with

. . . particular characters, addicts

To blotches, angular anonymids

Gulping for shape among the reeds. No doubt,

We were the appropriate conceptions, less

Than creatures, of the sky between the banks,

The water flowing in the flow of space.

It was passing a boundary, floating without a head

And naked, or almost so, into the grotesque

Of being naked, or almost so, in a world

Of nakedness . . .

(*CP*, 371)

Stevens's figures, who are "floating . . . / . . . naked . . . into the grotesque" and are "less / Than creatures, of the sky between the banks"; "particular characters, addicts / To blotches, angular anonymids / Gulping for shape," reveal striking similarities with Cézanne's abstract bathers. Neither purely subjective nor purely objective, like Cézanne's unusually lively apples and thing-like people and the entwined people and objects in Woolf's novels, Stevens's half-imagery is "passing a boundary" (*CP*, 371) and making visible that "*unapproachable*" (*OP*, 194) space of betweenness that Merleau-Ponty calls "flesh," which is "not matter, is not mind, is not substance,"

rather, it is a “*general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea.” (Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 139). It is “not an obstacle between [subject and object]; it is their means of communication” (*VI*, 135).

So, “[d]oes the poet / Evade us, as in a senseless element?” (*CP*, 396) as “[t]he poem goes from the poet’s gibberish to / The gibberish of the vulgate and back again” (*CP*, 396)? From our discussion we can conclude that he does not. His poems’ emphasis on interaction between “ever-early candor” and “late plural,” leading the reader into an “a perspective that begins again” (*CP*, 528), is neither “structureless, fluid, and volatile,” as described by a recent critic,¹¹⁴ nor a sign of imaginative limitation, leaving the poetic self in isolation, despair or self-enclosure. On the contrary, it “*satisfies* / Belief in an immaculate beginning” (*CP*, 382; italics mine), suggesting that the poet’s domain is one of perpetual opening. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the incompleteness of the reduction. . . is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself, the rediscovery of vertical being,” which “is to be understood not as an imperfection. . . but as a philosophical *theme*” (*VI*, 178). The impossibility of complete reduction to “the poem of pure reality” keeps the poet’s creativity alive. Although it results in ongoing vacillations between “an immaculate beginning” and “an immaculate end,” the failure of reduction is not to be taken as a sign of futility but as a perpetual opening onto “the giant himself” (*CP*, 465), the infinite and “plain” ground of expression. In accordance with my discussion in the previous chapters, then, once again the reduction offers a key to this Modernist’s creative cycle of perpetual beginning and stresses the ever-new and constantly possible.

¹¹⁴ Theodore Sampson, *A Cure of the Mind: The Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2000), 170

As “the partaker partakes of that which changes him” (*CP*, 392), the self in Stevens is always in implicit relation to a pregiven and infinite world of change: he is, as “Sailing After Lunch” reminds us, “a pupil of the gorgeous wheel” (*CP*, 121), which turns and turns, leading to “never-ending meditation[s]” on creativity.

Stevens’s “gorgeous wheel” recalls Louis in Woolf’s *The Waves*: “I feel come over me the sense of the earth under me and my roots going down and down till they wrap themselves round some hardness at the centre. I recover my continuity . . . I becomes a figure in the procession, a spoke in the huge wheel that turning, at last erects me, here and now” (*W*, 26). Louis’s “roots” “wrap themselves round” the “invisible” framework of the visible: the continuity and repetitions, which underlie our daily actions. These repetitions, which also underlie the “[m]ere repetitions” (*CP*, 405) of Stevens’s work, are, as the poet puts it in “Notes,”

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:

One of the vast repetitions final in

Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round, the merely going round,

Until merely going round is a final good.

(*CP*, 405)

Thus, in response to Hillis Miller’s above mentioned claim that “a reconciliation [between imagination and reality in Stevens] turns out to be impossible,”¹¹⁵ I would like to stress, borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, “we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility

¹¹⁵ Miller, “Wallace Stevens’s Poetry of Being,” 145.

which is the ultimate truth” (VI, 155). Stevens’s “total double-thing” is in itself “a final good.”

If there is a development from Stevens’s early to his late poetry, this does not take place because the poet “discovers a new relation of self and world,” as suggested by Hines (Hines, 26-27),¹¹⁶ or because his realisation of the “limits” of his imaginative creations forces him to “redescend into reality,” as argued by Regueiro,¹¹⁷ or because “the facts of experience appear to contradict” what Rae interprets as the poet’s enclosed “epochal space.”¹¹⁸ Neither does the poet’s relation with the world change, nor does he realise the failure of his early poetic inquiry. Despite his awareness of the division between pure intentional experience - “the poem of pure reality” - and our familiar “apprehended” reality, Stevens never allows us to lose sight of the horizon of experience, the “shapeless giant” (CP, 219), where “the poem of the act of the mind” (CP, 240) is embedded. What does change, however, is the poet’s confidence about articulating this complexity. His position shifts from being an onlooker of the paradox of human experience in his early poem “The Idea of Order at Key West” to being an integral part of the paradox itself in longer poems such as “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” and, most clearly, in the very final poem of *The Collected Poems*: “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself.” In this short poem, a “bird’s cry” is heard by a nondescript perceiver “At the earliest ending of winter,” (CP, 534), which is the cold, barren season of epochal ignorance:

That scrawny cry – it was

¹¹⁶ Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 26-27.

¹¹⁷ Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination*, 190.

¹¹⁸ Rae, *The Practical Muse*, 172.

A chorister whose c preceded the choir.

It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,

Still far away. It was like

A new knowledge of reality.

(*CP*, 534)

The “scrawny cry,” which is “part of the colossal sun” recalls “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: “the poem is the cry of its occasion / Part of the res and not about it” (*CP*, 473). The fact that the perceiver in this final poem *hears* rather than sees the “cry” indicates that he is himself “part of the res” and immersed in the middle space where poetry comes into being: “the contention, the flux // Between the thing as idea and / The idea as thing” (*CP*, 295). As in the poem “Yellow Afternoon,” “Everything comes to him / From the middle of his field” (*CP*, 237) and now, immersed in Merleau-Ponty’s “interworld,” that fleshy “intermundane space. . . where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap” (*VI*, 48) and where the subjective and the objective “exchang[e] secrets,” in the words of Cézanne, Stevens’s partly subjective and partly objective “man-sun” (280) “speaks the poem as it is” (*CP*, 473). Thus, having shifted the perceiver’s position from onlooker to insider, the “new knowledge of reality” that this final poem offers does not reject the approach of the early poems of “order”; rather, it stands one step closer to the unapproachable and insubstantial “thing itself,” “the poem of pure reality” that Stevens has always sought and is still seeking.

POSTFACE:
LOOKING BACK AND OPENING UP

As the reason destroys, the poet must create.

—Wallace Stevens, *OP* (190)

In this study I have brought to light intersections between American and English Modernist writers and mid-twentieth century phenomenological concerns with aesthetic production, arguing that the Modernist form of writing shares a kinship of method and concern with the phenomenological reduction. Using the reduction as my guiding theme, I have identified in the literary works of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens configurations of similar “shift[s] of standpoint,” which call attention to “the thing itself,” uncovering the creative subject’s intentional experience of the object, and revealing this as the “starting-point and basis” for creative production.

Drawing upon the generative dimension of Mieke Bal’s metaphor of the “navel” as necessary connection and entry-point, I have shown that creative production for Woolf, Stein and Stevens begins and ends – only to begin again – at the “navel.” Just as through Woolf’s “A Mark on the Wall” I began at the navel, I must also end at the navel and begin again. I will therefore finish this study not only by looking back on the previous chapters, but also by looking forward, beginning again, opening onto the present, and identifying in the work of contemporary

American poet John Ashbery (1927) and the box constructions of American artist Joseph Cornell (1903-77) examples of similar phenomenological concepts. In both looking backwards and opening up, I bring into focus a new connection and entry-point in between an “original past” (*PP*, 242) and what is still becoming, thereby creating a foundation for new research.

My choice to look at Ashbery and Cornell in particular is not arbitrary. Ashbery has often been considered in the context of his Modernist predecessors.¹ At the memorial service for Joseph Cornell, Ashbery delivered a moving reminiscence in which he referred to the artist as one of those “certain sphinxes;” “a man whose genius had affected me so strongly from afar.”² Cornell seems to have been well versed in phenomenological terminology. In his diary, as recorded in *Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind*, he ponders over “the incroyable of ‘experience’ . . . ‘phenomenology’ . . . so often the merely physical and the poetics of “stirrings”. . . “cognisance”. . . – wandering too much – V. Woolf – flash image –mirror . . . “ In another entry, he refers to an “eidetic image - an image (especially perceived by children) which receives a previous optical impression with the clearness of hallucination.”³ As phenomenology is the study of essences or Eidos (Ideas), Edmund Husserl terms it the “eidetic science”(Ideas, 62). “Looking for the world’s

¹ See, for instance, Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*; and Susan McCabe, “Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery: A Surrealist Lineage,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 22, no.2 (Fall 1998): 149-168.

² John Ashbery, foreword to *Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind: Selected Diaries, Letters, and Files*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: Thames and Hudson) 10. Much recent scholarship has touched upon but not offered in-depth examinations of Cornell’s influence on Ashbery. When commenting on the “dream processes” of Ashbery’s poems, James McCorkle briefly notes that Cornell’s work, in particular his “memory theatres,” “serves as a metaphor for Ashbery’s poetry.” See McCorkle, “Nimbus and Sensations: Eros and Reverie in the Poetry of John Ashbery and Ann Lauterbach,” in *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Susan Schultz (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1995), 102, 103, 104. For other connections between Cornell and Ashbery, see John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 176; and Ward, *Statues of Liberty*, 145.

³ Cornell, *Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind*, 437, 311.

essence,” Merleau-Ponty told us, “. . . is looking for what it is as a fact for us, *before* any thematization” (*PP*, xv; italics mine).

In opening onto the present, I primarily locate the poetry of Ashbery within a continuum of the Modernist attention to the phenomenological “thing itself” and bring to light his simultaneous connection with and detachment from the inquiries of Woolf, Stein and Stevens. Just as Woolf’s “A Mark on the Wall,” Stein’s “A Box,” and the “never-ending meditation[s]” (*CP*, 465) of Stevens’s poetic “notes” offer not closure but opening, I will close the thesis by opening a few of Cornell’s boxes from the early and late 1940s and shed light on similar patterns of opening in Ashbery’s poetry.

Looking Back

In the previous chapters I have explored the ways in which Woolf’s works expose the usually unperceived “hidden. . . pattern” “behind the cotton wool of daily life” (*MB*, 72), thus calling attention to the ground of pre-conceptual experience round which our acts of expression take shape and from which perceiving subjects arise in mutual and reciprocal relations. Stein’s *Tender Buttons* seeks to “mean names without naming them” (“PG,” 141), that is, to unfold our primal perceptions of things without the obstructions of conventional acts of naming, thus attempting to restore original meaning to both the word and a twentieth century full of “cracks” (*Picasso*, 49). Throughout his poetry, Stevens too insists on seeing the world “clearly in the idea of it” (*CP*, 380) by removing the “varnish and dirt of generations” (*Stevens, Letters*, 426-427). He too suggests that our pre-reflective intentional

experience of things is the source of the meaning of the world. Drawing upon Husserl's thoughts about the reduction and Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of this concept in his reflections on aesthetics and his concepts of "écart," "flesh," and "hyperdialectic," I have brought to light in the work of Woolf, Stein and Stevens configurations of the passage from primary perception to expression of the perceived, thus "stating the space" between subject and object-world and highlighting what I feel is an overlooked aspect of Modernist aesthetics at large.

Taking my bearings from Mieke Bal's reading of the nail and the hole in a wall in Vermeer's *Woman Holding Balance* as "textual navel" - a "trac[e] of the work of art," which includes the "work" of the reader - I also began this study at the navel. Opening up my discussion with a phenomenological reading of Woolf's "A Mark on the Wall," I pointed out the generative dimension of Woolf's "Mark," Stevens poetic "Notes," and Stein's "Buttons" in *Tender Buttons* as necessary foundations and starting-points for aesthetic production. These "navels," I have argued, are signs of simultaneous dependence on and detachment from the original ground of meaning, the "ground of pure pre-conceptual experience," as Husserl terms it (*Ideas*, 27). On the one hand, they refer to our primal bond with the pre-reflective dimension of experience (the umbilical cord was once attached), but, on the other hand, they are points of opening or beginning (the umbilical cord has been cut). In this sense, the works I have examined point in two directions at once, expressing a tension between attachment and opening, basis and starting-point, leading the reader into processes of what Woolf calls "eternal renewal" (*W*, 247), what Stein refers to as "[b]eginning again and again" ("CE," 23) and what Stevens terms the "never-ending meditation" (*CP*, 465) of the "endlessly elaborating poem" (*CP*, 486).

I have identified these processes of “perpetual beginning” as literary versions of Merleau-Ponty’s “hyperdialectic,” a dialectic without synthesis, at the core of which lies the impossibility of complete reduction. In Chapter Two, I demonstrated that the wave-like movements of Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical speculations – a movement of perpetual reduction and expansion – takes place in the “fleshy opening” of Woolf’s *The Waves*: an “unsubstantial territory” (*W*, 11) between subject and world, perceiver and perceived.⁴ In Woolf’s abstract “play-poem,” the sentences of six beings interchange, highlighting how the perceiving and creative self is caught up in what Merleau-Ponty calls the “flesh of the world.” We are at once seeing/speaking/touching subjects and seen/heard/touched objects; we are at once distanced from and intertwined with the world. I argued that it is this paradox that pervades Woolf’s “play-poem” and makes it expand and contract in wave-like movements.

In the words of John Carvalho, “[s]trictly speaking, “flesh” is what we get at after pulling back the skin, what is protected by the casement of the epidermis”; “the secrets of Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh are hidden in the entwined visibility and invisibility of human beings in the world.”⁵ In this sense, Stein’s *Tender Buttons* too pulls the outer skin, lid, peel or dirt off our habitual fact-world, revealing “how you are feeling inside you to the words that are coming out to be outside you” (“PG,” 125), thus opening the usually unperceived space of betweenness where the subjective and the objective, the invisible and the visible inter-relate. The “word-objects” in *Tender Buttons* are presented as containers that must be opened (“A

⁴ The term “fleshy opening” is Laurie McRobert’s, “Breakdowns and Philosophy: On Deconstructions and Chaos,” in *Breakdowns*, eds. Bruce A. Butterfield and Jürgen Kleist (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), <http://pages.citenet/users/ctmz0565/breakdowns.html> (accessed on 20 April 2004).

⁵ John Carvalho, “Folds in the Flesh: Merleau-Ponty/Foucault,” *Rereading Merleau-Ponty*, 295, 308.

Box”), substances that must be uncovered (“A Substance in a Cushion”), fruit that must be peeled (“Orange”) or “dirt” that must be removed by what “Glazed Glitter” calls “perhaps washing and polishing” (*TB*, 3). By “bracketing” outer facts, Stein leads us back to “see[ing]. . . fine substance[s] strangely” before the conventional structures of objectivity take over. *Tender Buttons*, I suggested in Chapter Three, offers a clear literary example of “hyperdialectic.” “Hyperdialectic” is inscribed in what Merleau-Ponty terms “écart,” the temporal space of “distantiation” between pre-linguistic perception and expression, which is the “necessary condition for the production of meaning.”⁶ The process of reading Stein’s text, I pointed out, is tantamount to a passage through this écart. Our experience of reading this obscure work can be described as a dialectical process without synthesis, an ongoing stretching back and forth between the pre-reflective and the reflective, substance versus cover, the essential “thing in itself” versus the factual thing as named. The engine of this process is the phenomenological reduction, always leaving the reader with a feeling of what Stein in “Composition as Explanation” calls “beginning again and again.”

“Hyperdialectic” is aware of the impossibility of completely grasping the pre-reflective “thing itself.” Due to our apprehended language, through which we make experience meaningful, it is always already too late for that. As Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*: “The world is what I perceive, but as soon as we examine and express its absolute proximity, it becomes, inexplicably, irremediable distance” (*VI*, 8). In this light, I pointed out that Stevens’s singer in “The Idea of Order as Key West” is “observing the past” (*OP*, 190) and singing a song that cannot but be “beyond” (*CP*, 128) (later than) the “genius” of the sea, that

⁶ Madison, “Merleau-Ponty and Derrida,” 104.

is, the pre-predicative ground of experience. Like Woolf and Stein, Stevens's work presents us with a "total double-thing" (*CP*, 472): it opens onto the space of correlation between essence (idea) and fact, between the pre-reflective "first idea" and "the moment after" of the fully thought and verbalised expression. Like Stein's "buttons" and Woolf's "mark," then, Stevens's poetic "notes" are fissures, which simultaneously divide and join, bringing to light the passage of creative production itself – the passage from the "poem of the idea" to "the poem of the words" (*OP*, 174). Bringing us back to Mieke Bal's "textual navel," on the one hand, his poetic notes open up a creative process but, on the other hand, they always point back to the pre-communicative source of this creativity. Stevens's "Notes" lie in the perpetual movement "toward a Supreme Fiction," in between "a kind of original past, a past which has never been present" (*PP*, 242) and what is always still to become.

Stein, Woolf and Stevens, then, share the phenomenological viewpoint that "[p]erception is not a state but a mobile activity," hence the artwork - visual art or text - is never fixed but perpetually renewed.⁷ Like the phenomenologist, who knows that the world is "displayed only gradually and never 'in its entirety'" (*PP*, 208), it is "the novelist's task . . . not to expound ideas or even analyse characters but to depict an inter-human event, ripening and bursting it upon us with no ideological commentary" (*PP*, 151). Just as Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" leaves us not with closure but with opening and Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* tells herself to "[g]et that and start afresh, get that and start afresh" (*L*, 261), so does Bernard's struggle to find a "little language" in Woolf's *The Waves* seem like a "perpetual warfare." In *The Waves* Woolf leaves us with the rhythmic breaking of the waves, the "incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again" (*W*, 234), echoing the inter-dependent and open-

⁷ Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 85.

ended wave-like patterns of world and creative mind. Likewise, the “rudimentary” (*TB*, 4) nature of Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, which any reader fails to get completely on the “button,” reflects “the *living* experience of an ‘incomplete world.’”⁸ The structure of Stevens’s “Notes” adds to our understanding of the “living” acts of creation that the three Modernists promote. This long poem is divided into three sections, entitled “It Must be Abstract” (*CP*, 380), “It Must Change” (*CP*, 389), and “It Must Give Pleasure” (*CP*, 398). Stevens’s poems oscillate between the “Abstract” “immaculate beginning” of pre-reflective experience (the “first idea”) and “an immaculate end” of apprehended reflection. In “mov[ing] between these / Points” (*CP*, 382), the reader too is forever moving *toward*, but never completely reaching a “Supreme Fiction.” Poetry “has to be living” (*CP*, 240): it has to reflect the “living” experience of a world of perpetual change. The poet’s “notes” remain preliminary scribbles, emphasising that “It Must Change” and that such change is in itself the “Pleasure” of creative production, “the going round / And going round, the merely going round, / Until merely going round is a final good” (*CP*, 405). The impossibility of complete reduction to Woolf’s “essential thing,” Stein’s “thing in itself” and Stevens’s “poem of pure reality” is what keeps creativity alive and is therefore a “final good.”

Finally, it should be pointed out that the three writers shared awareness of the “fate of perception” does not lead to shared reactions. Although Woolf is aware that the “essential thing” cannot be pinned down in words, she never stops yearning to “give the moment whole” (*Diary* 3, 209). Although Stevens knows that the “poem of pure reality” cannot be attained, he still ponders on “the poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (*CP*, 239). Whereas Woolf’s awareness of

⁸ Raynova, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Turning-Point,” 231.

unattainable wholeness is a physically painful experience, which throughout her life drove her to illness, in stressing the “final good” of “merely going round,” Stevens more willingly gives into the impossibility of sufficiency. Unlike Stevens and Woolf, Stein seems to lack the desire for wholeness or sufficiency and more directly accepts the “fate of perception.” Influenced by Cézanne’s insight that “Each part is as important as the whole,” *Tender Buttons* suggests that the meaning of wholeness can be grasped only when understanding that “[a] whole is inside a part” (*TB*, 38-39). “Whole” meaning is not merely objective. Objectivity arises from an intending subjectivity. Meaning, then, cannot frame the artwork or text from the outside but is made and re-made from within through the phenomenological act of seeing/reading itself.

In different ways, then, the three writers anticipate or directly express an awareness of the subject’s “slippery hold” on reality, thus rejecting finality and embracing openness. I have stressed and will stress again that this openness should not be taken as a sign of aesthetic failure or uncertainty, reflecting the subject’s lack of grounding in a Modern world of rupture. The oscillating movements between pre-reflective and reflective experience, stating the space between the primal perception of the “mark,” “button” or “note” and the articulation of the word, serve as openings onto and constant reminders of the underlying ground which makes experience possible, never allowing us to lose sight of the “wonder in the face of the world” which remains the key to all creativity.

Opening Up

The phenomenological “fate of perception” anticipated by high Modernists Woolf, Stein and Stevens lies at the core of contemporary poet John Ashbery’s work.⁹ Like his forebears, Ashbery considers the creative moment of insight in phenomenological terms. “The ‘reality’ of the thing,” as Merleau-Ponty calls it, is motivated precisely by the impossibility of fully “grasp[ing]” it (*PP*, 233):

You see that you cannot do without it, that singular isolated moment that has now already slipped so far into the past that it seems a mere spark. You cannot do without it and you cannot have it.¹⁰

In his poem “The Task,” Ashbery tells us: “For these are moments only, moments of insight, / And there are reaches to be attained, / A last level of anxiety that melts / In becoming, like miles under the pilgrim’s feet” (*SP*, 83). Ashbery is of course alluding to William Cowper’s pre-Romantic poem “The Task” (1785), in which references to physical wandering are plentiful.¹¹ In the light of the Romantic quest for “reconcilement of the external with the internal,”¹² opening the way to the Romantic poet’s divine moments of visions, which would transcend the common world, at first sight, the goal of Ashbery’s “Task” seems provocatively empty. It is, however, relevant to my argument that the wandering Pilgrim’s “unfruitful” (*SP*, 83)

⁹ As noted earlier, I have borrowed the term “fate of perception” from Geoff Ward, who, in his reading of Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” points out: “Merleau-Ponty’s . . . phenomenology of perception sits well with Ashbery’s poem.” See Ward, *Statues of Liberty*, 156, 165. My argument in this Postface can be taken as an expansion of Ward’s insight, locating both the work of Ashbery and that of Cornell in a continuum of what seems to be an overlooked aspect of modernist aesthetics at large.

¹⁰ John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1985), 144. Hereafter abbreviated as *SP*.

¹¹ William Cowper, *The Task*, (1785; Yorkshire: The Scholar Press Limited, 1973).

¹² Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 131

destiny emphasises process over goal. There is no beginning, no middle and no end in Ashbery's wandering across "fugitive lands [which] crowd under separate names" (*SP*, 83) and there are no divine moments of vision. Instead, the poet speaks of "a *casual* moment of knowing that is here one minute and gone the next" (*SP*, 134; *italics mine*), offering what Merleau-Ponty calls "a direct description of our experience as it is" (*PP*, viii). Whereas the "spot of time" that haunts Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper" gives rise to a "powerful. . . emotion *recollected* in tranquillity"¹³ (*my italics*), and, as noted in the previous chapter, separates both poet from scene and reader from poem, Ashbery "states the space" – in Beckett's words - between perceiver and perceived, gesturing toward the embodied experience of both writing and reading. "You are wearing a text," he writes in "Crazy Weather": "The lines / Droop to your shoelaces and I shall never want or need / Any other literature than this poetry of mud" (*SP*, 221).

Working back from this, the actual "reaches" that are "to be attained" in Ashbery's "The Task" are in fact the "miles under the pilgrim's feet," suggesting both the artist's creative wanderings and the reader's act of wandering across the page, the poet's "paper city" (*SP*, 84).¹⁴ Ashbery's twin "tasks" of life and poetry will always be, as "The Task" puts it, "preparing to begin again" (*SP*, 83), accentuating both the reader's and writer's pleasures of beginning again and again, of searching and *re*-searching. Thus, like Woolf, Stein and Stevens, Ashbery too is

¹³ Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works*, 192.

¹⁴ For the notion of the act of reading as "wandering" I am influenced by Marjorie Perloff's claim that the meanings of the words "wander" and "wandering" in Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha* (1909) should be understood in terms of what Ashbery, in an essay on Stein, calls a "way of happening." See Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 93. But, whereas Perloff argues that this "way of happening" reveals uncertainty and groundlessness, thus locating the work of both Ashbery and Stein within a Post-Modern "poetics of indeterminacy," my interpretation of the word "wandering" emphasises the phenomenological notion of "perpetual beginning" as an opening onto the ground which underlies experience.

“preparing to begin again,” but unlike his forebears he reminds us that “his destiny / Is to return unfruitful” (*SP*, 83), implying that the inter-twined processes of writing and reading are continual movements *toward* becoming but not, as in the work of Stevens, “toward a supreme fiction.” Whereas Stevens speaks of “the poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” - despite his awareness that sufficiency cannot be found - the point of Ashbery’s “poem of the mind” is not merely the “*act* of finding,” but the direct acknowledgment of the impossibility of completely finding. At no point does Ashbery offer moments of rest or express a desire for wholeness. What is there, visible to the eye, is the perpetual change of a very fast moving reality, which is where the poet’s “act[s] of finding” take place:

. . . we and everything around us are moving forward continually, . . .
we are being modified constantly by the speed at which we travel and
the regions through which we pass, so that merely to think of
ourselves as having arrived at some final resting place is a
contradiction of fundamental logic. (*SP*, 137-138)

Thus, like Virginia Woolf, Ashbery seems to be catching “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms . . . as they fall” (*CD*, 8), but whereas Woolf yearns for wholeness, for Ashbery the atoms simply keep on falling. His direct acceptance of the impossibility of complete reduction is more like Stein’s. Ashbery too “[a]ct[s] so that there is no use in a centre” (*TB*, 43), acknowledging that “The conclusion came when there was no arrangement” (*TB*, 44).

Throughout this thesis I have stressed that the *epoché* points to a central paradox in human experience, which I have called the paradox of the “eye/I.” Merleau-Ponty elaborates this paradox in his notion of “flesh,” the unperceived space in between subjectivity and objectivity, seer and seen. This paradoxical

“between,” which is neither complete presence nor absence, neither purely subjective nor purely objective, is, it seems to me, the essence of Ashbery's work. His poems do not oscillate between Stevens's “immaculate beginning” and “immaculate end”; rather the paradox of what Ashbery, in “Clepsydra,” calls “[t]he half-meant, half-perceived / motions,”¹⁵ recalling Stevens's half-way states, is their “real’ meaning:

. . . it mattered precisely because it was a paradox and about to be realized here on earth, in human terms; otherwise one would have forgotten it as quickly as any morning dream that clings to you in the first few waking moments . . . (*SP*, 145)

The paradox of the “eye/I” central to Ashbery's phenomenological poetry not only reflects the artist's simultaneous separation from and interrelation with his object-world, but also leaves us with a sense what he, in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” calls “looking through the wrong end of the Telescope” (*SP*, 203), thus giving voice to the “fate of perception” that his predecessors anticipated. The “reality” of the “thing itself,” which triggered the creative processes of Stein, Woolf and Stevens, then, are “snatche[d]” from both the writer's and readers' grasps.

The figure of speech “looking through the wrong end of the telescope” significantly echoes “Through the Big End of the Opera Glass,” the title of a 1943 art exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery, featuring the work of Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp. Pointing out that this paradox is incorporated in Cornell's boxes, suggesting an increasing “distance between spectator and object viewed,” Jodi Hauptman takes it as a sign of the “impossible interplay of longing and futility,” thus raising Lacanian spectres of melancholic subjectivity or nostalgia, detaching the

¹⁵ John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1972), 63.

artist from his world and the seer from the seen.¹⁶ Cornell was obsessed with sightings of young women, in particular pictures of or images related to female film stars such as Lauren Bacall, Jennifer Jones and Greta Garbo. In an attempt to hold onto these muses, Cornell displayed their pictures in glazed boxes, and thus they became, in the words of Jodi Hauptman, “[a] pleasure to watch, but impossible ever to reach.”¹⁷ Taking my bearings from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, I want to highlight a wholly different aspect of this lack of grasp of the object. Rather than revealing a void of nostalgic loss or lack, I suggest that the threshold between subject and object promoted by Cornell’s boxes highlights a phenomenological mutuality and reversibility between seer and seen, artist and world, spectator and artwork. These glazed boxes, at once displaying their gazing women and reflecting our act of looking, are, I suggest, promoters of ethically self-reflective and reciprocal seeing.

In his diary entries, Cornell repeatedly ponders on wanting to incorporate in his boxes and collages “fresh wonder,” “wonderment,” or the “wondrously new.”¹⁸ “[W]onder’ in the face of the world,” Merleau-Ponty told us, is “[t]he best formulation of the reduction” (*PP*, xxi). Wonder, we have seen, is by its very nature pre-reflective: still open to the essence of the world, the child looks at it in wonder. The “visual magic” of the “soap bubble sets, marbles, and toy birds” displayed in Cornell’s boxes were for the first time met by Ashbery when he was “about ten years old, “momentarily swe[eping]” the astonished boy into “the unbiased seeing of

¹⁶ Jodi Hauptman, *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 4, 212n8, 49, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ Cornell, *Joseph Cornell’s Theatre of the Mind*, 279, 280, 310.

childhood,” restoring wonder to the “paraphernalia” seen with a “force. . . so delicate and powerful that one hesitates to talk much about it.”¹⁹

Much like Ashbery, Joseph Cornell was an “enchanted wanderer,”²⁰ who wandered through New York to collect flotsam and jetsam: engravings, prints, newspaper articles and photographs of legendary film stars, which he would place in glazed boxes. He referred to his wanderings as “a type of image-search,”²¹ a terminology that Hauptman interprets as “an aesthetic, attitude, and method that reconfigures portraiture as exploration, research, collection.” Hauptman underscores the traditional view of Cornell as a “voyeur” whose boxes not only disclose the found object but also appear as “traps, capturing, framing and holding their subjects tightly away from the spectator outside,”²² both characterising Cornell as nostalgic dreamer, trapped in the past, and detaching the seer from the seen. In contrast with this, it rather seems to me that the both “delicate” and “powerful” force of Cornell’s constructions, “swe[eping]” the young Ashbery back into “the unbiased seeing of childhood,” triggers a release from our preconceived and “biased” notions about the world and a return to a more primordial vision, a primary perception of the thing seen, which is also the starting- point of the artist’s creative process. Rather than cutting off the artist/artwork from the world, the seer from the seen, this vision, I argue, restores openness onto the world.

In calling attention to this “openness,” I not only underscore my promotion of phenomenology as a clue to Modernist aesthetics, but also want to release the poetic

¹⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁰ “Enchanted Wanderer” is one of Cornell’s so-called “journey albums” dedicated to the film star Hedy Lamar. See Hauptman, *Stargazing in the Cinema*, p. 2.

²¹ Cornell as quoted in Hauptman, *Stargazing in the Cinema*, 1.

²² Hauptman, *Stargazing in the Cinema*, 1, 49.

inquiries of Cornell and Ashbery from the “trap,” which is usually assigned to the avant-garde, of “isolating the object, breaking off its ties with the rest of the world,”²³ thus turning it into a nostalgic “fetishistic substitute for a lost object.”²⁴ This fetishism brings us back to Eagleton’s “autonomous, self-regarding, impenetrable modernist artifact” referred to in Chapter One. We recall that Eagleton’s isolated and alienated Modernist art work is a result of what he calls a “bracket[ing] off” – a negation – of external facts, which stands in stark contrast to the Husserlian method of “bracketing” as an opening onto the world.

We recall that Husserl’s reduction, which operates through the method of “bracketing,” argues against what is usually understood as reductionism. It does not reduce the subject’s viewpoint, thus creating a division between subject and object, seer and seen, but insists on “a new kind of practical outlook” (*Crisis* 1,169), bringing to light their implicit relation.

Cornell’s boxes and Ashbery’s poems, I suggest, bring into focus exactly this relation, revealing a perhaps surprising image of these artists as not merely engaged with processes of wandering, physical and metaphysical, but as practical phenomenologists. Just as Cornell’s boxes display vast amounts of flotsam and jetsam found on his wanderings through New York, Ashbery’s poems display “endless lists of things” (*SP*, 145), unrelated and “broken” images, accumulated on textual wanderings through the poet’s “paper city” (*SP*, 84). The artists’ journeys through cities of things stress phenomenological interrelation with the world as a condition for creative production.

²³ Diana Waldman, *Joseph Cornell* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 14.

²⁴ Hal Foster as quoted in Hauptman, *Stargazing in the Cinema*, 33.

I can perhaps best condense my argument by returning to Stein's "A Box": "it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely." Just as Stein's "A Box" opens onto the "rudimentary" (undeveloped) first perception of the thing seen, so are Cornell's boxes creative products of what Gilles Deleuze calls "the self that opens to the world and opens the world itself."²⁵ What the Cornell box presents us with, then, is not enclosure but disclosure of a more original way of seeing, not entrapment but opening up.

By "bracketing" our usual world of facts, the reduction lays bare what Merleau-Ponty calls the "invisible inner framework" of the visible (VI, 215-216). Like Stein's "A Box," it takes the lid off the box and exposes what is contained within this container. What we are left with is a more immediate experience of "the thing itself" before it is concealed by our habitual ways of seeing and modes of expression. What, one might ask, then, is this: Is the see-through glass of Cornell's boxes, at once enclosing and disclosing the objects of his "image searches," comparable to phenomenological brackets? It certainly was to Ashbery. "Each of Cornell's works," he writes in an art chronicle, "is an autonomous visual experience, with its own natural law and its climate: *the thing in its thingness*; revealed, not commented on: and with its ambience intact."²⁶

Just as Cornell would collect his objects along the margins of New York, from junk shops and flea markets, so do Ashbery's poems display a de-centralised self who is "living on the margin" (SP, 87). Not only do the wanderings of these wonderers take place at margins or thresholds, but phenomenological thresholds of

²⁵ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 42.

²⁶ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 16. Hereafter abbreviated as *RP*.

perception are also incorporated into the structures of their work. Beautiful female film stars triggered Cornell's wanderings and explorations but, paradoxically enough, they were also the ones who ended them. This paradox is incorporated into the construction of Cornell's boxes. Displayed behind glass, a clear vision of these women only becomes real at the moment that they become unreachable. Ashbery tells us:

. . . Cornell's boxes embody the substance of dreams so powerfully that it seems that these eminently palpable bits of wood, cloth, glass and metal must vanish the next moment, as when the atmosphere of a dream becomes so intensely realistic that you know you are about to wake up . . . (RS, 16-17)

Cornell's glazed boxes – microcosmic versions of his journeys as a wandering voyeur – invite us not only to look at his found objects but also to reflect on our own acts of seeing. Merleau-Ponty's "mirror-phenomenon" of "flesh," "the idea that every perception is doubled with counterperception . . . , is an act with two faces" (VI, 255, 264), allows us to articulate this threshold between the seeing and the seen.

If we take a look at Cornell's *Medici Slot Machine* (1942; Figure 7), his *Medici Princess* (c. 1948; Figure 8) and the *Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall* (1945-46; figure 9), we notice a wall of glass, a threshold between the objects and ourselves. This glass, tantamount to phenomenological brackets, underpins the fine line between distance and closeness, being seen and seeing. Precisely like Cornell's subjects, always staring at us from the centre of their constructions, we, the spectators, are what Merleau-Ponty terms "Visible-seer[s]" (VI, 260): just as they are the visible objects of our acts of seeing, so are we the visible objects towards which their gaze is directed. Their vision reciprocates ours, underscoring the simultaneity

of subject and object-world: “every perception is doubled with counterperception . . . , is an act with two faces.”

Like the glazed fronts of Cornell’s boxes, bracketing the ordinary, enclosing in order to disclose not just his chosen subjects but also the viewer in an important way, the mirror surface of Ashbery’s poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” functions as the fine line between affirmation and denial. The poem, which takes its name from and is a meditation on Parmigianino’s painting, opens as follows:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
 Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
 And swerving easily away, as though to protect
 What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams,
 Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together
 In a movement supporting the face, which swims
 Toward and away like the hand.

(*SP*, 188)

Just as Parmigianino’s head “swims / Toward and away like the hand” “as though to protect / What it advertises,” this long poem “veers in and out” (*SP*, 198) of focus, making *us* wander and wonder. Ashbery’s swimming *hand* gestures: “the ‘reality’ of the thing is . . . precisely what snatches it from our *grasp*.” We think that we have a grasp of what we see and then again we don’t. The metaphor of “swimming” supports the movement of the painter’s hand “thrust at the viewer.” Continually expanding and contracting, very much like waves in a sea, this waving hand at once pulls us in and yet pushes us away, challenging us to reflect on our own acts of reading, looking or touching, making us realise that we are at once visible objects and seeing subjects, tactile and touching, separate from and intertwined with the

visible world. Perpetual phenomenological reduction and expansion is the engine of the art of perception.²⁷

Like the face in the sky in Cézanne's *The Large Bathers* and the hidden "lady. . . writing" in Woolf's *The Waves*, the hand of Ashbery's Parmigianino gestures "come here" and then pushes us away. Again, Ashbery may have learned this phenomenological lesson from Cornell, since the seductive eyes of Cornell's Lauren Bacall, and the gazes of the Medici boy and Princess - whose poses and clothes are reminiscent of Parmigianino's Mannerist sitters - also gesture "come here" and then push us away, signalling "a combination / Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful / In its restraint that one cannot look for long" (*SP*, 189). What this tension between regret and pleasure suggests is that our objective, expressed vision of the seen, like the artist's finished work of art, will only ever be a "convex mirror," the seer's "reflection once removed" (*SP*, 188), that is to say, a belated and often slightly distorted expression of the intentional moment of insight, the "thing itself." "The words," writes Ashbery, "are only speculation / (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror): / They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music" (*SP*, 189). Our slippery hold on reality, making us unable completely to "box" it up is the regrettable and yet pleasurable reality of Cornell and Ashbery's perceptual reconstructions.

²⁷ Mary Ann Caws has invoked a notion of thresholds and self-reflexivity in Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" which might seem consonant with the one I am arguing for. Claiming that Ashbery's poem challenges us to "reflect on the reflecting of and on reflecting," she locates this self-reflexivity within a Surrealist attention to "weeping eye and pointing finger, both already metagestural in that they concern vision and are seen, pointing and are pointed to" as seen in the work of Breton, de Chirico and Max Ernst. But whereas Caws' notion of this perceptual "threshold" guides us into what she calls an "*inscape* rather than *outlook*. . . an inner scene . . . a private space," my phenomenological standpoint, aiming to release the poetics of Cornell and Ashbery from notions of entrapment or internalisation, rather points to the perpetual inter-relation and interaction between inside and outside. The reduction points out that objectivity arises from the intending subject. See Mary Ann Caws, *The Eye in the Text: Essays on Perception, Mannerist to Modernism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 51, 68, 19.

The poetic inquiries of Cornell and Ashbery, then, open onto the realm of possibility from which creativity arises, constantly sweeping us back to the primacy of perception, the “unbiased seeing of childhood.” Just as we can only see clearly when the lid is off a Cornell box, so does Ashbery’s work promote perpetual openness, preparing us “to begin again” (*SP*, 83), challenging us to wander in wonder through the space between being and meaning, primary perception and expression, the complete closure of which would mean the end of desire, and the end of creativity itself. Ashbery’s poem “Paradoxes and Oxymorons” is a witty and moving description of this paradoxical process, recalling the unreachable muses in Cornell’s boxes and stressing the phenomenological “fate of perception”:

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.

Look at it talking to you. You look out a window

Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.

You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.

The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot be.

(*SP*, 283)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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FIGURES 1-9

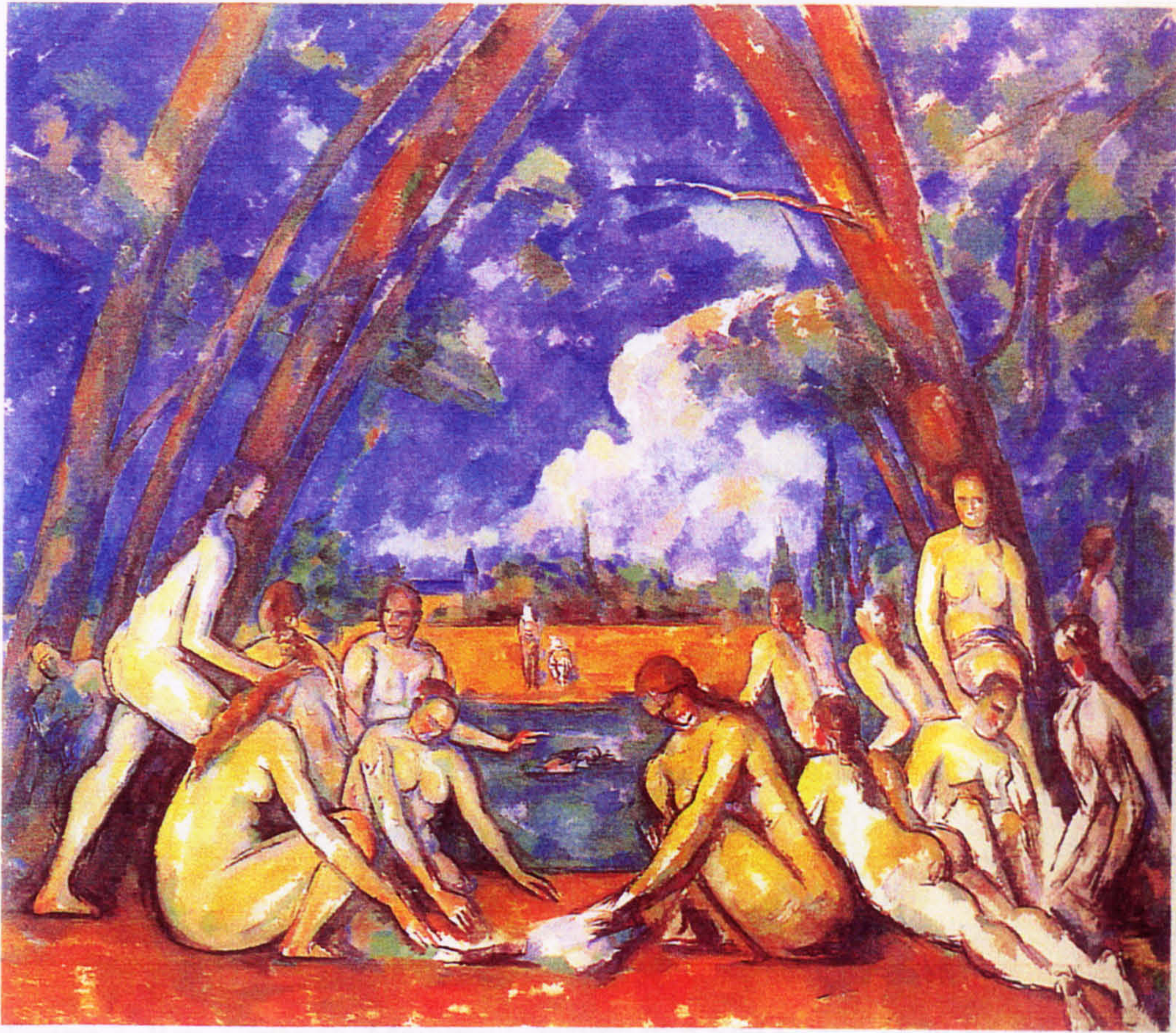


Figure 1. Paul Cézanne, *The Large Bathers*, 1906, oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

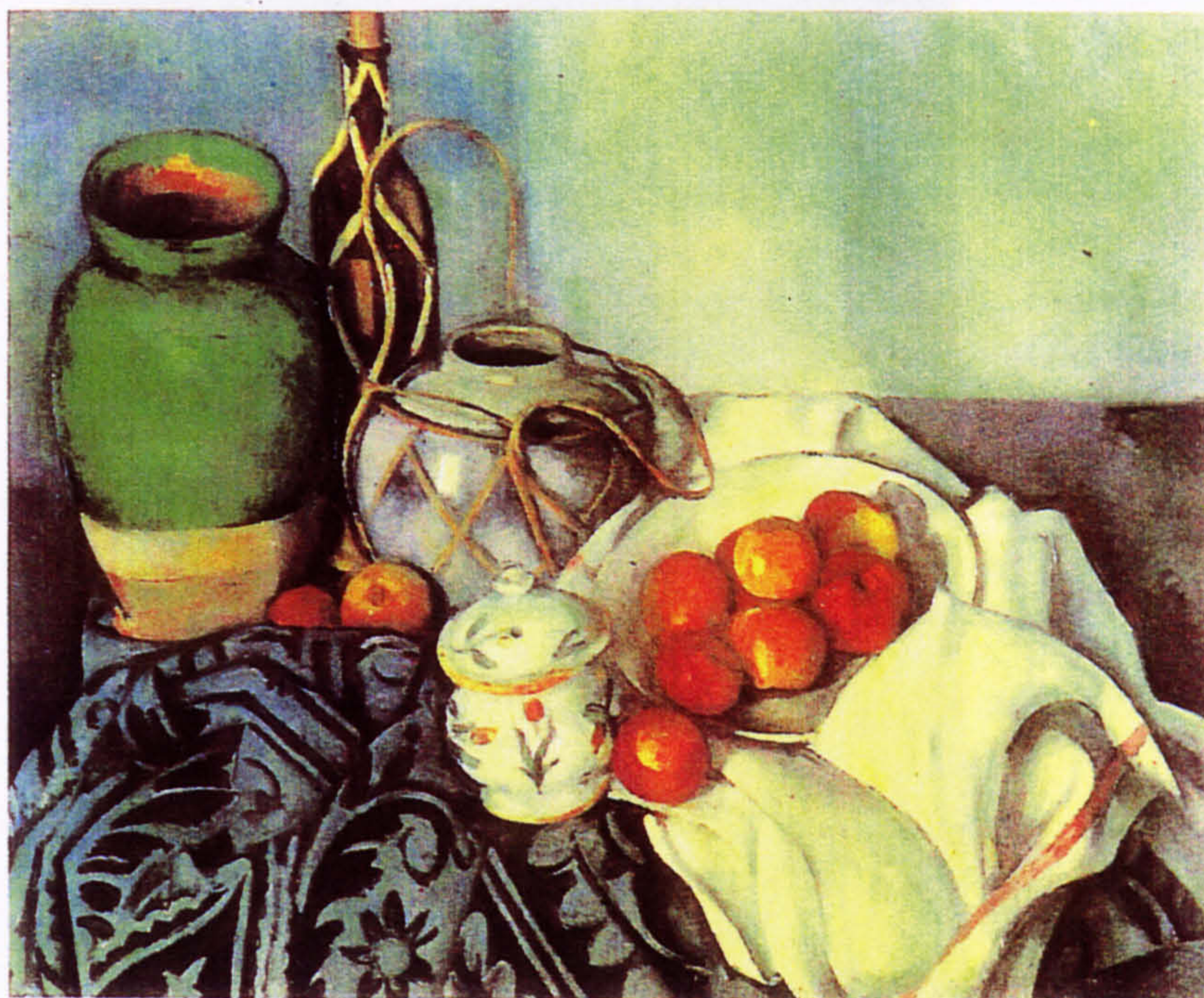


Figure 2. Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples*, 1893-94, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

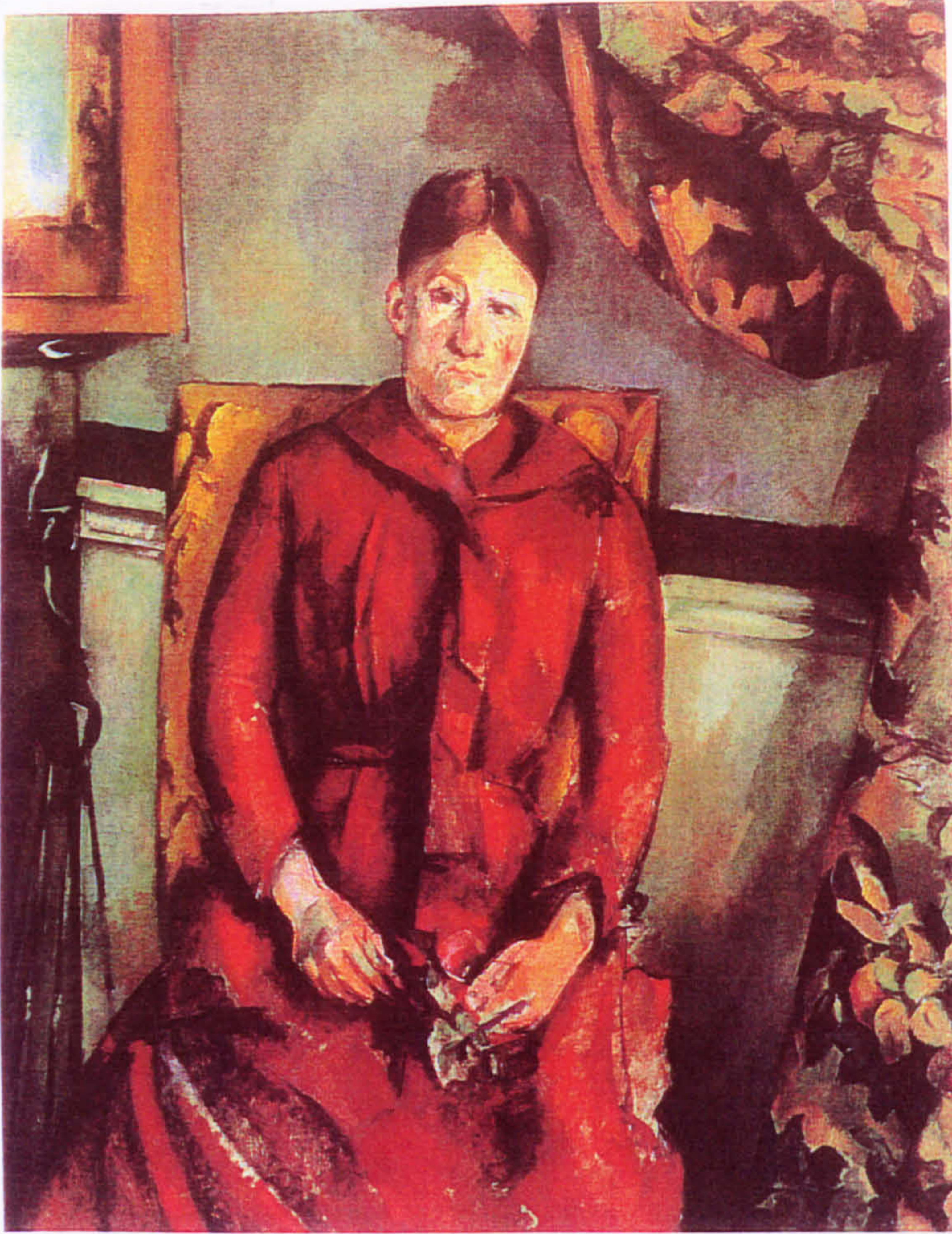


Figure 3. Paul Cézanne, *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress*, 1890-94, oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Mr. & Mrs. Henry Ittleson Jnr. Fund, 1906.



Figure 4. Paul Cézanne,
Old Woman with a Rosary, 1896-98,
oil on canvas. Paris.

Figure 4. Paul Cézanne,
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National Gallery, London.

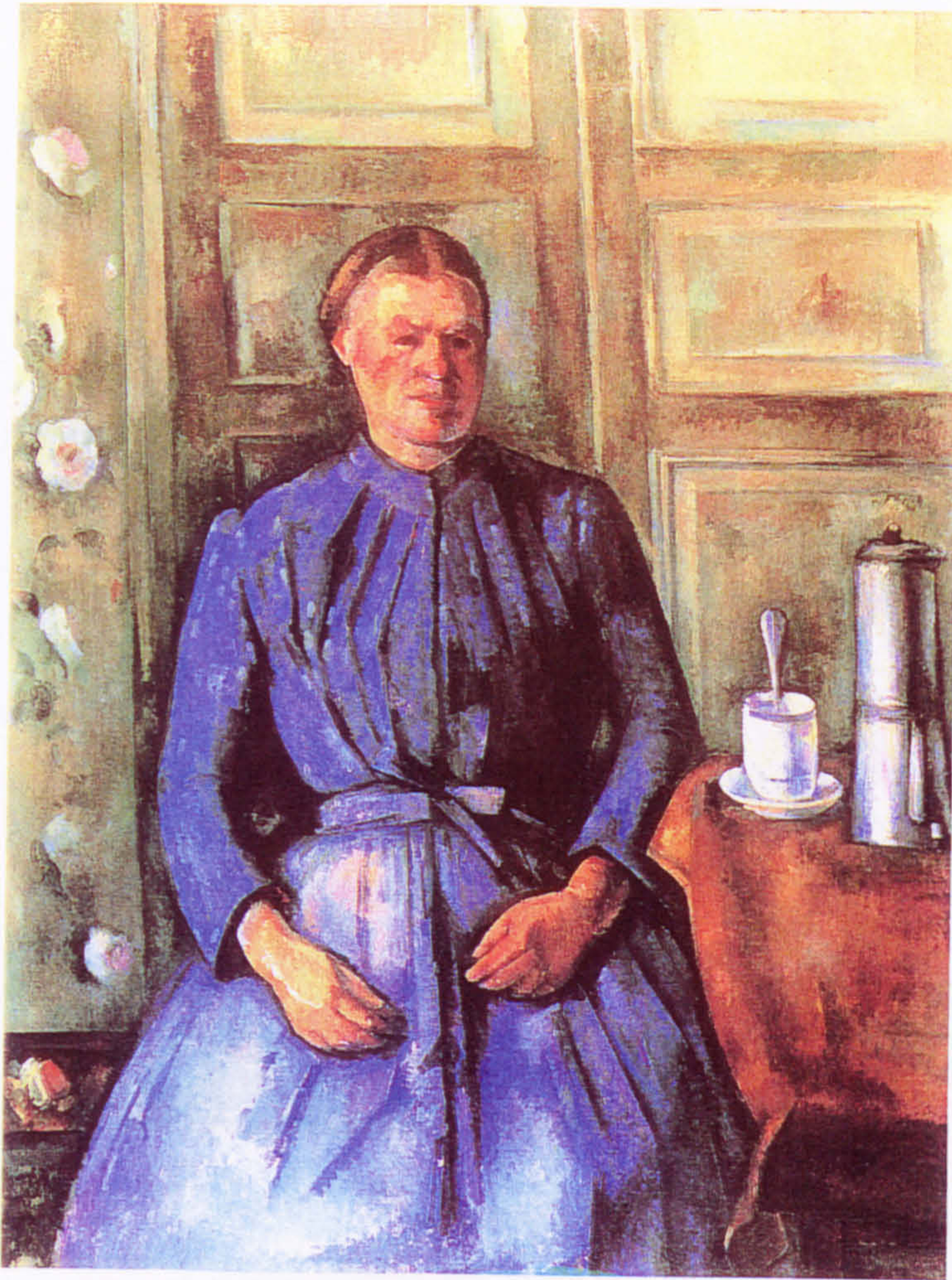


Figure 5. Paul Cézanne, *Woman with a Coffee-Pot*, c. 1893-5, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Figure 6. Paul Cézanne, *Boy with Skull*, 1896-98, oil on canvas. Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania.



Figure 7. Joseph Cornell, *Medici Slot Machine*, 1942, box construction. Private Collection, Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

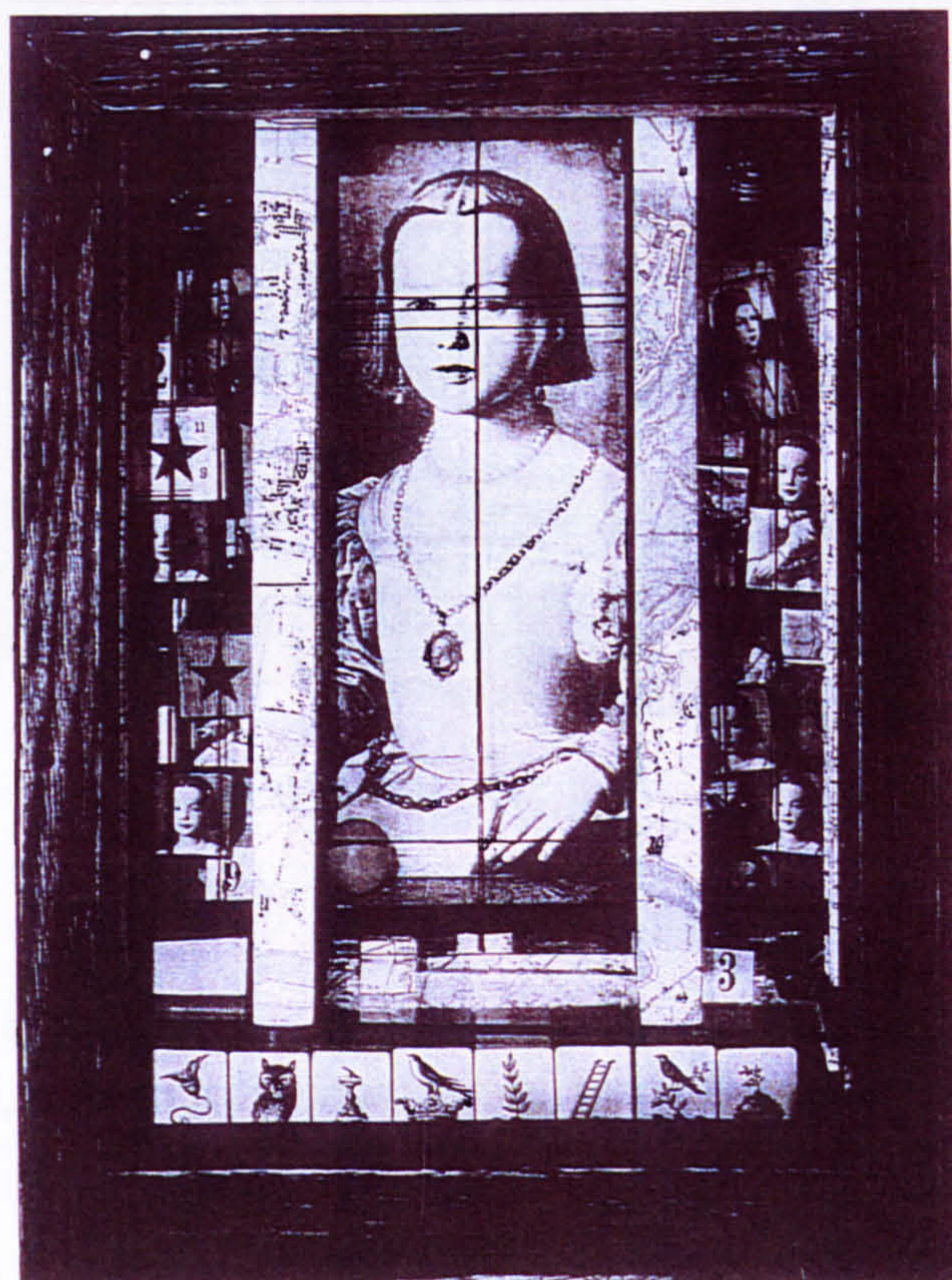


Figure 8. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Medici Princess)*, construction. Private Collection, New York.



Figure 9. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)*, 1945-6, mixed media construction, Lindy Bergman Collection, Chicago.

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