THE RHETORIC OF THE

ORDINARY:

MODERNISM AND THE LIMITS OF

LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contributes to the recent turn towards ordinary events, objects, and practices in scholarship on modernist literature. While modernism is typically characterized by formal experimentation and the aesthetics of shock, scholars are beginning to consider that many of the most potent energies animating modernism arise from its fascination with the ordinary. While this new approach has been productive, its tendency to minimise the rhetorical dimension of literature in favour of questions about content (what do modernist texts say about the ordinary?) and context (what ideas about the ordinary circulated in the period?) remains problematic.

That is because these approaches neglect a potent contradiction: if literature uses figurative language to depict the ordinary, does it not thereby transfigure what it represents by bringing it within the "charmed circle" of art? Whatever else modernism is, it is clearly concerned with putting pressure on the means by which likenesses and illusions are produced. Modernist texts, I argue, are drawn to elaborate means to declaim their status as representations: a "rhetoric of not having rhetoric" is integral to modernist representations of the quotidian. Out of this generative paradox arises the succession of rhetorical strategies that this dissertation identifies in the works of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce.

Recent scholarship has set the terms for a comprehensive reassessment of literary modernism, which this thesis pursues through explorations of modernism's relationship with realism, the avant-garde, mass culture, space and place, and the nature of modernity. My argument has specific ramifications for these ongoing debates in modernist studies, the relationship between rhetorical and historicist paradigms of literary criticism, and, above all, the fate of modernism: its legacies in twentieth century literature and its ongoing place in our public culture.

Dedicated to my parents, J. D. and D. K. Madden.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPP: T. S. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*.

MoA: Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*.

SCPP: Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose of Wallace Stevens*.

"TB": Gertrude Stein, "Tender Buttons."

U: James Joyce, *Ulysses*.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

Material appearing in chapter 3 has been published as "Arnold Bennett and the Making of *Sweeney Agonistes*," *Notes and Queries* 58.1 (2011): 106–10. Material appearing in chapter 4 has been published as "What's So Ordinary about Stevens' 'The Ordinary Women?'" *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 36.1 (Spring 2012): 9–22.

INTRODUCTION

I remember Yeats: "I have spent the whole of my life trying to get rid of rhetoric and have merely set up another."

— *Ezra Pound*[1]

If poetry introduces order, and every competent poem introduces order, and if order means peace, even though that particular peace is an illusion, is it any less an illusion than a good many other things… Isn't a freshening of life a thing of consequence?

—*Wallace Stevens*[2]

Ordinariness, the ubiquitous condition in which we are immersed for most of our lives, is, from one point of view, the implicit subject of a great deal of twentieth century literature and thought, though it has only recently begun to be recognized as such. The ordinary as

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[1] Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 245.

[2] Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 293.

a topic of enquiry is by nature capacious, and any
attempt to limit it to a manageable scope will run the
risk of arbitrariness. This introduction will delimit as
much as possible what I mean by the ordinary, before
showing that the ordinary presents itself as a special
problem in the context of modernity. The rapidly shifting
horizons of historical and social possibility that
characterize our historical condition make the ordinary a
site of continuous change. The ordinary in modernist
writing is thus paradoxical: it is both a refuge from
history and the strongest index of its relentless
movement. Indeed, it may be that the social upheaval of
modernity is necessary to bring the ordinary into view at
all, by providing a standpoint outside of the immersion
in custom and tradition that characterizes pre-modern
societies.[3]

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[3] This anthropological dilemma has been a recurrent theme
of ethnographic theory from the Bronislaw Malinowski's
Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922), which identifies
the object of ethnography as "the imponderabilia of
actual life," to Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of
Cultures* (1973), which insists on the paradoxical
necessity and impossibility of value-neutral description
of culture as a precursor to theory. Geertz, *The
Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973),

This, I think, accounts for the recurrent lapses into nostalgia that characterize one strain amongst modernist writers and their critics. "Modernism," declared Louis Menand, "is a reaction against the modern," but this, I think, accounts for only one of a variety of competing impulses among most modernist writers, and, indeed, within most modernist works.[4] The challenge for the critic is to weigh these competing impulses in a way that avoids what Theodor Adorno would call a false reconciliation. "A thing final in itself and, therefore, good," as Stevens put it in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," will necessarily elude us; in the condition of modernity, "It must change."[5] This study emphasizes the strain of modernism that Menand's aperçu neglects: the playful, often irreverent side that turns the ordinary stuff of modernity into *materia poetica*. This is not to

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3-30; Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 1922), 18.

[4] Louis Menand, "T. S. Eliot and Modernity," *New England Quarterly* 69.4 (1996): 554.

[5] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 336, 350. Hereafter cited in text as "*SCPP*."

say that modernist literature did not frequently evince anxiety about modernization and its repercussions. But the revival of modernist studies since the 1990s has generally endorsed the view that "rather than being a reaction against or an escape from the forces of modernity, cultural Modernism is implicated in numerous ways with the scientific, technological, and political shifts which characterize the modern era."[6]

Throughout this study I use the term "ordinary" to denote objects, practices, and modes of attention that do not usually call attention to themselves, that seem to most of us, most of the time, unworthy of reflection. I choose "ordinary" in part as a reflection of its Latin etymology, from the noun *ordo*, arrangement, which also gives us the English "order," to express the conviction that when we turn our attention on ordinary phenomena, what we discover there is not inchoate psychological sensation, insensate materiality, or the traumatic capital-R real. Rather, the ordinary is a, perhaps the, locus of social and material meaning, a vivid

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[6] Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

constellation of social relations subject always to processes of historical change and development. That said, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, "Le quotidien: ce qu'il y a de plus difficile à découvrir."[7] That is to say, the ordinary has a habit of frustrating our attempts to analyze it or theorize about it; for, once the heavy machinery of empirical inquiry or speculative thought is brought to bear, the ordinariness of the ordinary seems to evaporate: "Le quotidien a ce trait essential: il ne se laisse pas saisir. Il échappe."[8]

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[7] Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 355. "The quotidian: the most difficult thing to discover." Cf. Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies* 73, Everyday Life (1987): 12–20.

[8] Blanchot, *L'entretien infini*, 357. "The quotidian has this essential trait: it doesn't allow itself to be caught. It escapes." Blanchot, like Michel de Certeau, uses the term *le quotidien*, as opposed to Lefebvre's *la vie quotidienne*, which, while it still connotes the daily, also encompasses a more capacious sense akin to "ordinary" in English. This is the sense in which I use the term "ordinary," and why in the course of my argument I allow some slippage between it and the term "everyday life."

The same problem arises in art: literary representation seems to turn a transfiguring gaze upon its objects. Literary works are necessarily limited in size and scope, and as a result they presuppose an economy of attention: the text itself can only offer a finite amount of detail, leaving the appurtenances of ordinary life—from the furnishings of a room to characters' bodily cycles and everything in between—merely implied. We tend to assume that everything presented explicitly by the literary text *signifies*. This convention applies even more forcefully to lyric poetry than to realist narration: lyric poems are characterized by their almost hyperbolic attention to their subjects, which, through the inherent ambiguity of lyric form, become amenable to any number of metaphorical transformations or symbolic recuperations.[9] The power that this convention holds over readers is exemplified in poems that resist it, like Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar":

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
>
> And round it was, upon a hill.

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[9] I am indebted to Jonathan Culler on this point; See Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* [forthcoming].

It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,

And sprawled around, no longer wild.

The jar was round upon the ground

And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.

The jar was gray and bare.

It did not give of bird or bush,

Like nothing else in Tennessee.

(*SCPP*, 60-1)

When lyric attention is directed toward an object so
banal as a mason jar, and so deracinated as to be placed
on a hill in Tennessee, the effect is, so to speak,
jarring. The jar is "tall of a port in air," that is,
empty; the most it signifies is a refusal to signify. The
term "anecdote" in the poem's title says much: in its
original meaning, "anecdote" referred to "secret, private,

or hitherto unpublished narratives or details of history,"
a category obviously apt for the ordinary.[10]

That there is a modernist fascination with the mute
object world and its resistance to literary
representation is well attested in recent criticism.[11] But
this line of thinking has frequently veered towards what
Victoria Coulson memorably describes as "Heidegger's
melancholy idealism," registering a "profound distrust of
language's postlapsarian disconnection from the real."[12]
As such, by using the term "ordinary," I also intend to
evoke the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein, J.
L. Austin, et al. In any deployment of the term

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[10] "anecdote, n." OED Online. September 2013. Oxford
University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/7367
(accessed November 21, 2013).

[11] See Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects : Modernism and the Test
of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1998); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter
of American Literature* (Chicago and London: University of
Chicago Press, 2003); Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in
Things, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago and London: University of
Chicago Press, 2004).

[12] Victoria Coulson, "Things," in *Henry James in Context*,
ed. David Bruce McWhirter (Cambridge and New York:
Cambridge University Press, 2010), 323.

"ordinary," the question arises, "ordinary as opposed to what?" For Wittgenstein, the answer was "metaphysics," and indeed, the whole philosophical and scientistic jargon that it brings to bear on the problems of philosophy. Wittgenstein and his successors, by contrast, stress the sufficiency of ordinary language to formulate and to resolve philosophical issues:

> "problems are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling what we have long been familiar with. Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language."[13]

This is the sense of the ordinary set out at length by Stanley Cavell, as a force that wards off the threat of

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[13] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations*, Rev. 4th ed. trans. G. E. M. Anscombe et al. (Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 52.

skepticism, that is, the immobilizing possibility of communicative failure.[14]

Wittgenstein's sense of the ordinary has been a spur to much of the tradition known as everyday life theory, most obviously in the case of Michel de Certeau, who sees in Wittgenstein's work "a philosophical blueprint for a contemporary science of the ordinary."[15] A similar sense of the ordinary's potential clearly lies at the heart of Henry Lefebvre's project, too:

> All we need do is simply to open our eyes, to leave
> the dark world of metaphysics and the false depths
> of the "inner life" behind, and we will discover the

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[14] Stanley Cavell, "The Uncaniness of the Ordinary," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1988), 154.

[15] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 14.

immense human wealth that the humblest facts of

everyday life contain.[16]

But recent accounts of modernism and the ordinary have

differed on the merit and applicability of everyday life

theory. Whereas Bryony Randall and Lorraine Sim situate

their work as specific responses to this tradition,

Siobhan Philips and Liesl Olson either elide it or

explicitly deny its relevance.[17] For Olson, "the everyday

life described by Lefebvre differs historically from the

everyday of literary modernism," in part due to the

former's preoccupation with consumer culture, a social

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[16] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. I,
Introduction, trans. John Moore (London and New York:
Verso, 1991), 132.

[17] Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*
(Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,
2008); Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of
Ordinary Experience* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate,
2010); Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford
and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Siobhan
Phillips, *Poetics of the Everyday: Creative Repetition in
Modern American Verse* (New York: Columbia University
Press, 2010).

configuration that according to Olson emerged only after the Second World War, at least in France.[18] As both an historical and a philosophical claim, this study disagrees firmly: the development of consumer culture and its impact on ordinary life is one of its recurrent preoccupations.[19] As Lefebvre himself puts it, "modernity and everydayness constitute a deep structure."[20] Recent contributions to cultural studies and the history of

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[18] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 13.

[19] "Thing theorists" are not the only critics to focus attention on commodities and consumer culture in modernism; this has been a topic of lively debate in Joyce studies, with notable contributions from Thomas Richards, who offers an almost Althusserian attack on the consumerist ideology represented in "Nausicaa," prompting a powerful rejoinder inflected with the outlook of Michel de Certeau from Garry Leonard. Cf. Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 205-48; Garry Martin Leonard, *Advertising and Commodity Culture in Joyce* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 98-141.

[20] Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," trans. Christine Levich, *Yale French Studies* 73, Everyday Life (1987): 11.

ideas by Ben Highmore and Michael Sheringham have not only elaborated a canon of thought on the everyday, but stressed its shared intellectual horizons with aspects of modernist literature.[21] Rita Felski has identified everyday life as an urgent topic for feminist intervention, and this argument has been taken up by Bryony Randall, in a compelling account of the everyday in modernist literature as specifically bound up with daily temporality, canvassing issues of work, leisure, and so on.[22] Randall also holds that everyday life theory and the criticism instigated by it have neglected the temporality of the everyday for an excessive focus on space; in my discussions of Eliot and Stevens, however, I will show that even spatial accounts of the everyday have neglected modernity's more subtle dialectic of place and space.

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[21] Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[22] Rita Felski, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 33.4, Everyday Life (Autumn 2002): 612. Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, 10-20.

The emergence of everyday life theory in the mid-twentieth century is deeply bound up in the debates over ideology, political praxis, and the relationship between individual and society that convulsed Western Marxism during the early twentieth century, and which, in large part, gave rise to critical theory. There are any number of ways to recount this history; my own preference is to situate the question of the ordinary in relation to the concept of social totality that animated much of this debate. As Martin Jay argues,

"Totality" has indeed enjoyed a privileged place in the discourse of Western culture. Resonating with affirmative connotations, it has generally been associated with other positively charged words, such as coherence, order, fulfillment, harmony, plenitude, meaningfulness, consensus and community. And concomitantly, it has been contrasted with such negatively valenced concepts as alienation, fragmentation, disorder, conflict, contradiction, serialization, atomization and estrangement.[23]

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[23] Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality : The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 21.

Just as modernity has often been characterized as a falling away from order and plenitude into a fragmented and alienated state, so the everyday is invoked either as the victim of this process or its remedy. What Jay calls "the holistic impulse in Western Marxism" arises from the humanism that gained ground amongst Marxist theoreticians outside the Soviet Union beginning roughly in the 1920s, inaugurated by György Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. In that work, Lukács devoted considerable space to developing the concept of "reification," the putative power of the commodity form to disguise the social character of human relations behind a façade of objectivity.[24] Reification is an effect of the division of labor, which Marx identifies in *The German Ideology* as a state wherein "man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him." Implicit in the idea is a holistic view of human endeavor that sees specialization of any kind as a sacrifice of human potential.

While the concept of reification appears in *Capital*, the new centrality accorded to it and, in particular, to the related concept of "alienation" in Western Marxism

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[24] Ibid., 244.

represents a shift in emphasis toward capitalist society
conceived not merely as an economic structure, but as a
social totality encompassing philosophical and cultural
aspects. This is the descriptive use of totality, which
stresses the interrelatedness of social, cultural, and
economic phenomena, as distinct from the normative use,
which designates the historical *telos* of a society free
from alienation.[25] Alienation is reification writ large,
encompassing the full range of subjective and cultural
ramifications of reified social relations. The argument
that the concept of alienation should form the fulcrum of
Marxist critique was bolstered considerably by the
rediscovery of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical
Manuscripts of 1844* and their publication in 1927.
Sympathetic interpreters stress that Marx's critique of
capitalism is in no way a sanction for nostalgia, that
rather he acknowledges alienation and estrangement as
"necessary stages on the road to a higher level of
fulfillment."[26] In practice, though, the rare instances in
which Marx offers his reader a glimpse of a future
communist society do tend to resemble an idealized past,
as in *The German Ideology*: "Nobody has one exclusive
sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in

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[25] Ibid., 23.

[26] Ibid., 63.

any branch he wishes… to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner."[27] But despite Marx's refusal of nostalgia, locating an absent wholeness and plenitude in the past or in a utopian future amounts to much the same gesture.

That gesture is a recurrent feature of both Western Marxist theorizing and modernist literature, which have both tended to locate the world before the fall somewhat closer to the present. Theodor Adorno, for instance, took the catastrophes of the twentieth century to indicate that the dream of a normative social totality would never be achieved; indeed, from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on, "the concept of totality lost nearly all of its positive connotations and became almost a synonym for totalitarianism."[28] Modernity, for Adorno, implies the deadening ascendency of the professional/managerial class, ushering in "the administered world," or, as the subtitle

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[27] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 54; ibid.

[28] Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 261.

of *Minima Moralia* has it, "damaged life."[29] Hence Adorno's famous aesthetic of modernism:

> The work of art 'reflects' society and is historical to the degree that it *refuses* the social, and represents the last refuge of individual subjectivity from the historical forces that threaten to crush it… Thus the socio-economic is inscribed in the work, but as concave to convex, as negative to positive.[30]

For Adorno, the collapse of the social totality in modernity demands truthful representation in formal terms by the art of the present, rather than a revival of the past, however ironic: "in philosophy, as in music,

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[29] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), 38; Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

[30] Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 34–5.

atonality was more 'truthful' than an 'extorted reconciliation.'"[31]

In this, Adorno demonstrates his complex indebtedness to the modernist aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, who had advocated "the art of interruption in contrast to the chain of deduction; the tenacity of the essay in contrast to the single gesture of the fragment; the repetition of themes in contrast to shallow universalism; the fullness of concentrated positivity in contrast to the negation of polemic."[32] Adorno would go on to echo Benjamin's praise of the essay, though not his dichotomy between essay and fragment, in his own celebrated account of the "Essay as Form." That work of Adorno's has lately taken on key significance in accounts of the ordinary, as Michael Sheringham has identified it as an aesthetic of the everyday that would reach full fruition in the work of Georges Perec: "Important here— and this parallels a deep-seated tendency in approaches to the *quotidien*—is the small scale ('little acts of knowledge'), the detail ('the claim of the particular to truth'), and the concrete, experimental stance of the

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[31] Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 255.

[32] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 32.

essay."[33] These are the tropes common to that heterodox strain of Marxism embodied by the Frankfurt School.

France had no institutional equivalent to the Frankfurt School, but it did produce a theoretician who, like Benjamin, possessed a masterful command of the philosophical tradition and whose Marxism was also transfigured by his encounter with Surrealism in the 1920s. If Adorno's thought is characterized by its pessimism about prospects for a normative social totality and endorses fragmentation as an appropriate aesthetic for contemporary art, Henri Lefebvre defends a utopian vision of social transformation, and does so from the perspective of everyday life. Lefebvre's three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* is the classic statement on everyday life in the twentieth century, although its legacy is still vigorously debated.[34] Whereas Adorno disparaged alienation and manifested a consistent

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[33] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 53.

[34] Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. I; Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. II*, Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, trans. John Moore (London and New York: Verso, 2002); Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. III, *From Modernity to Modernism*, trans. John Moore and Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2008).

preference for the later Marx, Lefebvre makes recourse to the concept throughout his discussion of everyday life: "We would suggest that alienation is spreading and becoming so powerful that it obliterates all trace or consciousness of alienation."[35] That said, "like the Surrealists who first sparked his interest in totality, Lefebvre remained doggedly optimistic in his belief that alienation could be overcome."[36] Thus when Frederic Jameson anoints Lefebvre "the last great classical philosopher," he means the last to relinquish social totality as the framework of his critique.[37]

The distinction between descriptive and normative concepts of totality that Jay develops maps exactly onto Lefebvre's work; there is, we might say, a descriptive everyday life, the particular character of ordinary life in a given time and place, and a normative everyday life, a utopian vision of a society that has overcome alienation. Specialization remains the fulcrum of this discussion: the everyday is "what is left when you subtract higher activities," that is, when we

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[35] Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Allen Lane, 1971), 94.

[36] Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 298.

[37] See Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. I.

strip human activity of what pertains to specialized

activities, removing all technical knowledge and

expertise and simply leaving such everyday factors

as effort, time, and rhythm.[38]

Importantly, though, however much importance Lefebvre's theory lays on the overall problem of alienation, it also plays host to a contradictory impulse that identifies the everyday as a *niveau de réalité* that contains within itself the potential for its own transformation. It takes the form of an uncontainable excess: the everyday is a "something which reveals the inability of forms (individually and as a whole) to grasp content, to integrate it and to exhaust it."[39] That is to say, "the turn to the 'hidden', 'despised', remaindered and 'microscopic' content of everyday experience unites the everyday with what *escapes* the totalization of reason and

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[38] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 147–8. C.f. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. II, 52.

[39] Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. II, 64.

systematic philosophy."[40] This sense of the everyday as that which strains against the limits of form is central to my account of modernist formal experimentation.

Lefebvre offers a much clearer sense of what a normative totality might look like than Marx did, particularly in a famous section of *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, entitled "Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside."[41] There, Lefebvre constructs an idealized image of the *fête*, or carnival, in which, he holds, a prior social configuration effectively sacralized the everyday, and dramatized the "dialogic moments of struggle" within it.[42] Sympathetic commentators like Highmore reject the view that this strain of Lefebvre's thought is reducible to "nostalgia for an unrecoverable past," emphasizing instead that the dynamism of Lefebvre's conception contrasts with the static images of "forests and *volk*" to be found in Heidegger, for instance.[43] But this tendency to align normative totality with archaic social forms has its dark

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[40] John Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory* (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006), 63.

[41] Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. I, 201–27.

[42] Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 125.

[43] Ibid.

obverse in Lefebvre's almost histrionic denunciation of certain aspects of modernity, notably postwar urbanism. "Every time I see these 'machines for living in' I feel terrified," he writes of the new town of Mourenx. The first volume of *Critique of Everyday Life* ends with an extended invocation of the Nazi death camps, leading to the conclusion "if Fascism represents the most extreme form of capitalism, the concentration camp is the most extreme and paroxysmal form of a modern housing estate."[44] The critique of everyday life might amount to "a study of alienation under conditions of modernity," but yet, just as surely as everyday life goes on inside the modern housing estate, there is also an ethical value in attending to it for its own sake, and not merely as an object of condemnation.[45] This conflict between normative and descriptive meanings of the everyday recurs throughout both critical discussions of modernity, and modernist literature.

It should be acknowledged, though, that following the end of the Cold War, this vocabulary has come to seem shopworn. However valuable a Marxist account of history has been and continues to be, present discussion has ossified around the risibly premature term "late

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[44] Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Vol. I, 245.

[45] Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 120.

capitalism." Moreover, following a wave of skepticism about the claims of the Enlightenment, augmented by the postcolonial critique that identifies imperialism as its logical extension, critical theory has tended to deny the emancipatory potential of modernity entirely. That the result of so much Marxist theorizing should be a distinctly un-dialectical account of our present state is a peculiar irony. Theory's intransigence in the face of an increasingly dynamic and global capitalism is only exacerbated by arguments like Jameson's, which make scholarly activity the focus of that familiar anxiety about specialization:

> The system has always understood that ideas and
> analysis, along with the intellectuals who practice
> them, are its enemies and has evolved various ways
> of dealing with the situation, most notably—in the
> academic world—by railing against what it likes to
> call grand theory or master narratives at the same
> time that it fosters more comfortable and local

positivisms and empiricisms in the various

disciplines.[46]

Why the local and the empirical should be conflated with positivism, and why especially any of these approaches should be more comfortable than theory, is unclear. Nonetheless, I hold that to attend to the ordinary is to assert the local and the empirical against *all* totalizing systems, be they theoretical *or* positivistic in orientation.

Arguments like Jameson's are unappealing in part because they are coercive: only theory can successfully resist "the system"; other approaches—particularly those that might undermine or circumscribe the theoretical project in any way—are *ipso facto* complicit with capital. Some version of this anxiety must help to account for the current ubiquity of interdisciplinary approaches in the humanities, and the ordinary is, by its nature, an interdisciplinary topic of inquiry. This study remains resolutely literary in its focus, but it nonetheless draws upon a particular sociological model of modernity;

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[46] Frederic Jameson, "The Theoretical Hesitation: Benjamin's Sociological Predecessor," *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999): 267.

not to acknowledge one would, after all, only be to adhere to one implicitly. The model I have in mind is Anthony Giddens's theory of modernity, set out in a number of works from the 1990s, when the need for a post-Marxist sociology was felt most keenly.[47] Giddens characterizes modernity as a social system defined by its dynamism, which in turn derives from three sources:

> The *separation of time and space* and their recombination in forms which permit the precise time-space "zoning" of social life; the *disembedding* of social systems (a phenomenon which connects closely with the factors involved in time-space separation); and the *reflexive ordering and*

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[47] Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pierson, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

reordering of social relations in the light of

continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions

of individuals and groups.[48]

The first two points are the most germane to a discussion of everyday life, and indeed, are hardly extricable from one another. Giddens glosses the point thus: "The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between 'absent' others, locationally distinct from any given situation of face-to-face interaction."[49] What Giddens means by a separation between space and time is epitomized by the "communications revolution" of the early nineteenth century, especially the development of the telegraph: it was no longer necessary to physically transport a message from place to place; instantaneous communication over unfathomable distances became possible for the first time.[50]

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[48] Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 19.

[49] Ibid.

[50] "The most important fact about the telegraph is at once the most obvious and innocent: It permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation." James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman,

The net result of this separation of time and space is the process Giddens describes as *disembedding*, or "the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space."[51] Giddens also identifies two of what he calls "disembedding mechanisms": the creation of symbolic tokens, and the establishment of expert systems. By the former, Giddens means money, which, following Talcott Parsons, he situates alongside power and language as the "circulating mediums" of modernity.[52] The latter need not concern us overly, except to note that where the Marxist tradition sees a diminution of human potential through the division of labor, Giddens sees a necessary development in social organization. We specialize for the same reason that we narrativize: in order to manage complexity.

The net effect of disembedding might appear to be the wholesale destruction of tradition for which modernity is often reproached, but Giddens makes an important caveat: "modernity has rebuilt tradition as it

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1989), 203. Cf. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 690-8.

[51] Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 21.

[52] Ibid., 23.

has dissolved it."[53] Moreover, the reconstruction of tradition is an ongoing and dynamic process, which has left its mark on many of the intellectual and cultural endeavors of the modernist period, including psychoanalysis, which responds to a moment in which

> traditions in everyday life were beginning to creak and strain under the impact of modernity. As tradition dissolves, one can speculate, 'trace memory' is left more nakedly exposed, as well as more problematic in respect of the construction of identity and the meaning of social norms.[54]

Modernity, in other words, is characterized by rapidly shifting horizons of ordinary experience, in which the process of historical change produces an uncanny

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[53] Giddens draws particular attention to the cluster of rituals and observances that surround the concept of the nation, an argument that accords with Eric Hobsbawm's notion of "invented tradition." Cf. Beck et al., *Reflexive Modernization*, 56; E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[54] Beck, et al., *Reflexive Modernization*, 67.

uncertainty between tradition's destruction and its persistence. A vital reason for studying modernist literature, then, is that it registers this uncertainty while also participating directly in modernity's reconstruction of tradition, for instance, in its co-optations of the commodity form and its interventions in debate over literary canons.

The interpenetration of everyday life by the kinds of abstract systems that Giddens identifies is also apparent to Lefebvre, who draws particular attention to it in *Everyday Life in the Modern World*: "Everyday life must shortly become the one perfect system… it would be the main product of the so-called 'organized' society of controlled consumption and of its setting, modernity."[55] Lefebvre, like so many of his fellow theoreticians of the everyday, is echoing Max Weber's famous figure of modernity as a state of imprisonment within an "immutable shell" of bureaucratic rationality.[56] Lefebvre himself

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[55] Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 72–3.

[56] The *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, or "immutable shell," is better known to English-language readers as the "iron cage" of Talcott Parsons' translation. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells

uses a slightly different metaphor with his famous

formulation "the colonization of everyday life,"

subsequently taken up with vigor by the Situationists.[57]

On this point, French and German traditions coincide:

Jürgen Habermas, in a sense the last representative of

the Frankfurt School, posits a "colonization of the

lifeworld," in which the extension of abstract systems

into everyday life diminishes the agency of the

individuals who are subject to them.[58] Giddens departs

from this view by emphasizing the dialectical

relationship between these abstract systems and ordinary

practices. Moreover, positing a pre-existent lifeworld

that modernity then impinges upon and disrupts is itself

a trope of modernity.[59] Radical social change may be a

(London: Penguin Books, 2002), xxiv, 13, 121. Cf. Beck,

et al., *Reflexive Modernization*, 58.

[57] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 360.

[58] Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*,

2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 196; Giddens, *The

Consequences of Modernity*, 144.

[59] "One of the distinguishing characteristics of the

nineteenth-century sense of time, then, is the

dramatization of change as the restless iteration of the

new, and also the insistence that the experience of this

change is unique and foundational to the idea of

constant feature of modernity, but any attempt to measure
that dynamism by reference to a prior social formation
will necessarily be a reconstruction of it.

The ordinary in modernity is thus characterized, we
might say, by rapidly shifting horizons of expectation.
In other words, it might be the very rapidity of those
shifts that makes the ordinary visible under the
condition of modernity. Sociological models like
Giddens's can only amount to heuristics in the context of
a literary study; they are, like literary texts, also
assemblages of tropes. But to characterize modernity in
such a way allows us to situate the modernist turn to the
ordinary with reference to a broader set of cultural
conventions, which the specific aspects of modernity I
have just outlined begin to place under strain. I am
referring to the Aristotelian poetics of narrative, which,
though they might be more honored in the breach than in
the observance at times, have exercised a determining
influence on Western literature since the Renaissance.

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modernity. It may well be the greatest conceit of
modernity to claim for itself the special consciousness
of transition and indeterminacy." Peter Fritzsche,
*Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy
of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
2004), 53-4.

"The signal event in this history of literary criticism
in the Italian Renaissance," writes Bernard Weinberg,
"was the discovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* and its
incorporation into the critical tradition." Weinberg
describes a process of dissemination beginning with
Giorgio Valla's Latin translation of 1498, culminating
with Bernardo Segni's Italian translation of 1549. From
the mid-sixteenth century on, a thriving tradition of
commentary and exegesis developed.[60]

The rediscovery of Aristotle brought back into the
Western literary consciousness an aesthetic of *decorum*
that stressed a high degree of spatiotemporal and
logical-causal connectedness as the foundation of
narrative. Aristotle's project is to defend mimesis, that
is, fictional representation, from Plato's attack on it
in *The Republic* by showing that mimesis leads to
philosophically significant forms of comprehension. To
make this case, Aristotle takes on Plato's argument from
the *Theatetus* that philosophy begins in wonder.[61] The

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[60] Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in
the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Chicago
University Press, 1961), 349, 422.

[61] For a Cartesian exploration of the aesthetics of wonder,
see Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the*

wonderful, then, becomes in a sense the essence of mimesis, its most sought-after effect. Much of the *Poetics*, then, is given over to describing how the poet, especially the tragedian, might elicit wonder from his audience without straining their credulity beyond breaking point. Thus, in a discussion of the characteristic tragic affects fear and pity from chapter 9:

> Given that the mimesis is not only of a complete action but also of fearful and pitiable matters, the latter arise above all when events occur contrary to expectation yet on account of one another. The awesome will be maintained in this way more than through show of chance and fortune.[62]

The surprise that provokes the audience's wonder must be able to be resolved into a coherent, logically and

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Aesthetics of Rare Experiences (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 10-1.

[62] The translator glosses "awesome," *thaumaston*, as "wonder" in a footnote. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 63n.88.

causally consistent, sequence of events. The audience's decoding of that sequence mimics the process of philosophical understanding.

However, Aristotle also appears to contradict himself on the question of wonder when, in chapter 24, he writes:

> In tragedy one needs to create a sense of awe, but epic has more scope for the irrational (the chief cause of awe [wonder]), because we do not actually see the agent… Awe is pleasurable: witness the fact that all men exaggerate when relating stories, to give delight… Things probable though impossible should be preferred to the possible but implausible. Stories should not comprise irrational components; ideally there should be no irrationality, or failing that, it should lie outside the plot.[63]

The concluding remarks in this passage plainly contradict its opening, where irrationality is cited as "the chief cause" of wonder. Stephen Halliwell, Aristotle's translator and commentator, suggests that wonder,

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[63] Ibid., 123–5.

properly conceived, "lies on the boundary between the
explicable and the inexplicable, and so can slip into the
latter (and hence become irrational) or, properly used,
may stimulate and challenge understanding."[64] The
relevance of this paradox to the aesthetics of modernism
is readily apparent; as Lawrence Rainey argues,
"Modernism, with all its machineries of extremism, was
anything but eager to resolve the experience of
wonder/horror into the ready comprehensibility of
spatiotemporal and logico-causal connectedness."[65] And
with the foregoing discussion of modernity in mind, we
can see why: in a world of disembedding, abstract systems,
and time-space distanciation, the canons of Aristotelian
decorum must appear outdated, to say the least.

But it is not only modernism's "machineries of
extremism" that resist recuperation into narrative. The
ordinary, the opposite of the wonderful, would seem to

[64] Aristotle, *Aristotle's* Poetics, trans. Stephen
Halliwell (London: Duckworth, 1986), 75n.41.

[65] Lawrence Rainey, "Introduction," in *Modernism: An
Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Maldon, MA and Oxford:
Blackwell, 2005), xxvi. My discussion of Aristotle is
indebted to *Modernism: An Anthology* and Lawrence Rainey,
Revisiting The Waste Land (New Haven and London: Yale
University Press, 2005).

constitute a fundamentally anti-Aristotelian aesthetic.
Phillip Fisher's excellent exploration of the nexus
between aesthetics and epistemology, *Wonder, the Rainbow,
and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, situates wonder
even more fundamentally in relation to the artwork:

> To characterize wonder we are forced to look at its
> alternative, the qualities of the ordinary, and
> paradoxically what we end up saying is that there
> cannot be any experience of the ordinary. As a
> result, surprise, the eliciting of notice, become
> the very heart of what it means to 'have an
> experience' at all… The ordinary can not or does not
> turn itself into experiences.[66]

In other words, Fisher is restating the paradox we first
encountered in Blanchot, of the ordinary's propensity to
slip the nets of inquiry and representation. Fisher
refers to the impossibility of experiencing the ordinary
as a paradox, since we can readily imagine what an
experience of the ordinary might be like, and I think it
is a paradox worth retaining. Rather than describe a
literary work as representing the ordinary, we should

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[66] Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare
Experiences*, 20.

think of it instead as offering a rhetoric of the ordinary.

Recent models of literary criticism, however, have tended to flatten out that paradox by taking the veneration of rare experiences to an extreme. Since the appearance of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) and her collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), "trauma" has acquired a position of central importance in the lexicon of contemporary criticism. In her introduction to the latter volume, Caruth identifies the legacy of the Vietnam War as a major impetus for trauma's resurgence in public discourse, epitomized by its incorporation as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the third edition of the American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1980).[67] But "trauma theory," as it has come to be known in literary studies, looks beyond the neurological approach to recover a psychoanalytic approach to trauma all but abandoned by clinicians. The founding text for this line of thought, then, is Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure

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[67] Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 3-4.

Principle," in which he grapples with the challenge posed to his own wish-fulfillment theory of dreaming by the experience of traumatized soldiers following the First World War. If dreaming is indeed governed by the pleasure principle and unconscious wish fulfillment, why do the dreams of traumatized patients cause them to relive their experience, even while their waking life is characterized by rigorous attempts to avoid traumatic stimuli?[68] Freud's solution is to posit the "death drive," a tendency implicit in all organic matter to return to a prior state. If the death drive did not offer a comprehensive explanation for the "compulsion to repeat" experienced by trauma victims, it did at least make space within the Freudian system for mental phenomena not governed by the pleasure principle.[69]

Trauma theory does not necessarily endorse Freud's attempt at explaining traumatic symptoms, preferring instead to re-situate trauma as a challenge to representation: "What returns to haunt the victim… is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been

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[68] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 51-2.

[69] Ibid., 95.

fully known."[70] In describing trauma as a surfeit of "the real," trauma theory owes something to Jacques Lacan's notion that experience is divided into three registers, the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. Lacan describes the Real as unmediated by the other two registers, and thus inassimilable; any encounter with it is inherently traumatic.[71] Hence the notion that traumatic experience exposes its victim to an excess that returns again and again. "Trauma brings one repeatedly to this particular paradox: that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may occur as an absolute numbing to it; that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness."[72] Certain suggestive possibilities arise from this understanding of trauma, and Caruth seizes on one of them by making the traumatic

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[70] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 6.

[71] Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 160.

[72] Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 6.

impact of the real a figure for linguistic reference itself.[73]

Beyond the novel readings of literary and philosophical texts that it inspired, trauma theory has also had broad implications for the institution of literary studies. Caruth situates the emergence of trauma theory in the context of debates over post-structuralism and language's capacity to offer reliable access to the world.[74] If representation appears to break down when confronted with a surfeit of the real, perhaps the various strategies invoked by witnesses to gain a foothold in these circumstances offer a new approach to these more general problems of representation. But trauma theory goes further by framing literary criticism as a practice governed by ethical imperatives: victims' testimony represents a "plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard."[75] That literary criticism should be responsive to ethical demands is not unreasonable, but the rhetoric of trauma theory minimizes the inherent rhetoricity of literary texts, and privileges a rhetoric

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[73] See chapter 4, "The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference," in Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 73–90.

[74] Ibid., 73.

[75] Ibid., 9.

of authenticity. "Writing" becomes "testimony," and "representing" becomes "witnessing." Reading for trauma makes figural language less a question of deviation and play; instead troping becomes an even stronger testimony to the presence of an underlying reality, and literature less a rhetorical activity than an ethical one.[76]

As a consequence, trauma establishes a new aesthetic hierarchy, according to which those texts that claim to depict trauma and its aftermath have the strongest claim on critics' and readers' attentions. In short, trauma orients aesthetics toward rare experiences,

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[76] In doing so, trauma theory also runs the risk of prematurely naturalizing the category of trauma, blurring the lines between a cultural and a medical phenomenon. Without disputing its reality, it still necessary to remember that "trauma" denotes a floating cluster of symptoms that have been repeatedly rearranged and redeployed throughout the history of psychiatry. See Lawrence Rainey, "Shock Effects: Marinetti, Pathology, and Italian Avant-Garde Poetics," in *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940*, ed. Mark S. Micale (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

rather than ordinary ones.[77] In its privileging of "testimony" over "representation," trauma theory becomes reminiscent of the "jargon" which Adorno subjected to withering critique in his attack on existentialism. The jargon pretends to vouchsafe the "authenticity" of utterances made under the guise of the "statement," which suppresses the fact that "the first price exacted by language is the essence of the individual."[78]

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[77] Leaving aside, that is, the extraordinary extensions of definition to which the term is now subjected, epitomized by Mark Epstein's "The Trauma of Everyday Life." For instance, the distinction between mourning and pathological grief (notably articulated by Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia") seems to be dissolving in contemporary psychiatric practice. According to "The Trauma of Everyday Life," every experience of bereavement, displacement, or existential discomfort is an instance of trauma, making the concept virtually ubiquitous. Mark Epstein, *The Trauma of Everyday Life* (New York: Penguin, 2013). Cf. Benedict Carey, "Grief Could Join List of Disorders," *New York Times*, January 25 2012.

[78] Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 10.

"Statement" wants to announce that something which was said has come from the depth of the speaking subject; it is removed from the curse of surface communication. But at the same time communicative disorder disguises itself in the statement. Someone speaks and, thanks to the elevated term "statement," what he says is to be the sign of truth—as if men could not become caught up in untruth, as if they could not suffer martyrdom for plain nonsense.[79]

The rubric of trauma promises to revive the metaphysics of speech that Adorno scorned even against the poststructuralist wave of the following decades by grounding reference in a traumatic encounter with the Real.

The currency of these models of literary language reminds us that the present moment is characterized by an increasingly anti-rhetorical criticism (in addition to trauma theory, I could cite the many variants of historicism that posit social contexts as the ultimate referents of literary texts) situated within in an

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[79] Ibid.

increasingly anti-rhetorical culture.[80] These factors, in combination with a certain predictable weariness with the anti-referential models of poststructuralist thought, have produced a resistance in criticism to figurative language, and a preference for content- or context-based readings that seek to ground reference in one or another kind of extra-linguistic reality.[81] The body, the thing, trauma, and so on: each of these rubrics or paradigms that have swept over literary criticism in succession has held out the promise of curtailing the infinite play of figurative language. The ordinary, it seems at times, has the potential to do the same. But can we *speak* of the ordinary at all? Or can we only invoke it by its metaphors? In this sense, the problem of representing the ordinary amounts to a special case of the problem of literary language in general.

Hence my insistence, with Paul de Man, on "the rhetorical model of the trope, or, if one prefers to call it that, literature." The trope, on this view, "is not a

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[80] See Rita Felski, "'Context Stinks!'" *New Literary History* 42.4 (Autumn 2011): 573-91.

[81] Hence the fact that a resurgence of interest in form amongst literary scholars was thought worthy of particular mention; see Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," *PMLA* 122.2 (2007): 558-69.

derived, marginal or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence. The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but it characterizes language as such."[82] What kind of figurative structure, then, produces the effect of the ordinary in modernist literature? One example must be found in what might be called the "rhetoric of not having rhetoric," or a "trope of not troping." To see what I mean, consider the film *Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*), the 1948 neo-realist classic directed by Vittorio de Sica.[83] The film follows Antonio Ricci, who is offered a job posting advertisements but needs the bicycle he has already pawned in order to be eligible for it. His wife pawns her dowry—the family's bedding—in order to buy back the bike and Antonio takes the job, accompanied by his son Bruno. But his bike is promptly stolen, so Antonio and Bruno set off on a desperate search for the bicycle or its thief. Antonio's quest is ultimately unsuccessful, and failure leads him to compromise his morality: he attempts to steal an unattended bike and is only saved from an irate

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[82] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 15, 105.

[83] Vittorio de Sica, "Ladri Di Biciclette," (Italy: Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1948).

crowd by their compassion for Bruno, who cries at seeing his father accosted. As the crowd disperses, Bruno takes his father's hand and leads him away, completing a poignant dramatic reversal between father and son.

Ladri di Biciclette is widely, if a little oddly, praised for its social realism: oddly insofar as, despite its unsparing depiction of a precarious existence, the film frequently has recourse to a symbolic register that augments the social and ethical implications of its events. Take, for instance, the scene in which Antonio visits a local fixer associated with the Communist Party, Baiocchi, to ask for his help recovering the stolen bike. After being chastised for interrupting the discourse of a party intellectual—the flow of abstract ideas thus taking precedence over an immediate problem—Antonio finds Baiocchi rehearsing a cabaret act, debating with one of his singers over the pitch of the lyric "gente": "people" (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Baiocchi (on the far right) rehearses his performers. Vittorio de Sica, "Ladri Di Biciclette," 93 min. Italy: Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1948.

The next day, after having searched unsuccessfully for the stolen bike at a market guided by Baiocchi, Antonio and Bruno shelter from a rainstorm under an eave, joined by a group of clergy. It soon becomes apparent that these clergymen are visitors, speaking to one another in German (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Antonio and Bruno shelter with a group of German-speaking clergymen. de Sica, "Ladri Di Biciclette."

First, the film suggests that the day-to-day struggles of workers are of marginal interest to the Communist Party, whose displays of benevolence toward them are mere performances. Second, the film shows the clergy literally speaking a language incomprehensible to its parishioners. The Communist Party and the Catholic Church are the two institutional lynchpins of working class life in postwar Italy, but through a careful manipulation of symbolic artifice, the film implies that they are in fact

indifferent to the plight of those they claim to represent or minister to. These moments in which the texture of detail in the film exceeds strict narrative necessity are easily recuperable in terms of symbolic meanings.

But this tension between realism and symbolism comes to a head in a brief scene forty-five minutes into the film, during which Antonio and Bruno are pursuing an old man whom they've seen conversing with the bicycle thief. The two become separated, and at the moment of maximal narrative tension, and in stark defiance of narrative tension, Bruno breaks off from the pursuit to relieve himself against a nearby wall (Fig. 3). Before he can, though, Antonio catches up with him and calls him back to the pursuit. In the context of a climactic chase, Bruno's action is explicitly anti-narratival. The anticipated end of the pursuit arrives with Bruno and Antonio catching up to the old man, but not before the narrative tension is dissipated by Bruno's action. How is the viewer to interpret this brief scene in such a way as to justify this narrative disruption? One possibility might be to see the film as adverting, once again, to a symbolic register. But unlike my other examples, no obvious symbolic reading arises. In fact, Bruno's actions seem anti-symbolic: the act of emptying one's bladder seems so calculatedly banal and universal as to defy

symbolic recuperation. At the same time, though, it is an act often excluded from representation even within ardently realist modes of storytelling, and thus calls attention to itself. Through it, the film seems to make the claim for an even more hyperbolic realism: it will encompass even the most routine and intimate bodily acts. But this reading, though valid, both fails to account for the scene's position within the film with its consequent anti-narratival effects, and, moreover, the film's overarching claim to represent the real: where *else* within it are such detailed accounts of the ordinary to be found? Or is the presence of some principle or principles of selection guiding the rest of the narrative thereby disclosed? We are left with a paradox: a scene that makes an implicit claim to documentary realism but in doing so, exposes the artifice of realism at work in the film around it. The scene clearly constitutes a trope, but a trope of not troping, amounting to a rhetoric of not having rhetoric.

Fig. 3: Bruno breaks off the pursuit to relieve himself.
de Sica, "Ladri Di Biciclette."

The world inhabited by de Sica, and indeed, by the
modernists, has largely disappeared. In the West,
industrial capitalism has given way to a different
socioeconomic configuration, whose meaning for culture is
still being determined. Finance capitalism must,
according to Jameson, produce "new and unrepresentable
symptoms in late-capitalist everyday life," but it is far
from clear that "late capitalism" has generated

representational dilemmas wholly unknown to the modernists.[84] Giddens's sense of radical modernity at least offers a less teleological and more historically expansive model for these phenomena. Moreover, the crisis of representation that Jameson alludes to has been a recurrent feature of theory and criticism throughout the twentieth century; it even occurs within everyday life theory, when Lefebvre decries "the significant *decline of referentials* at the beginning of the twentieth century."[85]

> Language endows a thing with value, but in the process it devalues itself. Simultaneously it makes everyday life, is everyday life, eludes it, disguises it, and conceals it, hiding it behind the ornaments of rhetoric and make-believe, so that, in the course of everyday life, language and linguistic relations become *denials* of everyday life.[86]

Lefebvre's suspicion that rhetoric obscures and deforms the ordinary is emblematic of a distrust of

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[84] Frederic Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *Critical Inquiry* 24.1 (Autumn 1997): 252.

[85] Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 111.

[86] Ibid., 120-1.

representation more deeply rooted in Western culture than modernity itself. But in the context of radical modernity, with no material commodity to back the currency, no absolute yardstick of value to contain the speculations of a financialized economy, and no transcendental signifier to curtail the infinite deferral of meaning, those anxieties are as apt as ever to reassert themselves. The rhetoric of not having rhetoric, then, allows us to negotiate those anxieties in a productive fashion.

My first chapter takes up the vexed debate about the origin of Stein's literary innovations, with particular emphasis on her relationship with the philosophy of William James and the art of the Cubists. Finding these accounts unpersuasive, despite recent attempts to reexamine James in relation to the ordinary, I turn to Stein's epic novel *The Making of Americans*, which I read as a frustrated, and indeed, frustrating, attempt to move beyond the Aristotelian conventions of narrative and make repetition a generative aesthetic principle. I then read "Tender Buttons" as a more fully realized account of the ordinary, with a particular emphasis on its indeterminate genre. Whereas Stein's critics have generally labored to reduce the work's opacity, my reading attends to the

usefulness of that opacity as both an account of the ordinary and the outline of a queer identity.

My second chapter addresses the *locus classicus* of the modernist ordinary, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It begins with an account of the novel's reception, charting a tradition amongst critics that I broadly label "symbolism" and associate with T. S. Eliot's reading of the novel, which is inimical to the ordinary and the everyday despite the novel's manifest concern with them. I identify an alternative, "realist," tradition inaugurated by Ezra Pound, before considering the more recent critical paradigm brought about by textual genetics and post-structuralism. I consider the implications of these models for the modernist ordinary, particularly in the context of the novel's incorporation of mass culture. This also prompts further enquiry into the realist tradition, building on my discussion from chapter 1. I then give a detailed account of the "Cyclops" episode as an example of the two textual economies at work in the novel, showing how Joyce figures the ordinary itself as a kind of excess, akin to the aesthetic rather than opposed to it.

My third chapter develops both the discussion of Eliot's classicism and his ambivalent engagement with mass culture from Chapter 2 in the context of his

neglected 1924 verse-drama *Sweeney Agonistes*. Eliot uses mass culture to figure for the ordinary as an object both of attraction and repulsion. Eliot's ambivalence toward daily life under the condition of modernity at this stage of his intellectual and poetic development had issued in productive aesthetic contradictions in *The Waste Land*, a compelling oscillation between an aesthetic of decorum and one of extremity. In *Sweeney*, however, that contradiction, manifested on a formal level in the work's attempt to fuse poetry with drama, Aristophanes with jazz, and ritual with melodrama, results only in fragments. I then turn to Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which have tended to be read with a view to explicating Eliot's Christian worldview for so long that a secular reevaluation is overdue. Moreover, the *Quartets* demand an account of the relationship between the ordinary and the concepts of space and place, as opposed to the usual emphasis on temporality in both accounts of the poem and everyday life studies. The *Quartets* show that Eliot's approach to resolving the latent contradictions of his earlier work was, in effect, to align the ordinary with a lost social totality located in the distant past, aligning his work with aspects of everyday life theory discussed in my introduction.

My fourth chapter takes up the ordinary in Wallace
Stevens, a poet more celebrated for the visionary
intensity and lofty abstraction of his poems than their
sense of the everyday, or, to use his own preferred term,
the commonplace. I begin by treating one of Stevens's
lesser-known lyrics, "The Ordinary Women," as a work that
poses fundamental questions about the relationship
between the aesthetic and the ordinary in the context of
early cinema. This discussion concludes the discussion of
mass culture that has developed over the preceding
chapters. I then return to the questions of space and
place raised in chapter 3 as a way in to Stevens's "An
Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in a discussion that
raises a number of questions about the compatibility of
formalist and historicist approaches to literature. The
poem, I conclude, exemplifies both Stevens's rhetoric of
not having rhetoric and his hopeful account of the
imagination's power to transform the real.

I conclude with a discussion of the contemporary
American novelist Don DeLillo, who has been frequently
misread as a critic of American consumerism in the latest
iteration of criticism's tendency to denigrate the
ordinary. Out of this pervasive misreading has arisen an
account of the relationship between modernism and
postmodernism that my argument has sought to revise. This

coda explores the latent metaphors for the ordinary that have developed in the course of my argument, in particular the notion of the figuring both the ordinary and the aesthetic as waste. This allows me to situate my work in relation to ongoing debates about the realist tradition, popular culture, postmodernism, and above all, the fate of modernism and its legacies in twentieth-century literature.

Chapter 1: Gertrude Stein's Queer Ordinary

Though Gertrude Stein announced often that she was a grammarian, I would go a little further than grammar and say I value her also and most as a rhetorician.[1]

It is a queer thing to me who am really entirely loving repeating that mostly not any one is seeing feeling hearing themselves as doing repeating. Perhaps it would not be pleasant to most of them, indeed very many of them are quite certain they do not at all love repeating.[2]

Gertrude Stein continues to occupy now, as she did during her career, an uncertain position in the modernist canon. Based in Paris for most of her writing career, she was at the center of modernist experimentation in the visual arts, while somewhat isolated from the network of publishing

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[1] Donald Sutherland, "Gertrude Stein and the Twentieth Century," in *Gertrude Stein Advanced: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1990), 17.

[2] Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* (Normal, IL and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 599. Hereafter cited in text as "*MoA*."

and patronage that fostered modernism in the English-speaking world. Despite claims for the importance of Stein's own critical outlook—"Composition as explanation"—for the sensibility of the New Critics, in practice she was largely neglected by their efforts to canonize modernism in the mid-twentieth century.[3] Despite a steady stream of monographs and essays, the most wide-ranging reconsideration of Stein occurred in the wake of Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide*, when feminist scholars and critics who identified with postmodernism agreed that Stein had never really been a "modernist" after all, but a postmodernist *avant la lettre*.

This argument starts from the view put forward by Huyssen and others that modernism is defined by its aversion to popular culture and its resultant determination to secure a domain of exclusive and inscrutable high art against the encroachment of the masses. As a result the culture of the masses, "the popular," is the object of unremitting modernist disdain. I have argued elsewhere that Huyssen's account of modernism does not extend much beyond caricature. But the important thing to note here is that he treats postmodernism not only as a repudiation of modernist

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[3] See Steven Meyer, "Gertude Stein," in *Modernism and the New Criticism*, ed. A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

ideology, but as a continuation of an historically contemporary alternative to modernism: the historical avant-garde. Huyssen endorses Peter Bürger's influential theory that the avant-garde is defined by an attack on the institutions of art and determination to reintegrate art with the praxis of life.[4] Thus, postmodernism too celebrates popular culture and subverts the institutions of official culture through irony and appropriation.

The everyday is of crucial importance here; on this account, "Stein attempted to merge high art with certain forms and genres of mass culture and the culture of everyday life, self-consciously mixing these popular modes with avant-garde discourses."[5] Stein's explorations of narrative did lead her to explore the detective genre in the 1930s, but from the perspective of Stein's career as a whole, such

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[4] Peter Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*," *New Literary History* 41.4 (Autumn 2010): 704-5. Cf. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[5] Ellen E. Berry, *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein's Postmodernism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 134.

a description is close to unrecognizable.[6] Throughout her

career, Stein's experimental writing (as opposed to her

forays into more conventional genres) remains resolutely

opaque and largely impervious to intertextuality. Moreover,

it would be wrong to claim that *any* of Stein's writing

demonstrates a degree of engagement with the popular

comparable with Joyce's *Ulysses* or Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

At work here is a double misrecognition: a selective reading

of Stein crossed with a systematic misreading of modernism.

Huyssen, following Bürger, is, I think, right to align

"popular forms" with the "culture of everyday life" (or the

ordinary), but profoundly mistaken to predicate a definition

of modernism on their exclusion. But reversing Huyssen's

simple binary and allowing that modernism embraces the

popular (as this thesis argues throughout) will still not

account for Stein, who, any reader, any reader of the

maddeningly hermetic *The Making of Americans* will agree, is

not that kind of modernist.

    The content-based approach to situating Stein fails

because of its tendency to produce brittle dichotomies that

do not capture the complexity of her work. Earlier critics

preferred to emphasize a more imminent context: the Parisian

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[6] Cf. Gabrielle Dean, "Grid Games: Gertrude Stein's Diagrams

and Detectives," *Modernism/modernity* 15.2 (April 2008): 317–

41.

art scene of the 1900s and 1910s, particularly the development of Cubism. This is one of the earliest prisms through which Stein's work was read.[7] Stein's friendship with Picasso has been a constant topic of interest, not least because her autobiographical writings are a rich source of anecdotes and witticisms about him. She also claimed for herself the role of his privileged interpreter: "I was alone at this time in understanding him, perhaps because I was expressing the same thing in literature."[8] This purported parallel has been a topic of long-running fixation in Stein studies.[9] But arguments that posit cubism as a necessary part

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[7] "Public Gets Peep at Extreme Cubist Literature in Gertrude Stein's 'Tender Buttons'," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 5 1914.

[8] Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), 16.

[9] Wendy Steiner's *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance* is the principle account of Stein's "literary cubism," but this formulation, or some variant of it, is endemic to Stein criticism. Leon Katz is among the earliest critics to emphasize painting as a source for Stein's compositional technique. Michael Hoffmann invoked cubism decisively in his study of Stein's "abstractionism". Finally, Stein's biographer John Malcolm Brinnin described "Tender Buttons" as "wholly a product of the cubist dispensation." Wendy

of Stein's intellectual genealogy and therefore a means of penetrating its opacity are almost invariably thin. For one thing, they tend not to be terribly specific about cubism. As Marjorie Perloff has noted, "In discussing Stein's Cubism, critics repeatedly speak of 'non-representational' or 'abstract' art, of 'flat surface,' 'shifting perspective' and 'interacting planes.' All these are slippery terms: Kandinsky was one of the first non-representational painters of the twentieth century but he was hardly a Cubist."[10] Only Steiner's account gives the parallel much depth, but she achieves this through an extraordinarily etiolated account

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Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978); Leon Katz, "The First Making of *The Making of Americans*: A Study Based on Gertrude Stein's Notebooks and Early Versions of Her Novel (1902-1908)" PhD Thesis (Columbia University, 1963), 97-157; Michael J. Hoffman, *The Development of Abstractionism in the Writings of Gertrude Stein* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 162; John Malcolm Brinnin, "Introduction," in *Selected Operas and Plays of Gertude Stein*, ed. John Malcolm Brinnin (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), x.

[10] Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 71.

of both Cubism and Stein, reconciling the two only in the hinterland of Jakobsian semiotics, with scant regard for the phenomenology of reading or viewing. Other milder but equally unpersuasive accounts reject the notion that Stein's writing derived from Cubism in favor of the view that they were both exploring "questions of representation"—undoubtedly true, but terminally nonspecific.[11]

Neither an ensemble of ideas or an ideology, nor a set of formal devices borrowed from cubism will suffice to establish a reliable context for Stein's work. Moreover, these kinds of arguments fail to clearly distinguish between modernism and the avant-garde themselves. A more fruitful approach is to regard the avant-garde as "neither more nor less than a structural feature in the institutional configuration of modernism."[12] Viewed from this perspective, the problem of situating Stein comes into sharper relief.

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[11] See Jayne L. Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from Three Lives to Tender Buttons* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 129–30; Harriet Scott Chessman, *The Public Is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 92.

[12] Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 99.

Although some of her boldest works predated the *annus mirabilis* of modernism in 1922 by over a decade, Stein was already reaching towards a version of the idiom that modernist institutions would foster though an intricate network of artists, patrons, and publishers. It was only when those institutions gradually embraced Stein in the 1920s that she connected with an appreciative readership, signaled by the long-awaited (by Stein herself) publication of *The Making of Americans* by Robert McAlmon's Contact Editions. And her enmeshment in those institutions was, on the whole, brief. Modernist institutions and the personalities that drove them could be fickle. Stein published voluminously alongside the likes of Joyce in Eugene Jolas's *transition*, itself something of an outlier as an English-language magazine produced in Paris. But the 1933 publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* prompted a furious rejoinder from the *transition* group, seemingly appalled by Stein's claims to have been a fulcrum for the development of modern art in Paris.

Georges Braque, Eugene and Maria Jolas, Henry Matisse, André Salmon, and Tristan Tzara each summarized their recollections of Stein and life at 27 Rue de Fleurus in an effort to show, in Eugene Jolas's words, that she "had no understanding of what really was happening around her, that the mutation of ideas beneath the surface of the more obvious contacts and clashes of personalities during that

period escaped her entirely."[13] How much bearing this should have on those arguments that align Stein's work with cubist aesthetics is debatable. But ironically enough, the success of *The Autobiography* freed Stein from her reliance on these institutions. With excerpts of the *The Autobiography* appearing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, new work appearing in *Vanity Fair*, and an interview in the *New York Times*, Stein had finally achieved a measure of celebrity in her home country, which would be consolidated by her triumphal lecture tour in 1934-5.[14] In a sense, then, Stein began pursuing her experimental writing in relative isolation, and had to wait for modernism to offer both a means of disseminating her work and a cultivated reading public who would be sympathetic to it. Thus Gertrude Stein's position in the complex constellation of modernist literature can best be appreciated by attending to her interaction with the institutions that produced, marketed, and disseminated it.

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[13] Eugene Jolas et al., "Testimony against Gertrude Stein," *transition pamphlet no. 1* (1935): 2.

[14] Ulla E. Dydo and William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises 1923-1934* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 573, 95, 99.

I. William James, Gertrude Stein, and the Rhetoric of the
Ordinary

    In recent years, critics have begun to re-litigate
both the question of Stein's intellectual genealogy and her
relationship to modernism and the avant-garde. These lines
of argument converge in two places: on the status of habit
in the discourse of the avant-garde, and the importance of
William James as Stein's early mentor. Lisi Schoenbach
argues for a return to an ideological distinction between
the modernists and the avant-garde in her recent *Pragmatic
Modernism*. "The main difference between avant-gardism and
pragmatic modernism lies in their treatments of the problem
of habit."[15] While the avant-garde pursues shock and rupture
as means of overcoming entrenched habits and thus effect
social transformation, modernism takes a more circumspect
view of habit, emphasizing the "reintegration or
recontextualization of released energies back into the
social fabric."[16] "Pragmatic" modernism thus articulates a
more nuanced program for social change than the avant-garde,

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[15] Lisi Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism* (Oxford and New York:
Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

[16] Ibid., 7.

which even Peter Bürger's sympathetic account acknowledges has failed.[17]

Schoenbach's effort to reintroduce a distinction between modernism and the avant-garde has some presumably unintended effects: modernist advocates of the aesthetics of shock like the early Eliot and Pound find themselves set apart from modernism, while continental avant-gardists like the Surrealists, fascinated by the relationship between habit and the unconscious, arguably find themselves in the company of the modernists. One response to this kind of objection on Schoenbach's behalf would be to point out that she only attempts to isolate one particular strain within modernism: "pragmatic modernism," as opposed to modernism *tout court*. But this comes to look like a case of special pleading: the set of ideological grounds on which to divide up the modernist constellation is potentially infinite. Moreover, her definition of avant-garde is remarkably ad-hoc; recounting the break between Stein and the *transition* group following publication of *The Autobiography*, Schoenbach positions *transition* on the side of the avant-garde and Stein on that of "pragmatic modernism." Granted, one of the founders of Dada, Tristan Tzara, contributes to the "Testimony"; but the remaining contributors (the painters Braque and Matisse, the poet and critic André Salmon, Eugene

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[17] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 94.

and Maria Jolas) hardly amount to a coherent grouping of avant-gardists. Rather, this assemblage points to the special position that *transition* occupied amongst the institutions of modernism, as a point of contact between these heterogeneous artists and movements.

Schoenbach's central claim about Stein, however, is that her work ought to be read as continuous with pragmatism, the philosophical tradition of which her instructor at Radcliffe, William James, was a part.[18] The connection between Stein and James is so frequently invoked by scholars as to have achieved the status of a consensus.[19] This is particularly evident in recent studies of Stein and the ordinary: Liesl Olson and Bryony Randall also cite James as a source of Stein's fascination with habit and

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[18] Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism*, 50.

[19] Steven Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, & American Literary Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

repetition.[20] What each of these accounts has in common is an attempt to make Stein's experimentation more legible by connecting it with an intellectual genealogy. Thus Schoenbach and others draw attention to the network of pragmatist thinkers who passed through Harvard in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and who left their mark on the intellectual climate there.[21] Each of the three American modernists discussed in this thesis studied at Harvard: Gertrude Stein (at the Harvard Annex, 1893-1897), Wallace Stevens (1897-1900), and T. S. Eliot (1906-1909). James's charisma as a teacher is well-attested[22], but arguments of

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[20] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 91; Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, 94. Omri Moses gives the most comprehensive recent account of the variety of biological and philosophical approaches to habit available to Stein during her early career. Omri Moses, "Gertrude Stein's Lively Habits," *Twentieth Century Literature* 55.4 (Winter 2009): 445–84.

[21] For an account of this network through the intellectual biographies of William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, see Louis Menand, *The Metaphyisical Club* (London: Flamingo, 2001).

[22] In a much-remarked upon Radcliffe theme on the topic "Is life worth living?" Stein gushed, "Yes, a thousand times yes when the world still holds such spirits as Professor James."

this nature tend to rely on the assumption that exposure to
an idea at the outset of one's intellectual life will exert
an enduring influence, often irrespective of the
possibilities of indifference or misinterpretation. In his
early, influential treatment of *The Making of Americans*,
Leon Katz claimed that during the writing of the novel,
Stein "was in full flight from James and from pragmatism."[23]
Katz offers little in the way of argument to substantiate
his point, and as a consequence, later critics have ignored
his assertion. Only Lisa Ruddock reads the novel in a way
consonant with Katz's view, but her assertion that it
represents an oedipal attack on James is only a negative
affirmation of his influence.[24]

The consensus that Stein developed her interest in the
ordinary under the influence of James and pragmatism is
widespread, but I find it unsatisfactory for a variety of
reasons. To show why, I will begin by assessing the evidence
for James's influence that Stein herself provides. In "The
Gradual Making of The Making of Americans," published in
Lectures in America, Stein gives an oft-cited account of the

Rosalind S. Miller, *Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility,
Containing the Radcliffe Themes* (New York: Exposition Press,
1949), 146.

[23] Katz, "The First Making of *The Making of Americans*," 199.

[24] Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein*, 5.

novel emphasizing its origins in her psychological studies
with James:

> I became more interested in psychology, and one of the
> things I did was testing reactions of the average
> college student in a state of normal activity and in a
> state of fatigue induced by their examinations. I was
> supposed to be interested in their reactions but soon
> found... that I was enormously interested in the types
> of their characters that is what I even then thought of
> as the bottom nature of them.[25]

Later in the lecture she writes: "When I was working with
William James I completely learned one thing, that science
is continuously busy with the complete description of
something."[26] Neither of these statements offer much
specificity about James's philosophy or about Stein's
writing. As a result, some critics have taken the spirit of
her remarks—that some decisive connection exists—as license
to look for it elsewhere. In *The Poetics of Transition*,
Jonathan Levin recounts Stein's well-known status as a
favored pupil of James's at Radcliffe, and describes an

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[25] Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press,
1957), 137.

[26] Ibid., 156.

extended pragmatist tradition from Emerson to Stein and Stevens. But ultimately the strongest statement Levin offers about the possible influence of pragmatism on the way Stein writes is a generic nostrum of avant-garde poetics: "[Stein] follows William James in recognizing that words acquire meaning from the mind's stock of associations, but she refuses to allow habitual patterns of association to obscure the multiple associative contexts of words."[27] Levin has in mind the following passage from James's *Principles of Psychology*:

> If we look at an isolated printed word and repeat it long enough, it ends by assuming an entirely unnatural aspect. Let the reader try this with any word on this page. He will soon begin to wonder if it can possibly be the word he has been using all his life with that meaning... It is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity. We never before attended to it in this way, but habitually got it clad with its meaning the moment we caught sight of it... We apprehended it, in short, with a cloud of associates,

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[27] Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, 152.

and thus perceiving it, we felt it quite otherwise than
as we feel it now divested and alone.[28]

But as much as it suggests avant-garde strategies of radical
decontextualization, James's thought experiment does not
describe Stein's writing particularly well at all, a fact
that she herself eventually acknowledges:

I took individual words and thought about them until I
got their weight and volume complete and put them next
to another word, and at this same time I found out very
soon that there is no such thing as putting them
together without sense. It is impossible to put them
together without sense.[29]

In other words, no amount of fixation on individual words
will entirely arrest the combinatory axis of language. If
James's influence is to be a necessary condition for Stein's

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[28] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, ed. Frederick
H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, vol.
1, The Works of William James (Cambridge, MA, and London:
Harvard University Press, 1981), 726–7. Cf. Levin, *The
Poetics of Transition*, 18.

[29] Gertrude Stein, *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of
Gertrude Stein* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), 18.

literary experimentation, that influence must come from elsewhere than James's thoughts on language.

Stein had read William James's *Principles of Psychology* as a freshman, before joining his advanced seminar on "Consciousness, Knowledge, the Ego, the Relation of Mind and Body, etc." as a junior.[30] Liesl Olsen goes so far as to claim that habit is the "linchpin for the philosophical way of thinking that James called 'radical empiricism' and, later, pragmatism."[31] *Principles of Psychology* certainly evinces a thoroughgoing interest in habit, in the ways that it can be inculcated and the ways that it can be disrupted. James's vision of habit encompasses its workings at each level of existence, from the individual to the social. He arrives at a vision of habit as "the enormous fly-wheel of society," in other words, a repository that will absorb excesses and remedy deficiencies in both individual and social economies of energy.[32]

James's early psychology proceeds from the conviction that psychological phenomena have their basis in the organic makeup of the brain. James quotes from the French

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[30] Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, 150.

[31] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 91.

[32] James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 125.

psychologist Léon Dumont, who published an essay on habit ("De l'habitude") in the 1876 *Revue Philosophique*:

> Water, in flowing, hollows out for itself a channel, which grows broader and deeper; and, after having ceased to flow, it resumes, when it flows again, the path traced by itself before. Just so the impressions of outer objects fashion for themselves in the nervous system more and more appropriate paths, and these vital phenomena recur under similar excitements from without, when they have been interrupted a certain time.[33]

Dumont describes habit as a path of least resistance through the material of the nervous system. Habit, inculcated by the repetition of any particular act or movement, provides the foundation of a mature personality by inscribing itself on the nervous system: "In most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster."[34] To the limited extent that a coherent account of habit can be extracted from Stein's work—and there are good reasons to suspect that it cannot—it differs markedly from James's. His chipper

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[33] Léon Dumont, "De L'habitude," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 1 (1876). Cf. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 111.

[34] James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 126.

Victorian ethos of self-improvement is nowhere to be found in Stein; if habit is revelatory of one's bottom nature, one's bottom nature also determines one's habits: "It is hard living down the tempers we are born with" (*MoA*, 3).

That said, James also conceives of habit as a vessel for individual choice; the kinds of habits we cultivate will determine the sorts of people we become. As Olson notes, "James associates habits with character-building behavior."[35] In a shift of metaphors particularly evocative of the gilded age, James counsels his readers to approach their habits as an investment: "The great thing, then, in all education, is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.* It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund."[36]

It is worth considering how the nature of Stein's references to James develops throughout her oeuvre. Following the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein embraced her American lecture tour as an opportunity to defend her work against the charge of mere incoherence, in part by using her celebrity as an alibi.[37]

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[35] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 93.

[36] James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 126.

[37] See Liesl Olson, "'An Invincible Force Meets an Immovable Object': Gertrude Stein Comes to Chicago," *Modernism/modernity* 17.2 (April 2010): 331–61.

Hence, speaking of the American public: "It is the things they do not understand that attract them the most."[38] As such, her invocations of William James need to be read as, amongst other things, rhetorical arguments from authority. As we have seen, the two references to James in *Lectures in America* are notable mainly for their vagueness on the actual content of his philosophy. In addition to the passage already quoted concerning the object of science, in "Portraits and Repetition" Stein invokes "what William James calls the Will to Live."[39] The same resonant phrase recurs in *Everybody's Autobiography* and, most evocatively, in *Wars I Have Seen*:

> William James was of the strongest [*sic*] scientific influences that I had and he said he always said there is the will to live without the will to live there is destruction, but there is also the will to destroy, and the two like everything are in opposition, like... wanting eternity and wanting a beginning and middle and ending.[40]

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[38] Alice B. Toklas, *What Is Remembered* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 145.

[39] Stein, *Lectures in America*, 169.

[40] "There was evolution and James' the Will to Live and I I had always been afraid always would be afraid but after all

Stein never specifies the source of this "will to live" in James's work, but it is likely that the phrase distills her recollection of James's essay "Is Life Worth Living?," delivered as an address before the Young Men's Christian Association of Harvard and collected in *The Will to Believe* (1897).[41]

Stein's biographers have frequently drawn attention to the Radcliffe theme entitled "Is Life Worth Living?," quoted above.[42] Having established Stein's likely source for the

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was that what it was to be not refusing to be dead although after all every one was refusing to be dead." Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1993), 242; Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (London: Brilliance Books, 1984), 63–4.

[41] William James, *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, The Works of William James (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 34–56.

[42] The Harvard edition of James's essays corrects an erroneous footnote in the original publication, which had given the date of the address as May 1895. In fact, it took place on April 25, 1895, the same date given on Stein's theme of the same title. Stein's probable presence at the

phrase "will to live," it is worth asking how adequately it represents James's argument, particularly as the phrase in question doesn't occur at all in the essay; as Meyer notes, "the will to believe" is about as close to "the will to live" as James comes.[43] "Is Life Worth Living?" does indeed answer its own question in the affirmative by rehearsing the limitations of a strictly materialistic understanding of life. James's sense of science's inadequacy before the ultimate questions of ethics and metaphysics is briskly summarized in the passage from *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein's most detailed invocation of James: "He said science is not a solution and not a problem it is a statement of the observation of things observed."[44] If James's lecture did indeed imbue Stein with a sense of the limitations of the scientific world-view, it did nothing to prevent Stein from pursuing scientific studies at Johns Hopkins after leaving Radcliffe, or from putting that world-view at the center of *The Making of Americans*. Indeed, one of the ways the novel cripples itself *qua* narrative is by "pursuing the ideal

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lecture is noted by Stephen Meyer. Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, 212. Cf. James, *The Will to Believe*, 321; Miller, *Gertrude Stein*, 146; Brenda Wineapple, *Sister Brother: Gertrude and Leo Stein* (New York: Putnam, 1996), 67-8.

[43] Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, 213.

[44] Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, 250.

order of classical science, a conceptual grid that would impose coherence on the vast field of human behavior."[45] Far from the testimony of a writer disabused of totalizing systems from the start, the meta-narrative of *The Making of Americans* is precisely the narrator's slow, agonized abandonment of that ambition. The issue of James's influence on the early Stein thus raises more questions than it answers. Only by flattening out a great deal of complexity and equivocation in Stein's development can James's pragmatism be made to account for much in her early work.

The most famous and frequently cited anecdote concerning Stein and James occurs in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, when the narrator is reflecting on Stein's time at Radcliffe:

There was an examination in William James' course. She sat down with the examination paper before her and she just could not. Dear Professor James, she wrote at the top of the paper. I am so sorry but really I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in philosophy today, and left.

The next day she had a postal card from William James saying, Dear Miss Stein, I understand perfectly how you feel I often feel like that myself. And

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[45] Walker, *The Making of a Modernist*, 70.

underneath it he gave her work the highest mark in his course.[46]

This passage is an especially good example of the breezy tone that predominates in *The Autobiography*, a tone that succeeds in mollifying the reader's reaction to the book's frequent egotism. Here, Stein refigures her student/teacher relationship with James as a meeting of equals, two geniuses united in mutual recognition and bold unconventionality. A generous interpretation might treat the story as an allegory for one of William James's distinctive contributions to philosophy: his emphasis on the epistemological importance of mood.[47] But I think the more telling indicator of its function is the claim at the end, that James awarded Stein

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[46] Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London and New York: Penguin, 2001), 88.

[47] In the chapter on "Will" from *Principles of Psychology*, James notes that as we pass between "easy and careless" and "sober and strenuous" moods, "The whole scale of values of our motives and impulses then undergoes a change like that which a change of the observer's level produces on a view." William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, vol. 2, The Works of William James (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1140.

the "highest mark in his course." But her academic performance in James's Philosophy 20b was mixed: an A and a C, as opposed to the sterling record that Stein implies.[48] Why should this particular embellishment matter in the context of a work defined by its winsome embellishments? In part because of the aptness of critics and biographers to take Stein at her word.[49] In this way, James's formative influence over Stein has become a rarely questioned part of her biographical mythos, despite its shaky foundations.[50]

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[48] Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 21, 357.

[49] In a recent article on Stein's American tour, during which she visited Mortimer Adler's "Great Books" class at the University of Chicago, Liesl Olson quotes from the anecdote to demonstrate Stein's aversion to traditional pedagogical methods. Better evidence for the same argument might have been found in the sharp discrepancy between Stein's classroom-based courses and her laboratory work at Johns Hopkins. Olson, "'An Invincible Force Meets an Immovable Object,'" 358-9; Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 358-9.

[50] The pattern of giving credence to Stein's claim was set early, particularly in Brinnin's biography. That said, in a long appendix discussing Stein and James, Hoffman concedes that the most that can be concluded from their association is a "potentially open frame of mind" with which Stein might

From the outset of her writing career, Stein drew
extensively on her own experiences to inform her work. *The
Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1932 announces a
"radical change in matter and manner," introducing the style
of memoir she would employ again in *Everybody's
Autobiography* and *Wars I Have Seen*.[51] These two works also
feature prominent references to William James. In treating
these references as an index of James's enduring influence
over Stein, critics have elided their rhetorical dimension.

II. *The Making of Americans* and "loving repeating."

   The Making of Americans (published 1925, written 1902-
1911) represents one of Gertrude Stein's first concerted

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have received James's ideas. Janet Malcolm offers a welcome
reprieve by quoting the passage only to demonstrate the
illusory ease of the life Stein constructs in *The
Autobiography*. John Malcolm Brinnin, *The Third Rose:
Gertrude Stein and Her World*, Radcliffe Biography Series
(Reading, MA: Merloyd Lawrence, 1987), 34; Hoffman, *The
Development of Abstractionism*, 208-9; Janet Malcolm, *Two
Lives: Gertrude and Alice* (New Haven and London: Yale
University Press, 2007), 14.

[51] Dydo and Rice, *Gertrude Stein*, 535.

attempts at writing prose. Even *Q.E.D.* and *Three Lives*, as well as many of the portraits and other incidental pieces Stein wrote before 1912, were effectively digressions in the long process of composing the novel. Stein's choice of form itself indicates an orientation towards the ordinary, with which novels have long been held to have an inherent affinity.[52] But despite the novel's fixation on ordinary places, events, and people, it conspicuously abandons the conventions of realism. This is the novel's animating aesthetic question: how to represent the ordinary beyond the frontiers of realist narration? In its beginning, the novel is explicit about its ambition to show the genealogical arc of the Dehnings and the Herslands, the former a family of "lower middle class Jews, artisans and tradesmen from Germany, settled in Baltimore" (Bridgeport), though they soon move west to "Gossols" (Oakland).[53] There, the Dehnings come into contact with a western family, the Herslands, leading to the climactic marriage of Julia Dehning to Alfred Hersland, then the early death of the younger David Hersland (who shares a name with his father, the subject of memorable passages in the novel's opening), which prompts the short

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[52] See Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[53] Katz, "The First Making of *The Making of Americans*," 161.

meditation on mortality that closes the novel.[54] Genealogical plotting remains a sort of narrative spine throughout the novel.[55] But most readers' experiences of it will inevitably be conditioned more by the forces that impede the narrative than by the narrative itself: its digressiveness, its high degree of lexical and syntactic repetition, and the increasingly insistent intrusions of a metadiscursive voice reflecting on the process of writing.

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[54] Both Leon Katz and Richard Bridgman have undertaken the invaluable task of disentangling the novel's *fabula* from its notoriously tangled *szujet*, its narrative chronology confused by constant digression and what Stein would later call "always and always beginning again." Stein, *Lectures in America*, 148.

[55] Stein's notebooks reveal a fairly comprehensive synopsis of the plot, which only partially informs the completed novel. Katz comments that "it becomes possible to follow the novel if one keeps in mind the story which lies at its base, and if one watches for those moments, more and more rare as the novel proceeds, when the realistic story emerges to the surface of the text." Needless to say, it is a strange novel whose plot can only be followed with the aid of the author's private notes. Katz, "The First Making of *The Making of Americans*," 195.

These features have led some critics to cite *The Making of Americans* as a prototypical postmodern text, characterized by epistemological indeterminacy and skepticism toward the unified human subject posited by much of the western philosophical tradition.[56] Tanya Clement has used detailed textual analysis to rebut these readings of the novel, while arguing that it should be approached as a "modernist project using mimesis."[57] Unfortunately, Clement doesn't specify which of the many senses of "mimesis" she intends here. It is clear, though, that the term stands in opposition to "postmodern indeterminacy"; in other words, the view that the novel's insistent repetitions and tangled syntax express an epistemological uncertainty about the relation between the means of representation and the fictional world represented. Recalling Monica Fludernik's

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[56] Cf. Berry, *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering*; Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995); Melanie Taylor, "A Poetics of Difference: *The Making of Americans* and Unreadable Subjects," *NWSA Journal* 15.3 (Fall 2003): 26–42.

[57] Tanya Clement, "The Story of *one*: Narrative and Composition in Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 54.3 (Fall 2012): 445.

definition of mimesis as "the artificial and illusionary projection of a semiotic structure which the reader recuperates in terms of a fictional reality," we can see that Clement is asserting the continuity of a "fictional reality," against the suggestion that it dissipates as the novel wears on.[58] But both Clement and the postmodern critics she diverges from might be reliant on a false dichotomy. I want to approach the novel not in terms of recent skepticism towards the claims of mimesis, but rather in terms of a debate more fundamental to western aesthetics over the relationship between mimesis and diegesis.

This debate has vital implications for literary representations of the ordinary. In order to see how, we need to revisit the dispute between Aristotle and Plato over the status of what both refer to as *diegesis*, or, "simple narrative"; in Plato's words, whatever the poet speaks "in his own person," without attempting "to persuade us that the speaker is anyone but himself."[59] For Plato, diegesis

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[58] Monika Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 65.

[59] Plato, *Republic*, ed. and trans. by Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, Vol. I (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 249. Cf. Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 128.

represents the least "imitative" form of literary language, and therefore the most acceptable. For Aristotle, on the other hand, who reverses Plato's condemnation of mimesis, diegesis is a "weakened, attenuated mode of literary representation."[60] Thus while Plato would invite "into the City only some ideal poet whose austere diction would be as little mimetic as possible," Aristotle "praises in Homer whatever brings his writing closer to dramatic diction," in other words, pure mimesis.[61] While neither aesthetic system could be said to obtain unmediated in Western culture, it seems clear that since the Renaissance, a broadly Aristotelian orientation has prevailed, while a Platonic distrust of representation lingers as a potent, but subliminal, alternative. According to Genette, this debate is mirrored in the further distinction within diegesis itself, between *narration*, the representation of actions and

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[60] Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, 130.

[61] Ibid.; Cf. Wayne Booth, who suggests that this kind of Aristotelian injunction extends to authorial commentary of the type that Stein indulges in. The passage from Aristotle is: "The poet should say as little as possible in his own voice, as it is not this that makes him a mimetic artist." Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 92; Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 123.

events, and *description*, the representation of objects and characters.[62]

Thus we ought to think of the novel as a form in terms of an axis of description and an axis of plot.[63] The realist novel, the archetypal form of narrative in Western literature since the eighteenth century, depends for its effects on the author's sophisticated manipulation of these two axes and their interaction. In the wake of the realist tradition and its successors, critics have introduced further distinctions within the category of description. As Fludernik argues, the realist novel deploys two kinds of illusion in particular: "the *effet de réel* on the one hand and the instantiation of psychological verisimilitude on the other."[64] Barthes's *effet de réel*, or reality effect, is particularly notable in light of the everyday, since it names realist narration's tendency to dwell on insignificant details—for instance, material aspects of the story's setting—in order to heighten the story's imaginative

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[62] Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, 133.

[63] Genette also acknowledges that, since in practice description and narrative are deeply entwined, this kind of ideal schema is just that, ideal only: "Even a verb can be more or less descriptive, in the precision that it gives to the spectacle of the action." Ibid., 134.

[64] Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, 35, 38.

credibility.[65] The second aspect, psychological interiority, reminds us of realism's enduring concern with "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day."[66] Both, however, exist in permanent tension with the basically Aristotelian orientation of the realist novel towards a single, overarching plot.[67] Description and psychological interiority may contribute to the development of the plot, but they also necessarily suspend its progress, however momentarily.

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[65] "Descriptions of dresses, furniture, housefronts, and so on project an illusion of referentiality. These, besides their specific social significance, also signal real-life verisimilitude, calling to mind the abundance of objects surrounding us in everyday life and thereby supporting the effect of well-observed faithful representation of the world that the text attempts to achieve." Ibid., 38. Cf. Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, ed. François Wahl (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[66] Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

[67] "The well-made plot, then, ought to be single." Moreover, "Plot, then, is the first principle and, as it were, soul of tragedy, while character is secondary... Tragedy is mimesis of action, and it is chiefly for the sake of the action that it represents the agents." Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 49, 69.

The realist novel, then, requires the author to orchestrate the relationship between these two axes in such a way as to generate verisimilitude while developing the plot in such a way as to impart those descriptions with significance. *The Making of Americans* thwarts these narrative conventions, and it should be clear that it does so systematically enough not to by considered evidence of Stein's incompetence as a novelist, but rather of the determinedly anti-Aristotelian aesthetic of the novel. If Aristotle, in this sense the father of realism, calls for unmediated mimesis, *The Making of Americans* ultimately offers only diegesis. The narrative spine offered by its genealogical plot is warped by constant digression. Successive characterological schemas are devised, tested on relatively minor characters, then abandoned, before the narrative turns back to assay the main characters again.[68]

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[68] For instance, the story of the Shillings that occupies pages 77-85. As Bridgman notes, the narrator begins by asserting that there are "millions" like the Shillings, making them an exemplary social type. Like, that is except for the "queerness" "that makes them different." Just as soon as this qualification is introduced, however, the narrator concedes that "perhaps there was nothing... really queer inside them." These reversals and qualifications typify the novel's style, and make it nearly impossible to

Most critics straightforwardly identify the narrator with
Stein, who uses long meta-discursive passages to detail the
narrator's struggle to tell the story, occasionally veering
into her philosophical preoccupations, and, as the novel
progresses, sometimes expressing her despair at being unable
to complete the work to her satisfaction. In terms of the
fundamental distinction between *story* and *discourse*, a
heuristic tool that owes much to the aesthetic debates that
I have canvassed already, *The Making of Americans* represents
the overwhelming of story by a discourse that becomes
increasingly self-referential as the novel develops.

 Stein's attack on the realist tradition thus plays out
in terms of each of the distinctions described above.
Diegesis dominates over mimesis, discourse over story, and
description over narrative. The result is a singular style,
which I now take up in detail, using an example from the
novel's description of David Hersland:

 In the street in his walking, and it was then his

 children were a little ashamed of him, he always had

 his hat back on his head so that it always looked as if

 it were falling, and he would march on, he was a big

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extract from many such dense passages of character analysis
anything resembling plot. Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*,
70.

man and loved walking, with two or three of his

children following behind him or with one beside him,

and he always forgetting all about them, and everybody

would stop short to look at him, accustomed as they

were to see him, for he had a way of tossing his head

to get freedom and a way of muttering to himself in his

thinking and he had always a movement of throwing his

body and shoulders from side to side as he was arguing

to himself about things he wanted to be changing, and

always he had the important feeling to himself inside

him. (*MoA*, 49–50)

Throughout passages of this kind, marked by her

idiosyncratic syntax, Stein muddles the distinction between

story time and narrative time. Whereas Stein herself

described the novel as a thousand pages of continuous

present, in fact the novel treats tense much more

complicatedly.[69] The David Hersland passage doesn't contain a

single example of the continuous present (otherwise known as

the present progressive). Instead, its dominant tense is the

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[69] Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," in

Modernism: An Anthology, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden, MA and

Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 409. Cf. Barrett Watten, "An Epic

of Subjectivation: The Making of Americans,"

Modernism/modernity 5.2 (April 1998): 95.

simple past, as in such constructions as: "he always had his hat back on his head so that it always looked as if it were falling." The novel respects the frequent alignment of heterodiagetic narrators with retrospective (as opposed to concurrent) narration. But two aspects of Stein's style stresses the retrospectiveness of the narration to the point of denaturing it. First, the adverb "always" appears five times, usually modifying verbs in the simple past, as in: "he always had his hat back on his head so that it always looked as if it were falling, and he would march on" (*MoA*, 49–50). However, the final clause adds a note of ambiguity by introducing the modal auxiliary "would": "and he would march on." This particular use of "would" indicates propensity, as in "Whenever he heard her coming he would quickly put out his pipe."[70] Frequency adjuncts and modal auxiliaries are both common ways of indicating habitual actions; indeed, they are frequently used together: "he would always walk..." But Stein's style is characterized by an oscillation between these and other grammatical permutations with the same end, as if unable to settle on a single one.

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[70] Rodney Huddleson and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 197.

A related peculiarity of Stein's style is its fixation on gerunds, as in "In the street in his walking..." In his introduction to *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, Richard Konstelanetz notes that "Especially in *The Making of Americans*... Stein inserts extra gerunds into otherwise normal clauses."[71] In the case cited above, a number of more natural alternatives suggest themselves, such as "In the street as he was walking," or "In the street, as he walked" (*MoA*, 49-50). Both alternative formulations preserve the sense of ongoingness or habituality that the passage seeks to express, but do so in a more "natural" style.[72] Indeed, it isn't a question of which of the several tenses and modes in English expressing habituality that the novel uses, but rather, maintaining consistent sentences. Instead, the novel constantly subverts this expectation, and in doing so institutes on a syntactical level the excess manifest on a

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[71] Gertrude Stein, *The Yale Gertrude Stein* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), xiv.

[72] "Natural" in the specific sense described by Monika Fludernik, meaning "aspects of language which appear to be regulated by or motivated by cognitive parameters based on man's experience of embodiedness in a real-world context." It is these cognitive parameters against which Stein mounted a career-long polemic. Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, 17.

macro-level in the novel's sheer bulk. The first of my rewritings above highlights the peculiarity of Stein's syntactical choice by using the participle form of the verb "to walk," "walking." In this version, "walking" remains a verb, while in Stein's version, the syntax transforms the verb into a noun: "in his walking," paraphrasable as "in his manner of walking." But the gerund is, clearly, identical with the participle form of the verb. Whereas the verb expresses activity, the noun expresses stasis. But I would contend that the identity between these two forms creates a deliberate ambiguity in the reader's mind: Richard Bridgman goes so far as to declare gerunds "the basic components of the abstract style of *The Making of Americans*."[73] Indeed, the hybrid participle/gerund exemplifies a paradox that animates the whole of *The Making of Americans*: the simultaneity of movement and stasis, change and consistency, in a version of the ordinary characterized by habit.

These kinds of sentences also embody the novel's ambitions to arrive at a universal description of character: "I knew while I was writing The Making of Americans it was possible to describe every kind there is of men and women."[74] While the novel tends to hold out a description of "every kind there is" as a pious aspiration rather than an

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[73] Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 97.

[74] Stein, *Lectures in America*, 150.

achievable project, its relentless drive toward generality renders those descriptions practically inassimilable. The example of David Hersland's "walking" disappears amidst a morass of other activities (also rendered as gerunds) that we engage in:

> As one sees everyone in their living, in their loving, sitting, eating, drinking, sleeping, walking, working, thinking, laughing, as any one sees all of them from their beginning to their ending... sometime all of them will have the last touch of being, a history of them can give to them, sometime then there will be a history of each one, of all the kinds of them, of all the ways any one can know them. (*MoA*, 179–80)

A list of this kind could be extended enormously, as Stein herself acknowledges: "As often as I thought and had every reason to be certain that I had included everything in my knowledge of any one something else would turn up that had to be included."[75] With no principle of inclusion or exclusion at work, description becomes aimless and overwhelming. Genette holds that, in the context of narrative, psychological description serves the secondary

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[75] Ibid., 143–44.

purpose of justifying characters' actions.[76] In *The Making of Americans*, these values are reversed, and actions only seem to take place so as to offer specimens for the character type under consideration.

Stein seems untroubled by her contradictory rhetoric: acknowledging that her universal characterology is unobtainable, she nonetheless repeats, like an incantation, "sometime then there will be a history of everyone..." (*MoA*, 180). The fact that the novel sets up aesthetic goals that it cannot fulfill is only an index of its modernist ambition. The novel's self-consciousness goes further, in fact, and at times draws attention to the consequences of inverting plot and character, as in a striking passage that Stein draws attention to in *Lectures in America*, quoted here from the novel:

> The little son wanted to make a collection of butterflies and beetles and it was all exciting to him and it was all arranged then and then the father said to the son you are certain this is not a cruel thing that you are wanting to be doing, killing things to make collections of them... at last the boy was convinced it was a cruel thing and he said he would not do it. (*MoA*, 489)

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[76] Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, 135.

The next morning the father sees a moth, which he kills and pins to show to his son, who is confused by the contradiction in his father's behavior: "The boy was all mixed up inside him and then he said he would go on with his collecting and that was all there was then of discussing" (*MoA*, 490). This anecdote serves as a figure for the novel's own conflicted approach to its characters. In its zeal to construct various ways of classifying its characters, it has indeed turned them into specimens, "pinned and wriggling on the wall." But however alert to the pitfalls of this approach, the drive to accrete more and more is irresistible.

The sense of anxiety that underlies this allegory of writing represents a small departure in tone for the novel, reminding the reader of what it so often lacks: psychological depth. The *Making of Americans* insists on its intention to excavate the inner being of her characters, and yet it eschews virtually all of the tools of the conventional novel for imparting psychological interiority. The novel focuses heavily on external manifestations of character, and when it turns to articulating personality traits, it leans heavily on abstract nouns: "Mr. David Hersland had in him a feeling of being as big as all the world around him, he had in him a strong feeling of beginning, of fighting, of brushing people away from him"

(*MoA*, 157). This passage bears all the hallmarks of the style described earlier, in particular the blending of gerunds with present participles. Action, the motor of plot, stands in an etiolated relationship with character, including on the level of syntax. David Hersland does not "brush people away from him," either habitually or in a specific instance: he merely "has in him a strong feeling" of doing so.

It is difficult, then, to see how Stein's sense of character and habit could usefully be said to develop from the philosophy of William James, whose emphasis on habit as an active tool of self-fashioning is belied by the very syntax of *The Making of Americans*. Whereas in James, character can be built by conscious manipulation of habit, in Stein the ultimate sources of one's "bottom nature" remain obscure: "As I was saying often for many years some one is baffling; the repeated seeing, hearing, feeling of the being in them does not make clear the nature of the bottom being in them" (*MoA*, 351). At times in the novel Stein resorts to a rhetoric of depth: the view that, in Charles Taylor's words, "We are creatures with inner depths; with partly unexplored and dark interiors."[77] The attempt to

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[77] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 111.

master those dark interiors leads Stein to adopt the series of psychological schemes that occupy the novel from its second section on: the exhaustively elaborated categories of the "dependent independent" and the "dependent independent," or "attacking" and "resisting" natures, or some combination of the above as in "the dependent independent resisting murkily engulfing kind..." (*MoA*, 165, 551, 605). As Richard Bridgman observes, "Such a list can only come to an arbitrary end."[78] The uselessness of these schemas frequently accounts for the expressions of despair and self-doubt that crop up in the novel's metadiscursive passages: "Sometimes I lose it, sometimes I doubt it, it is too clear or too vague or too confused inside me" (*MoA*, 308). By declining all of the narrative and stylistic strategies offered by the realist tradition for exploring interiority, the novel short-circuits its own ambitions.

The example of *The Making of Americans* clarifies the affinity between realist narration and the ordinary. Through realism, the vast accretions of detail in which the ordinary consists are ordered and imbued with significance by the unfolding plot. Even when they are insignificant, that is, they exercise no determinative influence over the causal development of that plot, they remain significant in their

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[78] Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 76.

insignificance—Barthes's "reality effect."[79] But rather than give an account of the novel wholly grounded in its negative relation to the realist tradition, I want to conclude by drawing attention briefly to the positive aspects of a novel which, after all, has been described (subject to qualifications) as "the birth scene of modern experimentalism."[80]

The main development that Stein can be said to have made in the representation of the ordinary is the unprecedented predominance of lexical and syntactic repetition at the level of diegesis. While repetition remains pronounced throughout the novel, Tanya Clement identifies a shift from long passages repeated less frequently in the first half of the novel to short passages repeated more frequently in the second.[81] This accounts for the sense that as the novel progresses, the plot disintegrates; repetition at the level of discourse impedes the reader's ability to filter and arrange the novel's

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[79] "Flaubert's barometer, Michelet's little door finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified." Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 148.

[80] Lawrence Rainey, "Review of *the Making of Americans*, by Gertrude Stein," *Modernism/modernity* 4.2 (April 1997): 223.

[81] Clement, "The Story of *One*," 438.

content into a comprehensible sequence. Far from adding emphasis or correcting misapprehensions, as repetition tends to do in life, literary repetition can have an obfuscatory effect. On the other hand, as Peter Brooks and others have noted, repetition also effectively *constitutes* literature:

> Narrative, we have seen, must ever present itself as a repetition of events that have already happened, and within this postulate of a generalized repetition it must make use of specific, perceptible repetitions in order to create plot, that is, to show us a significant interconnection of events.[82]

As Derek Attridge puts it, "Meaning itself is grounded in repetition; the never-before-experienced, the wholly other, is meaningless, not even available to perception."[83]

Stein, it seems, would agree. Her love of repetition is attested to in explicit terms in *The Making of Americans:* "Loving repeating in me makes of me then one understanding

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[82] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 99.

[83] Derek Attridge, "Meaning in Movement: Phrasing and Repetition," in *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 34.

being in men and women" (*MoA*, 710). But Stein is also alive to repetition's paradoxes. As Brooks puts it:

> Is repetition sameness or difference? To repeat
> evidently implies resemblance, yet can we speak of
> resemblance unless there is difference? Without
> difference, repetition would be identity, which would
> not usually appear to be the case.[84]

Stein's opinion on this matter is emphatic: "I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition."[85] Instead, there is only iteration: "It is not repetition if it is that which you are actually doing because naturally each time the emphasis is different."[86] Stein couches her thinking about repetition in analogies with the cinema, a technology predicated on iterative repetition, making a cunning implicit claim for her use of repetition as in index of her work's modernity. However, as an apologia for the style of *The Making of Americans*, "Portraits and Repetition" falls short: in the case of narrative, the scale of iteration is all important.

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[84] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, 124.

[85] Stein, *Lectures in America*, 166.

[86] Ibid., 179.

Rather than accept Stein's insistence that repetition is simply her means of building up portraits of characters—an assertion belied by reading the novel—we should turn away from the content of specific repetitions and look instead for the kind of figurative work that repetition does. I want to argue, with Patricia Tobin, that the narrative line of the realist novel figures for the genealogical line of patriarchal society. Realist narrative is concerned with a genealogy of events: "At its origin it fathers a progeny of words, sustains them throughout in orderly descent and filial obedience, and through its act of closure maintains the family of words as an exclusive totality."[87] In other words, genealogy might be thought of as the archetypal, or limit case, of narrative, as in the Book of Numbers, which offers the barest example of storytelling in the Bible. Sarah Ahmed makes a comparable argument, and one that I will turn back to in reading "Tender Buttons," when she highlights the pervasiveness of linear metaphors in our commonplace descriptions of family and sexuality.[88]

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[87] Patricia Tobin, *Time and the Novel: The Genealogical Imperative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 18.

[88] Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 83.

Hence the genealogical plot of *The Making of Americans*, and its gradual abandonment. The novel thus appears as a sort of experiment in narrative no longer governed by the end-directed means of sense-making fundamental to realism. Thus the novel concludes with the extinction of the family line it has so doggedly traced through the early death of the character at the end of its genealogical line: "David Hersland came to be a dead one before he came to be at the ending of the beginning of his middle living" (*MoA*, 740). At the same time, the novel extinguishes the Aristotelian expectation of a plot ordered by beginning, middle, and end. The final section of the novel, "History of a Family's Progress," merges the narrator with the narrative to produce unmediated diegesis, and as Tanya Clement notes, replaces the familiar "I" of the narrative voice with the universal "some" or "one."[89] This shift towards the universal completes a synecdochic reduction of the whole novel's classificatory efforts:

> There are kinds of men and women. Many of each kind of them have been living. Many of each kind of them are living. Very many of each kind of them have come to be dead ones. Many of each kind of them are living. There

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[89] Clement, "The Story of *One*," 437.

will be lists of kinds of men and women. There will be

many lists of them. (*MoA*, 910)

No single quotation can do justice to the final chapter's

self-referentiality: each of the lexical units making up

this passage are combined and recombined almost ad infinitum

in the surrounding text. Repetition suspends mimesis, and

produces a wholly self-referential tissue of self-quotation.

Thus Stein achieves a rhetoric of not having rhetoric.

The novel's famous epigraph offers a glimpse of the

novel's radical innovations:

Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground

through his own orchard. "Stop!" cried the groaning old

man at last, "Stop! I did not drag my father beyond

this tree!" (*MoA*, 3)

The source of this epigraph is Aristotle's *Nichomachean

Ethics*; in the novel it is followed by a second paragraph

derived from a theme that Stein composed at Radcliffe.

Aristotle had meant to illustrate the distinction between

tolerance for "natural" and "unnatural" behavior: filial

aggression is recognized, but must be confined within

established limits. Stein pairs this anecdote with a

paragraph that describes the difficulty of "living down the

tempers we are born with," concluding that with the passage

of time "we see that these our sins are of all sins the really harmless ones to own... so our struggle with them dies away" (*MoA*, 3). Richard Bridgman, who identified the sources of the epigraph, notes that by combining these two passages, Stein produces a third meaning: "Applied to Gertrude Stein's own experience, it is possible to imagine what the irregularities of her young life were to which she had finally yielded as inevitable."[90] The parable might condense the novel's themes, but it also anticipates a readers' response to the text: dragged beyond the familiar environs of the realist novel, we experience exhaustion and not a little resistance. *The Making of Americans* thus ultimately rejects the whole metaphorical apparatus of realist narration, opening up possibilities for representing the ordinary which would only come to fruition in Stein's next, and perhaps most influential, project: "Tender Buttons."

III. "Tender Buttons" and the Queer Ordinary.

After the almighty struggle to defy generic conventions that shaped *The Making of Americans*, it isn't surprising that Stein should then turn her efforts to a piece that is essentially without genre. Michael Sheringham has written of

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[90] Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 67.

the "tendency for everyday writings to evolve modes of enunciation that signal a crossing of generic boundaries, and in so doing reflect 'mutations' in the everyday world and the way it is perceived."[91] "Tender Buttons" is often described as poetry, if only because it adheres to none of the rules of prose, but nor is it lineated in a way that resembles even the most extreme free verse. "A sequence of prose-poems" might come closer, if only the term "sequence" could be stripped of its orderly connotations and made to describe a work adhering only to the bare necessity of there being an axis of succession in any work extended on the page.[92]

If the question of genre has little purchase on "Tender Buttons," we can at least begin by noticing its concern with classification. Sheringham notes that classification is a way of generating observation, priming our attention to apprehend the overlooked, the ordinary phenomena that lurk beneath our notice.[93] "Tender Buttons" is organized into three sections, Objects, Food, and Rooms,

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[91] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 345-6.

[92] For instance, Stein appears nowhere in Rosenthal and Gall's extensive *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[93] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 263-4.

which together compose a sort of primitive ontology of the everyday. But as soon as classification seems to offer some purchase on the world of "Tender Buttons," it dissolves into incoherence. Not, as in Borges's Chinese Encyclopedia, as a self-aware comment on the hierarchies implicit in all listing; there is little in the way of priming and then subverting a reader's expectations.[94] "A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass" might suggest a teasing metaphor, but "A Method of a Cloak" is frankly obscure, and by the time the "Objects" section title repeats itself as a subheading, the text's organization has become vertiginously self-reflexive. This is typical of the whole of "Tender Buttons": means of interpretation suggest themselves, then just as quickly dissipate, without even allowing for their failure to be recuperated as a negative mode of interpretation. In other words, the piece delights in paradox, as its title suggests: buttons, on the whole, tend not to be tender.

Because "Tender Buttons" offers so little in the way of meaning on its surface, scholars have debated the proper approach to it extensively, and it has been subject to major reassessments in light of almost every new school of literary criticism. These debates have tended to break down

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[94] Jorge Luis Borges, "John Wilkins' Analytical Language," in *Selected Nonfictions*, ed. and trans. Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin, 1999), 231.

along lines that mirror the conflicting definitions of modernism invoked above: content-based approaches, and form-based approaches. Of the former, the most extreme is almost certainly Lisa Ruddick's account of "Tender Buttons" as a gnostic text, which can be "unlocked" by attending to its "woman-centered spiritual vision."[95] Ruddick offers a series of readings of passages from the text of varying degrees of persuasiveness, designed to show that "Tender Buttons" rewrites a founding western myth of sacrifice in an anti-patriarchal fashion.[96] The difficulty of Ruddick's approach is that in the absence of specific cues in the text to invite her gnostic reading, the reader must be sympathetic to a thesis about Western culture and the pervasiveness of its "fundamental myths" in order to be persuaded of the elaborate interpretive contortions to which the text is subjected: the hermeneutic code is imposed from the outside.

Other critics have taken a more modest approach by emphasizing what they see as coded biographical content in the work. It is sometimes read as a celebration of the changes in Stein's domestic circumstances during 1911, specifically Leo Stein's departure from the Rue de Fleurus and Alice B. Toklas's permanent installation in Gertrude's life and household. Leo's domineering personality,

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[95] Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein*, 190-2.

[96] Ibid.

intensifying neuroses, and disdain for Gertrude's creative efforts make him, in Leon Katz's and John Malcolm Brinnin's accounts, the early antagonist in the story of Gertrude's artistic development.[97] Some of the strength of this reading certainly derives from the presence of sexual insinuation throughout the text, as in:

> THIS IS THE DRESS, AIDER.
>
> Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers.
>
> A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let.[98]

"Aider," it seems, should be read as a pun on "Ada," one of Stein's nicknames for Alice B. Toklas.[99] Similar punning

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[97] Brinnin, *The Third Rose*, 194–96; Katz, "The First Making of *The Making of Americans*," 261–64; Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 110–14; Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein*, 181.

[98] Gertrude Stein, "Tender Buttons," in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden MA, and Oxford: 2005), 383. Hereafter cited in text as "TB."

[99] Neil Schmitz, "Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist: The Rhetoric of 'Tender Buttons,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 3.5 (July 1974): 1121–22.

references to sex abound; even the title offers a sexual
connotation: "tender buttons" in French, "tendres boutons,"
being a metaphor for buds, and by extension, nipples or the
clitoris.[100] The text's representation of sexuality reaches
the peak of its frankness in "Rooms":

> The sister was not a mister. Was this a surprise. It
> was. The conclusion came when there was no arrangement.
> All the time that there was a question there was a
> decision. Replacing a casual acquaintance with an
> ordinary daughter does not make a son. ("TB," 395)

Marjorie Perloff concludes that the work alludes to the
private side of Stein's domestic life with Alice, which, as
distinct from the public life recorded in *The Autobiography
of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody's Autobiography*, "demands a
different language."[101]

Margueritte S. Murphy offers a reading that similarly
stresses the work's domestic setting, but proceeds from
particular features of its language, like its frequent use
of parataxis and the imperative mood. These characteristics

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[100] Peter Howarth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist
Poetry* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,
2012), 157.

[101] Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 108.

reveal the work's indebtedness to "authoritative prose for women": cookbooks, housekeeping guides, and books of etiquette like *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*. The listing typical of cookbooks and the didacticism inherent in etiquette guides is reflected in the poem's frequent uses of parataxis and the imperative mood: "The tone is that of authority, as if to establish order, decorum, and domestic stability."[102] The aim of Stein's "counter-discourse" in "Tender Buttons" then is not to "renounce or trivialize" the world of cooking, housekeeping, fashion, and etiquette, but to use "its authority to value, explain, and stabilize her own domestic sphere."[103] Murphy's argument amounts to one of the more original claims for *Tender Buttons* as a feminist text.

It is tempting to pair Murphy's reading with Luce Giard's contribution to the second volume of de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*. There she observes that the everyday routines of the kitchen are composed of "rites and codes, of rhythms and choices, of received usage and

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[102] Margueritte S. Murphy, "'Familiar Strangers': The Household Words of Gertrude Stein's 'Tender Buttons,'" *Contemporary Literature* 32.3 (Fall 1991): 390.

[103] Ibid., 400.

practiced customs."[104] Giard treats cooking and other

everyday practices as repositories of a kind of tacit

knowledge, constituting "the cumulative cultural memory of

generations of women whose experiences have gone

unrecorded."[105] Perhaps this could offer an explanation for

the recognizably domestic setting of "Tender Buttons" as

well as its syntactic transformations: there is a discourse

of the everyday centered on the routines of the home so

fundamentally at odds with the Western episteme and its

traditional emphases that to give a true account of it

requires the abandonment of traditional modes of expression.

But if this kind of epistemological revolt did indeed

motivate the experiments of "Tender Buttons," it should be

possible to adduce some principle according to which its

deformations of orderly syntax operate. No such principle

emerges; the poem does not so much transform syntax as

reduce it to a very minimal level. Moreover, Giard saw the

domestic sphere not as a bearer of potentially transgressive

values, but rather as a site of resistance to the

encroachment of modernity: "frenetic overmodernization," as

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[104] Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Vol. 2, *Living and Cooking*, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 171.

[105] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 246.

she puts it.[106] A version of the ordinary as an encounter
with "altering alterity" is to be found instead in the
original work of Michel de Certeau, for whom gender
represents "a potentially damaging blind spot."[107] Finally,
Murphy's contention that Stein sets out to "stabilize" her
domestic setting is blatantly at odds with the experience of
reading the text: "Tender Buttons" seems less about
stabilizing Stein's domesticity than destabilizing everybody
else's.

Interpretive strategies like this one have a kind of
appealing perversity, in that they deny the text's opacity
or incoherence outright: reality itself is difficult or
obscure, and our habitual modes of representation falsify;
this text, by contrast, represents that difficulty
faithfully. This kind of argument finds its archetypal form
in Bridgman. Whereas more recent critics have fixed on *Three
Lives* and *The Making of Americans* as evidence of William
James's influence over Stein, for Bridgman "Tender Buttons"
makes it "impossible to overlook." James reminds us that
customary usage vouchsafes linguistic meaning, but custom
also causes us to forget their arbitrary nature. Likewise,
the "substantive" parts of our consciousness, those

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[106] de Certeau, et al., *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Vol. 2,
213. Cf. Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 153.

[107] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 243, 47.

available to linguistic articulation, are as boulders in a stream; the remainder passes by nearly unnoticed, "the transitive parts of thought's stream."[108] The virtue of Stein's style in "Tender Buttons" is that it forces the reader to confront the arbitrariness of discourse by wrenching words out of their habitual contexts.[109] Michael Hoffmann and Norman Weinstein make essentially the same point in their respective monographs.[110] Jayne Walker offers a later iteration of this argument when she describes "Tender Buttons" as a fundamentally "mimetic" text because it represents what James called the "'concrete chaos' of immediate sensory experience, in which 'collateral contemporaneity' is the only 'real order.'"[111] But mimesis, as we have seen, depends on a semiotic structure available to readerly recuperation; it isn't at all clear that "immediate sensory experience" could offer such a structure,

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[108] Cited in Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 133-4.

[109] Similar arguments are to be found in Schmitz, "Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist"; Michael Edward Kaufmann, "Gertrude Stein's Re-Vision of Language and Print in 'Tender Buttons,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 15.4 (Spring 1989): 447-60.

[110] Hoffman, *The Development of Abstractionism*, 194-5; Norman Weinstein, *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of Modern Consciousness* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1970), 64.

[111] Walker, *The Making of a Modernist*, 134.

or that we would have any real grounds to recognize it as such if it did. In other words, the claim that a text engages in mimesis of an experience unavailable to ordinary consciousness is self-contradictory.

Similar claims cluster around Stein's famous statement "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," from "Sacred Emily."[112] According to Harriett Scott Chessman, "The word, in appearing not once but many times, draws attention away from its status as a referential sign, which is so familiar to us that we can no longer experience the word's freshness."[113] We are supposed, by dint of repetition, to see the sign divorced from its referent; the line is not about a rose at all, but rather about linguistic representation. To put it another way, these critics advance a Shklovskian interpretation of Stein's style. According to Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization, "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life." The "work, clothes, furniture," and so on that force of habit occludes from our perception are "rendered strange" by being shown back to us in literary representation, allowing us, ideally, to return

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[112] Gertrude Stein, *Geography and Plays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 187.

[113] Chessman, *The Public Is Invited to Dance*, 82.

to the real world with our perception of it heightened.[114] Stein's critics merely displace the Shklovskian procedure from the actual clothes, furniture, etc. to the linguistic token which represent them. But Liesl Olson has made an insightful objection to the aesthetics of defamiliarization in *Modernism and the Ordinary*: that moments of heightened consciousness or perception are largely empty in themselves, and depend on the surrounding context of the ordinary to give them meaning.[115] In the case of "Tender Buttons," however, it would be reasonable to ask whether Stein's grammatical and syntactic deformations don't carry out their defamiliarizing work too effectively, leaving no ordinary context for the reader to recuperate.

Stein, moreover, had rather different ideas about the significance of her procedures:

Now listen! I'm no fool. I know that in daily life we don't go around saying "is a... is a... is a..." Yes, I'm no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is

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[114] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 11–12.

[115] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 42.

red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.[116]

Contrary to the view that Stein's language divorces signs from their referents, Stein herself claims that she has achieved, if anything, an even higher degree of verisimilitude. Indeed, the rose is not just vivid again, it's *red*, a detail wholly absent from the original poem. As her career developed, a more and more considerable part of Stein's output was given over to explaining and justifying her earlier experiments. By 1946, in the so-called "Transatlantic Interview," Stein aligns herself with the generalized reaction against nineteenth century literary norms that remains the most common, if inexact, definition of modernism: "You had to recognize words had lost their value in the Nineteenth Century, particularly towards the end, they had lost much of their variety." As a result, "I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word."[117] But despite the authority that critics

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[116] Quoted in Thornton Wilder, "Introduction" in Gertrude Stein, *Four in America* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), v-vi.

[117] Stein, *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, 17-18.

often attribute to them, Stein's claims to have revitalized language in a text like "Tender Buttons" would be more credible if she had done so without virtually abandoning literature's communicative function.

A related kind of self-justification is at work in Stein's claims about her association with cubism, analogies with which are the main interpretive strategy of those critics who emphasize the formal characteristics of "Tender Buttons." Despite being, as we have seen, one of the earliest attempts to give an account of Stein's innovations, the notion of Stein as a "literary cubist" has been surprisingly tenacious.[118] The strongest claim for an analogy here comes from Jayne Walker, who notes that "Within months after Picasso created his first collage [*Still-life with Chair Caning*, 1912], Stein invented the newly concrete, logically disjunctive style that culminated in *Tender Buttons*."[119] *Still-life with Chair Caning* includes a piece of oil-cloth painted with chair caning and a length of actual rope around the border of the canvas. For Walker, these

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[118] It appears again, for instance, in Paul Peppis's recent essay "Schools, Movements, Manifestos" in, *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[119] Walker, *The Making of a Modernist*, 130.

inclusions are "absolutely 'real,' literal pieces of the objects they signify, but they are starkly juxtaposed in an order that bears no resemblance to that of the everyday world."[120] Writing about the same Picasso canvas, however, William Rubin draws a crucial distinction: it is not the unfamiliar material of the oilcloth as against the canvas, but the clash "between the quasi-photographic illusionism of the chair caning and the abstract and painterly Cubist figuration of the rest of the still life" that draws the viewer's attention.[121]

In other words, "what is collaged is not chair caning, which Picasso surely could have acquired and affixed to his canvas had he wished, but oilcloth *picturing* chair caning."[122] Far from being an irruption of the real into the artwork, the oilcloth reveals a vertiginous regress. The contrast is not between reality and illusion, but between "alternate ways of *imaging* reality"; "reality in *Still Life with Chair Caning* is a game played with smoke and mirrors."[123] Collage, too, is only a rhetoric of not having rhetoric. Thus, when Walker argues that "Tender Buttons"

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[120] Ibid.

[121] William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 36.

[122] Ibid., 37.

[123] Ibid.

ought to be read according to the principle of juxtaposition that animates cubist collage, we have good reason to suspect her claims that this introduces into Stein's work a new "concreteness."[124] Nonetheless, her argument makes some headway by following Steiner and describing collage in structuralist terms. David Antin offers a useful summary of this approach by showing that the "stronger logical relations" that obtain in regular narrative or pictorial forms—"implication, entailment, negation, subordination and so on"—are suspended in favor of weaker ones: "similarity, equivalence, identity, their negative forms, dissimilarity, nonequivalence, nonidentity, and some kind of image of concatenation, grouping or association."[125] As Marjorie Perloff has pointed out, Antin's definition accurately describes a great range of modernist experiments with form.[126]

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[124] Walker, *The Making of a Modernist*, 130.

[125] David Antin, "Some Questions About Modernism," in *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 211.

[126] Marjorie Perloff, "Collage and Poetry," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

But Perloff also allows that Stein is "by no means a collagist."[127] What she means by this echoes the important distinction between cubist collage and the *papier collé*: the latter is defined by "the classical principle of the unity of medium," while collage is defined by the mixture of mediums.[128] It is debatable to what extent a "mixture of mediums" is even possible for writers to achieve. The closest parallel, and the one drawn by Perloff, is quotation. But quotation is wholly absent from "Tender Buttons," which, like almost all of Stein's experimental work, remains resolutely hermetic. By the end of her career, Stein had begun to re-situate herself as regards the cubists. No longer satisfied to be seen as a literary adaptor of their innovations, in the "Transatlantic Interview" she claims to have found the impetus in her experiments in Cézanne, widely acknowledged as a forerunner to the cubists. Stein is thus reinterpreting her relationship with cubism in fraternal, rather than filial, terms.[129] Stein's claims surrounding cubism amount to a self-serving rhetoric, but are no less interesting for that. Even a generous reading of the claims made for an analogy between

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[127] Ibid.

[128] Rubin, *Picasso and Braque*, 36.

[129] Stein, *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, 15.

"Tender Buttons" and cubism would have to concede that it amounts only to a shared effort to put pressure on the codes of representation that formerly obtained in their respective art forms. If the proximity and example of Picasso et al. did indeed have a determining influence on Stein's aesthetic practice, then the exact lineaments of that influence will have to remain obscure, known only, if at all, to Stein herself.

    "Tender Buttons" tempts critics to argue by synecdoche. The resolute opacity of the poem makes it expedient to take a part of the text, subject it to extended scrutiny, then allow the interpretation that emerges to apply to the whole of the text. Arguing by synecdoche, as many of the critics cited above have done, is a common tactic. The famous "sister was not a mister" line provides a perfect example because of its seeming frankness, yet nothing about its position within the text's development seems to authorize treating it as especially significant. Synecdoches allow us to gain a handle on formidably difficult texts, and to find purchase when no obvious route in is available. It is also, to a certain extent, the modus operandi of historicism, in which a text or texts are made to stand in for a larger cultural formation about which they reveal certain salient features. This discussion has already drawn on this strategy, and will do so again. But "Tender Buttons" is best served by also attempting to describe its

overall linguistic texture. After all, it is one of the rhetorical ploys of the poem to solicit synecdochic readings while also refusing the whole to which that part might be thought to refer. A line from "Salad Dressing and an Artichoke" reads: "A whole is inside a part," before concluding, "a part does not go away, a hole is red leaf" ("TB," 394). If we take the sentence's first clause alone, then it could be read as authorizing a synecdochic approach to the whole poem. But its next phrase seems to disavow that reading immediately, before transforming "whole" into "hole," suggesting the former's negation. The difficulty of arriving at a formal interpretation of "Tender Buttons" is that, as I have shown, the text thematizes its abandonment of even the pretense of formal organization. The best way to try and gain any purchase on the text, then, is to arrive at an accurate description of its salient features.

Monica Fludernik describes "Tender Buttons" as an example of "verbless writing," and it is reasonably clear what she means: the text lacks a wide array of verbs describing movement, change, development, and so on.[130] In reality, however, "Tender Buttons" is a verb-ridden text; it's just that the most frequent verb in it is "to be," in various of its forms (with the exception of the first

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[130] Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, 261.

person), but usually in copular clauses.[131] In fact, even though "to be" and its inflections are some of the most common words in the language, "Tender Buttons" takes their prevalence to an extreme.[132] The percentage of the total word count of each section made up by "to be" and its inflections is: "Objects," 8.1%; "Food," 8.3%; and "Rooms," 9.6%, for a total throughout the text of 9%. At first glance, these figures might appear modest or in line with expectations. But in fact, this is triple the usual rate of occurrence for "to be" in printed English.[133] Whatever else "Tender Buttons" is, it is certainly a sustained meditation on assertions of

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[131] Huddleson and Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, 266.

[132] Walker notes the prevalence of "to be" in her study of "Tender Buttons" and offers a rough count of its appearances. My figures show that if anything, Walker slightly underestimates the verb's prevalence, though she may simply have been taking into account fewer of its inflections. Walker, *The Making of a Modernist*, 164.

[133] Mark Davies, "The Corpus of Historical American English: 400 Million Words, 1810-2009," (2010). The same result was obtained using Google's Ngram Viewer, see Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books," *Science* 331.6014 (14 January 2011): 176-82.

identity and the role of the copulative function in language.

A typical passage from "A Long Dress" in "Objects" reads:

> Where *is* the serene length, it *is* there and a dark place *is* not a dark place, only a white and red *are* black, only a yellow and green *are* blue, a pink *is* scarlet, a bow *is* every color. ("TB," 377)

"Roastbeef," in "Food," contains the passage:

> All the time that there *is* use there *is* use and any time there *is* a surface there *is* a surface, and every time there *is* an exception there *is* an exception and every time there *is* a division there *is* a dividing. Any time there *is* a surface there *is* a surface and every time there *is* a suggestion there *is* a suggestion and every time there *is* silence there *is* silence and every time that *is* languid there *is* that there… ("TB," 383)

A similar exercise in noting the appearance of "is" and its other inflections throughout "Tender Buttons" will reveal the extent to which its sentences depend on "to be" in either its ascriptive ("a pink is scarlet") or specifying ("any time there is a surface there is a surface") uses.

Thus "Tender Buttons" manifests a fascination with the power of language to make assertions of existence ("there is"), as well as the transformative power of metaphor ("Cold coffee with a corn a corn yellow and green mass is a gem") ("TB," 389). Antin had aligned collage with the metonymic axis in language, stressing the side-by-side ordering of terms using "'weaker' logical relations" that allow "more degrees of freedom in the reading of the sign-objects and their ensemble relations."[134] It goes without saying that "Tender Buttons" applies the form of those logical relations illogically, but in doing so it also invokes the metaphorical axis. As in *The Making of Americans*, where ambiguity between gerunds and present participles arrests the grammatical movement of Stein's sentences, so in "Tender Buttons" does the copula act both metonymically and metaphorically: linking the terms in a sentence in a weak, side-by-side relation, while at the same time inviting the reader to interpret metaphorical relations between those terms. In doing so, it arrests the ordinary operations of literary sense-making, which depend on the kind of "strong," hierarchical logical relations that Antin identifies.[135]

Therefore, what thematics of the ordinary emerge from these syntactical games? How can such an extreme style

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[134] Antin, "Some Questions About Modernism," 211.

[135] Ibid.

credibly claim to have a bearing on the ordinary? The answer, I think, must be in part to do with Stein's choice of material: the range of diction she uses in the work, analysis of which demonstrates an unusual degree of plainness—the sort of delightful paradox to which Stein was much given.[136] As Perloff notes, reading "Tender Buttons" requires no special knowledge, unlike (in her example)

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[136] On average, 73% of the words in "Tender Buttons" fall within the top 500 English words by frequency of usage; 11% between 501 and 3000, and the remaining 16% outside the top 3000. These figures were arrived at using samples of approx. 1,300 words from each of "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms." For comparison, a sample of 1,250 words from a standard, contemporary realist text, Arnold Bennett's *Tales from the Five Towns*, registers 59%, 10%, and 30% respectively, amounting to a noticeably more variegated vocabulary. The frequency lists used for comparison here are drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. While it would be ideal to have the Corpus of Historical American English to make the comparison, the appropriate analytical tools have yet to be applied to it. Mark Davies, "The Corpus of Contemporary American English: 450 Million Words, 1990-2012," (2010-); Arnold Bennett, "Tales of the Five Towns." (Project Gutenberg, 1905), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13293/13293-h/13293-h.htm.

Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": a consequence
of its simplified diction as well as its imperviousness to
intertextuality.[137] If Stein's diction remains well within
the bounds of the ordinary, but her syntax strays far
outside of it, it could be said that her complaint is not
with the material of the ordinary world, but with its
arrangement. If we were to indulge, for a moment, in a
naively realist reading of the text, we might envisage a
series of domestic spaces strewn with objects and
foodstuffs; the home turned upside down. On these grounds,
we should agree with Kathryn Kent when she argues that "the
poem thoroughly queers domesticity." "Queer," in this case,
obtains on every level of its various meanings: "Tender
Buttons" does represent an ordinary, but a queer one.[138]

Kent situates the poem within the emerging commodity
culture of the early twentieth century, arguing that "Tender

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[137] Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 72.

[138] Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls into Women: American
Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Durham, NC,
and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 141. Cf. "Strange,
odd, peculiar, eccentric"; "Of or relating to homosexuals or
homosexuality"; "To ask, inquire; to question." "queer,
adj.1"; "queer, v.1". OED Online. September 2013. Oxford
University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236
(accessed September 10, 2012).

Buttons" offers an oppositional aesthetic of
unproductiveness. In essence, Kent combines sexual
dissidence with opposition to consumer capitalism by
suggesting a metaphorical correspondence between literary,
economic, and genealogical production. On this account, the
poem offers "a complex theory of textuality and sexuality
one that reclaims what have been labeled 'unnatural' sexual
practices, and links it explicitly with a queer economy of
writing and signification, Stein's unique brand of modern
poetics."[139] In fact, the features of the text that I have
already described offer some support for Kent's reading, if
we take the text's fascination with the copula as a play on
copulation. The poem's queer pairings, then, refuse to
reproduce meaning according to traditional syntactic
expectations, just as queer sexualities interrupt social
reproduction of genealogical lines.

There are traces in the text to suggest this sort of
interpretation, though they remain traces. Any
interpretation of "Tender Buttons" that advances in a
particular direction must accept that it will not attain
comprehensiveness. The main objection I raise to Kent's
bravura discussion of the poem is that she attributes to
Stein a "theory" of queer textuality, when theory is self-
evidently anathema to Stein's procedures. But traces

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[139] Ibid.

persist, and these include the aforementioned evocation of sexual intimacy in "This is the Dress, Aider." The reader who begins to search for sexual insinuations will find them throughout "Tender Buttons," sometimes in conjunction with puns on the name of Alice B. Toklas, as in the second "Chicken" section: "Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird" ("TB," 391). The term "queer" does not appear in "Tender Buttons," but it is an important term throughout *The Making of Americans*, where it appears 141 times, often in repetitive clusters:

It is a completely queer feeling, this that I am describing. It is a completely queer feeling to be realizing that someone is seeing something... that one realizing another one's feeling seeing remembering that thing cannot one's self feel see and remember that thing. I can say that having such a feeling is completely having a queer feeling in being one being living. (*MoA*, 711)

Queer, in other words, is also Stein's figure for the unknowable, and it tends to crop up in the novel when she faces a character or characters who frustrate the narrator's capacity to know.

"Tender Buttons" radicalizes these textual strategies of *The Making of Americans.* The novel gradually allows the

"I" of its narrator to dissolve amidst its increasingly insistent repetitions. "Tender Buttons" posits no organizing consciousness or narrative voice; it doesn't contain a single instance of the pronoun "I." In her seminal essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler describes the form of oppression that queer theorists often describe as "erasure": "Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable."[140] But erasure might also be a productive site from which to articulate a counter-discourse. Far from Kent's claim that critics' emphasis on the unintelligibility of "Tender Buttons" perpetuates that erasure, there is a politics and a metaphorical work undertaken by textual opacity.[141] Even the pun, central to the poem's economy of double meanings, is a figure that calls into question the author's responsibility over meaning: is the double meaning intended, or is it just

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[140] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 20.

[141] Kent, *Making Girls into Women*, 142.

an accidental effect of language's incorrigible polysemy?[142]
This is the sort of question that "Tender Buttons"
deliberately leaves open.

Despite the absence of an authorial voice or figure,
"Tender Buttons" does contain one particularly significant
appearance of the first person objective pronoun "me" during
the final section of "Food," "A Centre in a Table": "Next to
me next to a folder, next to a folder some waiter, next to a
foldersome waiter and re letter and read her. Read her with
her for less" ("TB," 394). This, I think, should be read as
incorporating the scene of writing into the text itself.
Earlier in the poem, "A Table" had been posited as "a whole
steadiness... A table means necessary places and a revision
a revision of a little thing" ("TB," 381). But now, as the
"Food" section gives way to "Rooms," the table and its
center are rejected: "Act so that there is no use in a
center" ("TB," 394). As Bridgman puts it, "There in the very
conception of a center was a false reality."[143] The table is
a significant object throughout the poem, and indeed, "holds

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[142] Jonathan Culler, "The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction,"
in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler
(Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 4.

[143] Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 132.

a kind of exemplary status in philosophical, and particularly modernist, discourse."[144]

That significance is best encapsulated by Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, which reads the table as a sort of primal scene for the western episteme, or more precisely, what she terms an "orienting device." Ahmed proceeds from Dianne Fuss's study of writer's room, where she notes that "the theatre of composition is not an empty space but a place animated by the artifacts, mementos, machines, books, and furniture that frame any intellectual labor."[145] Ahmed argues that "being directed toward some objects and not others involves a more general orientation toward the world." Thus the privileged space of the writer's table, cleared of the domestic and the familiar for the sake of the work undertaken on it, figures for the biases inherent in the whole western intellectual tradition, which brackets the familiar and the domestic, allows the subject to "disappear under the sign of the universal."[146] Within this domestic background, concealed from view, is the apparatus of compulsory heterosexuality: the family unit reproducing

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[144] Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, 116.

[145] Diana Fuss, *Sense of an Interior: Four Rooms and the Writers That Shaped Them* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 1.

[146] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 32, 34.

itself through particular orientations toward objects and ways of inhabiting space.[147]

But for Stein, the subject disappears as a willed act of erasure rather than under the sign of the universal. The distinction between background and foreground collapses in the absence of the subject whose deictic relationship with the objects around it would organize them into the apparent and overlooked. As the subject disappears, so do the strong logical relations of syntax that order the familiar world. Stein figuratively overturns the table, and with it, the set of histories and assumptions that reproduce themselves through habit. The absent center of the text alluded to by Bridgman is the "I" now submerged in the ordinary, the "I" seated at the table on which "Tender Buttons" itself is composed. The erasure of the authorial self and the refusal to make sense themselves take on metaphorical and political significance. Stein's sense of the ordinary is rendered strange by the ordinary's own acts of erasure.

The irony of Stein's experiments in both *The Making of Americans* and "Tender Buttons" is that opacity has induced critics to try to restore the absent center, to mine out of the text the traces of Stein at her desk in the Atelier at 27 Rue de Fleurus. The Aristotelian demand for plot, for the order of beginning, middle, and end, cannot be satisfied by

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[147] Ibid., 92–107.

the text itself, so Stein's critics have sought to answer it using her life instead. In other words, most critical strategies for coping with Stein's work resort to precisely the set of narrative conventions that it itself rejected. Stein becomes the hero of her own emancipation from any one of a number of oppressors: her brother, literary convention, societal expectation. Or, she becomes the protagonist of a bildungsroman, her education at the feet of William James or the cubists equipping her to reproduce their innovations in her own field and tying her to the ongoing genealogy of western art and thought.

By way of a conclusion, we should return to the troubled question of Stein's institutional location, to observe that her queer politics of opacity depend on the relative isolation in which she composed her early work. Indeed, Stein used her institutional position within the emerging modernist constellation to avoid the necessity of writing for an audience, and with it, the necessity of making herself understood either in content or in form. To acknowledge her work's opacity without trying to dispel it is not the same as surrendering to it. Instead, Stein challenges us to read without the help of our usual tools of sense-making. Her work shows that to depict the ordinary not only means to denature our usual modes of literary representation, but that having done so, we remain apt to fall back on these very modes to recuperate meaning.

Chapter 2: James Joyce and the Text of the Ordinary

On December 7, 1921, the French novelist and critic
Valery Larbaud delivered a lecture on Joyce's *Ulysses*, just
over a month after the novel's completion. Larbaud was, in
fact, among the first to learn that the novel was complete.[1]
To assist Larbaud in preparing his lecture, Joyce drew up a
schema of the novel's episodes, detailing their Homeric
parallels and other symbolic layers. This is the schema that
would eventually appear in Stuart Gilbert's *James Joyce's*
Ulysses: *A Study* (1930), having circulated amongst Joyce's
friends for some time already.[2] Gilbert summarizes the
schema's significance thus: "James Joyce is, in fact, in the
great tradition which begins with Homer… the unities of
Ulysses go far beyond the classic triad, they are as
manifold and yet symmetrical as the daedal network of nerves
and bloodstreams which pervade the living organism."[3] For
Larbaud, the Homeric model is indispensable for readerly

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[1] Joyce, letter to Budgen, 6 November 1921, James Joyce,
Letters, Vol. 1. (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 177.

[2] Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (London: Oxford University
Press, 1966), 534; Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses; A
Study*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1952), 41.

[3] Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses*, 43.

comprehension: "The reader who approaches this book without the *Odyssey* clearly in mind will be thrown into dismay."[4] Larbaud thus inaugurates a reading of the novel as a symbolist epic.

Larbaud's lecture epitomizes the genius for self-promotion that characterized modernism, and combines elements of affinity with two other moments from the history of the movement. The first is the impact of F. T. Marinetti's activities in London on the nascent modernism of Ezra Pound. As Lawrence Rainey argues, the varied fortunes of Marinetti's enterprises provoked Pound to acknowledge that industrial society had produced a situation in which art's formerly autonomous status had become untenable, effecting "a perceptible and irreversible leveling of both within the single and amorphous category of the commodity."[5] Pound's eventual solution to this dilemma was

> to defer consumption into the future, to transform it
> into an investment; which is to say, to encourage or
> even solicit the ephemeral seduction of the consumer

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[4] Valery Larbaud, "Ulysses," *The Criterion: A Quarterly Review* 1.1 (1922): 94.; Cf. Georges May, "Valery Larbaud: Translator and Scholar," *Yale French Studies*, 6 (Autumn 1950): 83–90.

[5] Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, 38–9.

economy, acknowledging the status of art as a

commodity, but to sublimate its consumption by turning

it into an object of investment whose value will be

realized only in the future.[6]

The result was the rise of a new network of patron-

investors, and a new infrastructure of publishers, presses,

and reviews attendant upon them. By 1922, Eliot's *The Waste

Land* offered compelling evidence of this new constellation's

maturity, as a competition to publish the poem ensued,

partly at Pound's instigation, between two little magazines

backed by patrons, *The Little Review* (John Quinn) and the

Dial (Scofield Thayer), and the mass-market periodical

Vanity Fair.[7] Remarkably, none of the competitors had read

the work in question whilst they haggled over it, seeming to

offer confirmation that the mysterious character of the

commodity form had definitively entrenched itself among

works of literature at every cultural level. Selling *The

Waste Land* represented "an unprecedented effort to affirm

the output of a specific marketing-publicity apparatus

through the enactment of a triumphal and triumphant

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[6] Ibid., 39.

[7] Ibid., 91.

occasion." Publicity, in other words, had become "the surest commodity of the modernist economy."[8]

Ellmann describes Larbaud's lecture as a "way of presenting Joyce to public notice in France," but in fact it was much more.[9] Remarkably, Larbaud in effect set out to introduce a French public to an English-language novel by an Irish expatriate writer, which they could not, at that point, have read. Moreover, Larbaud was far from a neutral critic expressing an objective point of view of the work. "The last of a rich family," Larbaud had become, largely through the agency of Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, a node in the network of modernist patron-investors. Larbaud's contribution may have been financially modest—he allowed the Joyces to live rent-free in his apartment at 71 rue du Cardinal Lemoine while he travelled in Italy between July and October 1921—but he offered Joyce commodious surroundings in which to work on *Ithaca* and *Penelope*.[10] His early praise for the novel, which he read in the *Little Review* and Joyce's typescript for *Oxen of the Sun* during the first two months of 1921, was included in Beach's prospectus for the Shakespeare & Co. limited edition.[11] In other words,

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[8] Ibid., 99, 106.

[9] Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 515.

[10] Ibid., 514, 26-7, 33.

[11] Ibid., 521-2.

by the time Larbaud addressed the audience at Monnier's bookshop on 7 December, he was speaking as an entrepreneur promoting an investment. Hence the extraordinary gesture of introducing a readership to an as-yet-unpublished novel: like the editors competing for the right to publish *The Waste Land* sight unseen, the members of Larbaud's audience were being invited to invest in the emerging idiom of modernism.

The circumstances of Larbaud's lecture are of profound and under-appreciated importance for the next stage of that idiom's development. T. S. Eliot heard tell of Larbaud's talk, and wrote to him on 12 March, 1922, proposing to publish it in the inaugural issue of the *Criterion*.[12] In the event, Eliot also translated the lecture into English himself, an earlier arrangement having fallen through, in the sort of minor calamity that would become typical of the magazine.[13] Eliot's intimate acquaintance with Larbaud's account of the novel would be borne out in his own statement on it, "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," published in the November 1923 issue of the *Dial*. "I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found," Eliot

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[12] T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot,* Vol. 1, *1898-1922*, Revised Edition ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 643.

[13] Ibid., 757.

begins, before swiftly drawing attention to the novel's use of Homeric parallels, which, he declares, "has the importance of a scientific discovery." This "mythical method" offers artists a means "of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." The novel's power derives from "the parallel to the *Odyssey*, and the use of appropriate styles and symbols to each division."[14] In other words, Eliot extends Larbaud's emphasis on the Homeric parallels into a vision of the novel as an elaborately-designed symbolist masterpiece, in which a chaotic surface will yield to a deep order in response to sufficient scrutiny. Further impetus would be given to this approach to the novel in Stuart Gilbert's *James Joyce's* Ulysses, which takes Eliot and Larbaud's procedure to the extreme.

In the main topoi of this brief essay, "anarchy," "order," "myth," and so on, we can see Eliot already at work evolving the rhetoric of "classicism" which he would later pair with his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in the preface

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[14] T. S. Eliot, "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1923), 175-7.

to 1928's *For Lancelot Andrewes*.[15] But the origin of "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth" in Larbaud's performance at La Maison des Amis des Livres points to its position within a larger constellation of modernist strategies. Critics have frequently treated Eliot's claim to a classicist aesthetic reverentially, perhaps neglecting what an astonishing rhetorical coup it is to have assimilated a work like *Ulysses* to an aesthetic founded on a sensibility of decorum.[16] That said, a contemporary example of the same rhetorical sleight of hand from Eliot's oeuvre can be found in Eliot's notes for *The Waste Land*. Now so deeply entrenched in the poem's reputation as to seem inextricable from it, the notes appear not to have been part of Eliot's original design at all: they do not appear in either the *Dial* or *Criterion* texts of the poem, and were probably added

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[15] T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London,: Faber & Gwyer, 1928), vii.

[16] This is not to minimize the personal and idiosyncratic meanings Eliot assigned to the term, or Hulme's rigid dichotomy between classicism and romanticism, but in order for it to have any critical currency at all the term must stand in some relation with its more widespread meanings. Cf. "Classicism," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 263-6.

to the American pamphlet edition partly at the insistence of Horace Liveright, who felt the poem as it stood too short for publication as a book. The notes profoundly shaped reception of the poem, which seemed, rightly, "bereft of the spatiotemporal and logico-causal connections typical of narrative." "To read the notes," on the other hand, "was to find reference to 'the plan,' an arcane but ultimately identifiable logic which was dictating the poem's entangled movements, perhaps even a narrative structure discernible behind its unruly opacity."[17] In other words, the notes encourage the same strategy of reading which Eliot himself would go on to perform on *Ulysses*. If we strip away the layers of earnest rhetoric, we may well find that Eliot's classicism amounts to a polemical claim on behalf of modernism, responsive to the imperatives of the movement's marketing apparatus: the aesthetic value of modernist literature is of the same kind as the value attached to the classics, and the same pleasures can be found therein, assuming the reader is equipped with the appropriate hermeneutic key. This represented one possible solution to the problem of mediating between the conflicting demands of

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[17] T. S. Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 75.

avant-garde aesthetics and the marketplace for commoditized literature.

Eliot's vision of *Ulysses* would prove the most influential for criticism over the next several decades by providing a means to reconcile the novel with the ordered vision of modern literature set out by Cleanth Brooks and the New Critics. This outlook presupposes a certain attitude to the ordinary: that the stuff of everyday life, when it appears in the text, will be justified by sublimation to a higher unity. The paradigm case of the New Critic's procedure must be Brooks's reading of *The Waste Land.* Taking his cue from Eliot's statement in the notes to the poem, "Not on only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend," Brooks advances a reading of the poem as "a work of extraordinary structural, thematic, and poetic integrity."[18] Brooks posits a consistent protagonist for the poem, and strives to impart a sense of change and development throughout it, conjuring up the rudiments of narrative.[19] But Brooks's reading, however much it appeals to our cultural bias towards an "Aristotelian poetics of narrative," flattens out the poem's

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[18] Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land*, 117.

[19] Ibid., 118-20.

texture and specificity, denuding it of the uncanny force it seemed to have for its original readers.

The poem is frequently characterized by points of tension between conflicting means of devising moments of coherence. One such moment, which might stand as a figure for a New Critical style of interpretation, can be found in the opening of part III, "The Fire Sermon":

> Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
> The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
> Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette
> > ends
> Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs
> > are departed.[20]

The "testimony of summer nights," "empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" are invoked in a paraleptic list, remarkable only by their absence. Their unstable status figures for the conflicting imperatives operating within this opening passage, which was Eliot's final addition to the draft of part III. By anticipating the motifs that appear at the section's end (the City setting, music, song, the nymph/Thames-daughters), the passage as a whole (lines 173-186) gives the section a

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[20] Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land*, 62.

ring structure.[21] However, as Lawrence Rainey argues, it also seems to "undermine the very assertion of connectedness which this passage was meant to achieve" because of a "transparent rupture in logical-causal relatedness": the Thames-daughters or nymphs whose song takes up lines 292 to 306 at the end of the poem are bid farewell in advance of their arrival.[22] Moreover, what Rainey describes as a "factitious" use of repetition to intimate connectedness *itself* seems to undermine "claims to logical and spatiotemporal connectedness which are elsewhere being asserted," as in the section's frequent, detailed references to real City locales: "Along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street…"[23] A similar assertion could be made about listing trash, which surely performs a similar function to invoking real locales, grounding the poem in the particular and adding verisimilitude. But the list is present only under erasure ("The river bears *no* empty bottles…"), and is sublimated to the passage's aim to establish coherence by using repetition and pattern with surrounding passages "to

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[21] Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land*, 44.

[22] Ibid., 44-45. Cf. Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land*, 66, 73, 110.

[23] Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land*, 45; Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land*, 65.

invoke symbolic depth."[24] The New Critical reading makes the establishment of symbolic depth the only legitimate principle for reading the poem.

I use the term "sublimation" because I discern in the New Critical approach an echo of Hegelian aesthetics, particularly insofar as it concerns itself with the proper status of the detail in works of art. The New Critical emphasis on the unity and wholeness of the "well-wrought poem," with its fealty to "the oneness of experience" and consequent aversion to the particular echo the Hegelian system's orientation toward the absolute, manifestation of which is the proper goal of art (and, indeed, all human endeavor).[25] For this reason, Hegel is hostile to mimetic art, which is inextricably bound up with nature, and thus falls short of the absolute:

> This is the prose of the world, as it appears to the
> consciousness both of the individual himself and of
> others:— a world of finitude and mutability, of
> entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of

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[24] Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land*, 45.

[25] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Denis Dobson, 1968), 174.

necessity from which the individual is in no position to withdraw.[26]

In her account of Hegel, Schor argues that "The detail as an aesthetic category undergirds the entire edifice of the *Aesthetics*."[27] The detail, in this account, clearly stands for an important aspect of the ordinary, and on Schor's reading, the whole of Hegel's aesthetic project is engaged with the question of how art—particularly, in this instance, Dutch realist painting—"succeeds in spiritualizing an initially vulgar matter."[28] Indeed, Schor's contention is that a theory of the novel, famously absent from Hegel's *Aesthetics*, is to be found in his analysis of that genre.

Thus, "in order for the 'sum of insignificances' which constitutes the décor of everyday life to have access to the world of art," they must, according to Hegel, "acquire 'the look of independent and total life and freedom which lies at the root of the essence of beauty.'"[29] Hegel assumes that the "indifference or repulsion" that the prosaic inspires arises

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[26] G.F.W. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 150.

[27] Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 23.

[28] Ibid., 36.

[29] Ibid., 36-7; Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 149.

from the purposive view that we habitually bring to objects, purposiveness representing the opposite pole in Hegel's system of values from the absolute, which is characterized as existing wholly for-itself.[30] In this process, Schor discerns a sort of aesthetic forerunner of Shklovsky's defamiliarization: only stripped of their habitual connotations and imbrication with the messy world of the ordinary can the detail find its place in artistic representation.

Surprisingly, perhaps, an alternative to the Eliotic approach to *Ulysses* was set out by Ezra Pound—before Eliot had the chance to express his own views in the *Criterion*.[31] In his "Paris Letter" of May 1922 for the *Dial*, Pound expresses a diametrically opposed view on the significance of the Homeric parallels:

In this super-novel our author has also poached on the epic, and has, for the first time since 1321, resurrected the infernal figures… Telemachus, Circe,

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[30] Schor, *Reading in Detail*, 38.

[31] Ellmann notes that Pound pointedly declined to attend Larbaud's lecture, speculating that he was "rather annoyed to have his discovery rediscovered." Whether or not this has any bearing on his sharply divergent reading of *Ulysses*, we cannot know. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 535.

and the rest of the Odyssean company, the noisy cave of
Aeolus gradually place themselves in the mind of the
reader, rapidly or less rapidly according as he is
familiar or unfamiliar with Homer. These
correspondences are part of Joyce's mediaevalism and
are chiefly his own affair, a scaffold, a means of
construction, justified by the result, and justifiable
by it only.[32]

Far from making the Homeric parallels integral to reading the
novel, Pound regards them (using the term "correspondences")
as little more than a distraction. The "Paris Letter" ends
with a paean to accurate language, and a version of the
perennial complaint about the obfuscatory kinds of language
used by politicians. *Ulysses*, goes the implicit claim, is
the kind of novel that promises to reinvigorate our common
language by reasserting its connectedness with the ground of
common experience. It is, in other words, a work of

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[32] Ezra Pound, "Paris Letter," *The Dial*, June 1922, 626.
Reprinted in *Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose: Contributions to
Periodicals*, Vol. VI: 1920—1921, C522—C699a, ed. Lea
Baechler, A. Walton Litz, and James Longenbach (New York &
London, Garland Publishing: 1991).

hyperbolic realism as opposed to Larbaud and Eliot's vision of a work of hyperbolic symbolism.[33]

Just as Eliot turned his encounter with *Ulysses* into a spur for his developing classicist rhetoric, so did Pound's approach to the novel chime with the documentary aesthetic he was developing for the Malatesta Cantos. Pound's "Paris Letter" bore the date May, 1922; on the fifteenth of that month, Pound visited the Tempio Malatesta in Rimini, Italy, for the first time. The next month, at Sirmione on the Lago di Garda, he began composing material for the Malatesta Cantos, drafts of which would be completed in May 1923.[34] Critics agree that the sequence represents a decisive turn in the development of Pound's aesthetics, and respond to a variety of different literary imperatives, including his encounter with *Ulysses*, but also the legacy of his short-

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[33] Ibid., 629.

[34] In *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture*, Rainey notes that the early Malatesta drafts "respond to his recent experiences with works by two of his contemporaries: the first publication of *Ulysses* (February 1922), and the composition and publication of *The Waste Land* (published October 1922). Lawrence Rainey, *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture: Text, History, and the Malatesta Cantos* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 5, 229-30.

lived collaboration with Amy Lowell.[35] In the Malatesta Cantos, Pound makes "conspicuous use of quotation from 'documentary' or historical sources."[36] The particular style of quotation that Pound practices is conditioned by his complex relationship with the philological practices of his day, which he sometimes invokes in order to discredit by

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[35] By April 1917, Pound was ready to distance himself from Imagism and did so by collaborating with T. S. Eliot on what would become his *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and the quatrain poems of Eliot's second volume. In other words, by distancing himself from what he characterized as Imagism's "sloppiness, lack of cohesion, lack of organic center," Pound had begun to commit himself to a counter-aesthetic with strong affinities for Eliot's emerging concept of impersonality. The documentary aesthetic of the Malatesta Cantos could be interpreted as the logical extension of this effort to abandon the subjectivism of Imagist poetry. Lawrence Rainey and A. Walton Litz, "Ezra Pound," in *Modernism and the New Criticism*, ed. A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 85.

[36] Rainey, *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture: Text, History, and the Malatesta Cantos*, 29.

juxtaposition with "a higher accuracy of the spirit."[37] Nonetheless, there is in Pound's use of quotation from historical sources a rhetoric of direct statement: an implicit claim that through being directly grafted into a poem, historical documents will speak for themselves independent of the agency or mediation of an author. It is, in other words, Pound's own version of a rhetoric of not having rhetoric.

There is a powerful affinity between Pound's documentary aesthetic, his reading of *Ulysses*, and at least one strand of Joyce's various self-representations. "I want," Joyce is reported to have told Frank Budgen, "to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book."[38] Likewise, Joyce remarked to Budgen on another occasion that "imagination was memory."[39]

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[37] Rainey's illustration of this point is centered on the (mis)quoted line "(*buttato via*)" from one of Sigismundo Malatesta's letters, in Canto VIII. Ibid., 68. C.f. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 28.

[38] Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of* Ulysses (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 69.

[39] Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 79.

If Stuart Gilbert's *James Joyce's* Ulysses is the locus classicus of the symbolist reading of the novel, then Budgen's account of *Ulysses* occupies the same position for the realist reading. Throughout his book, Budgen—himself a man of socialist convictions—is at pains to emphasize the novel's celebration of the "the clay of common experience":

> I found that for [Joyce] human character was best displayed—I had almost said entirely displayed—in the commonest acts of life. How a man ties his shoe or eats his egg will give a better clue to his differentiation than how he goes to war.[40]

Budgen does not dispute the presence of the Homeric parallels, and frequently reports Joyce's use of them as a heuristic when discussing the novel. But he disagrees with Gilbert's account by making the primary material of the novel not its purported mythical substructure, but the stuff of everyday life that comprises its surface: "[Joyce] made *Ulysses*, the epic of the body, out of material regarded as unworthy or, sometimes, ignoble."[41] His achievement is to have found a means for literature to attend to dimensions of the ordinary hitherto overlooked.

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[40] Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of* Ulysses, 75.

[41] Ibid., 320.

In his magisterial biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann modulates carefully between these two competing outlooks, but finally inclines toward a version of the realist viewpoint: "The final and determining act of judgment in his work is the justification of the commonplace." "Joyce's discovery," he concludes, "so humanistic that he would have been embarrassed to disclose it out of context, was that the ordinary is the extraordinary."[42] Joyce's lifelong fascination with the ordinary is thus on the order of a critical commonplace. The humanism to which Ellmann refers recalls "the affirmation of ordinary life," to use Charles Taylor's phrase, which Taylor traces to the reformation, and protestant theology's growing emphasis on approaching all activities—not just liturgical ones—in a spirit of piety.[43] Taylor quotes from *Paradise Lost*, in what could be a Joycean motto:

> To know
> That which before us lies in daily life
> Is the prime wisdom.[44]

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[42] Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 3.

[43] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 226–7.

[44] John Milton, *Paradise Lost: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: Norton, 2005), 183.

According to this reading, *Ulysses* might exemplify a secularized extension of this cultural shift, which manifests itself within the novel in moments of Arnoldian pathos like Stephen's famous remark in the Nestor episode:

> — That is God.
>
>> Hooray! Ay! Whrrwhee!
>
> — What? Mr Deasy asked.
>
> — A shout in the street, Stephen answered, shrugging his shoulders.[45]

Stephen's invocation of an immanent God might be read as a distant, ironic echo of his artistic theory, the epiphany, defined as the realization of a special significance in the fleeting instant.

In the immediate context, however, Stephen is attempting to deflate Mr Deasy's grandiloquent, teleological worldview: "All human history moves towards one great goal, the manifestation of God" (*U*, 2.380-1). Whether we are invited to greet this secularizing shift with or without irony is a question complicated throughout the novel, particularly in its opening motif, Buck Mulligan's parodic

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[45] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 2.383-6. Hereafter cited in text as "*U*."

mass. One reading of this scene will make it a metonym for the novel as a whole, and see Mulligan's mass as an ironic deflation of Christianity's transcendental claims—a bowl of lather substituting for a chalice and an ungirdled robe for priestly vestments—just as the implied parallel between the events of the novel and the wanderings of Odysseus exposes the comic diminishment of modern life by comparison with the heroic age of Homer. This sort of reading is typical of the liberal humanist tradition that represented the mainstream of Joyce studies in the mid-twentieth century. Prominent examples include Robert Martin Adams, S. L. Goldberg, Patrick Parrinder, and Ellmann himself.[46] What these interpretations share is an emphasis on Bloom as a gently ironized exemplar of modest virtues: "Bloom asserts a monistic decency"[47]; "Bloom's rational and pacifistic

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[46] See Robert Martin Adams, *Surface and Symbol: The Consistency of James Joyce's Ulysses* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); S. L. Goldberg, *The Classical Temper: A Study of James Joyce's Ulysses* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963); Patrick Parrinder, *James Joyce* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Richard Ellmann, *The Consciousness of Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977); Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey*.

[47] Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey*, 116.

attitude"[48]; "In Bloom, [Joyce] projects an image of what is still alive in the human spirit even among its most ambiguous manifestations."[49] These critics tend towards the view that part of Joyce's accomplishment is to have transcended his material in writing *Ulysses*: "It is the wonder of this tremendous imaginative achievement that it builds, out of the commonest trash, and in perfect indifference to the reader, a movement which envelops and absorbs him."[50] Modernity, it is taken for granted, represents a diminished state, rendering Bloom's modest virtues all the more poignant.

But liberal humanist accounts of *Ulysses* often seem to rest on a monumental misfit between form and content: the wild, epoch-defining prose experiments on which the mature Joyce's reputation rests amount to anything but "ordinary," "commonplace," or "modest" literary achievements. Moreover, the dichotomy between symbolist and realist, Eliot and Pound, Gilbert and Budgen as I have developed it is altogether too neat, both as an account of the novel and of its critical history. Even as the liberal-humanist reading was in its ascendency, alternative approaches to the novel were developing. A. Walton Litz's *The Art of James Joyce*

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[48] Parrinder, *James Joyce*, 172.

[49] Goldberg, *The Classical Temper*, 314.

[50] Adams, *Surface and Symbol*, 255.

(1961) launched a school of interpretation that looked to Joyce's compositional methods as a means to gain purchase on the novel and to clarify its textual ambiguities. This analysis of the novel's draft materials and note sheets helps to advance the terms of debate over the novel's Homeric parallels for perhaps the first time since Eliot and Pound. Litz's most forceful conclusions come out of his discussion of "Eumaeus," where he notes the presence of vastly more Homeric allusions in Joyce's notes for the episode than make it into the final version. Litz concludes that this excess reveals "how much more important the Homeric background was for Joyce than it is to the reader."[51] But in an extraordinary statement from the preface to his book, Litz questions the ultimate usefulness of his methods:

> The irreducible gap between the creator and his work faces one at every turn. Indeed it now seems to me that the controlling design—the "figure in the carpet"—lies always in plain view, not in the dark corners explored by the genetic or biographical critic.[52]

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[51] At this point, Litz quotes Pound's remark about the Homeric correspondences with approval. A. Walton Litz, *The Art of James Joyce* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 21.

[52] Ibid., v.

As works by Litz's student, Michael Groden, and more
recently, Hannah Sullivan, go to show, genetic methods still
have much to tell us about *Ulysses*. But Litz's conviction
that the novel's "controlling design" is to be found on the
surface seems like a concession that genetic methods will
not disclose, beneath the chaotic surface of the text, the
kind of pervasive order posited by symbolist interpreters.[53]

 In *Ulysses in Progress*, Groden gave considerably more
credence than Litz to Joyce's schemas and correspondences.
But his investigation of the novel's composition shows that
rather than issuing from a predetermined plan, the structure
of the novel was developed through a process of revision. In
other words, during the extraordinary period during 1921
when Joyce was revising proofs of the early episodes while
writing the final ones, he was in a unique position to
incorporate symbols, themes, and motifs that would knit the
early and late sections of the novel together, while having
both present at hand. The plan, too, is a product of the

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[53] Groden quotes Pound's "Paris Letter" and notes that "Pound
[and by extension Litz] greatly underestimated the
importance the parallels and correspondences eventually
assumed in Joyce's mind." Michael Groden, *Ulysses in
Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 76.

process of composition.[54] Genetic criticism offers reliable means to characterize that process. Moreover, Groden (and later Sullivan) point to the ways that Joyce's methods share a certain affinity with the ordinary that makes his novel peculiarly apt for its representation.

First, all commentators agree that Joyce revises by adding: between the Rosenbach manuscript (replicating the typescript versions of each completed episode) and the first edition, the novel expanded by about a third.[55] Hannah Sullivan identifies a dichotomy in modernist writers' approach to revision between "deletive" and "additive" approaches, or excision and extension. The former, she notes, is frequently associated with the difficulty that arises from stripping out the connective tissue that makes a text comprehensible, while the latter fills in detail, presumably with the opposite effect on comprehension. But, as Sullivan argues with Joyce as a case in point, extension can pose interpretive challenges as formidable as excision. Excision "produces ellipses and asks the reader to fill in the missing syntax," while extension tends towards "overdescription and the flat 'and and and' of parataxis."[56]

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[54] Ibid., 194-200.

[55] Hans Walter Gabler, Forward to Joyce, *Ulysses*, xvii.

[56] Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 148.

The piling up of detail runs the risk of banality, an anxiety frequently voiced within Joyce studies: "Exegesis is not necessarily clarification, but extension and accretion."[57] But as Sullivan points out, Joyce's additive procedure does not flatten out his prose, quite the opposite; that said, nor does it simply generate a higher degree of verisimilitude.[58] The masses of accreted detail present particularly in the final episodes of the novel do not necessarily correlate with a realist style, a point that I will return to in greater detail later.

Second, Joyce consistently demonstrates a commitment to the productive value of error. In his work on the proofs, Joyce seems to discard any notion of an ideal text (the object of traditional philology and textual criticism) against which the proof at hand is to be compared. Instead, errors in the proof sometimes become spurs for innovation, as in a passage from "Wandering Rocks," which, in the Gabler edition reads:

Blazes Boylan walked here and there in new tan shoes about the fruitsmelling shop, lifting fruits,

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[57] Finn Fordham, *Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake: Unravelling Universals* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31.

[58] Sullivan, *The Work of Revision*, 192.

> young juicy crinkled and plump red tomatoes, sniffing
>
> smells. (*U*, 10.307-9)

The *Critical and Synoptic Edition* shows that the passage had
initially read "lifting fruits, eying tomatoes, sniffing
smells," before a printer's error on the proof rendered
"eying" as "ying." This prompted Joyce to revise the second
clause, turning "ying" into "young," and occasioning "juicy
crinkled and plump."[59] Error becomes an opportunity to enrich
the texture of the sentence: the prose's sensuous attention
toward the tomatoes mirrors Boylan's sensuous attention
toward "the blond girl" in the shop—"a young pullet,"
according to the only snippet of his interior monologue we
are afforded (*U*, 10.327). In other words, Joyce matches his
fervor for schematizing with an openness to the aleatory
possibilities of composition.

These textual approaches to *Ulysses* had exposed Joyce's
compositional methods, but their significance for our
interpretation of the novel remained uncertain. Groden, who

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[59] Matthew Creasy and Ronan Crowley, "Gablerizing Error:
'Wandering Rocks,'" in *Errears and Erroriboose : Joyce and
Error*, ed. Matthew Creasy (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi,
2011), 101-2. C.f. James Joyce et al., *Ulysses: A Critical
and Synoptic Edition*, 3 vols. (New York: Garland, 1984),
488-9.

had pushed back against Litz's dismissal of the Homeric

parallels, nonetheless concedes:

> Several major problems in interpreting *Ulysses*
>
> unfortunately gain little or no illumination from a
>
> study of Joyce's work on the book. For example, the
>
> massive collection of notes, drafts, typescripts, and
>
> proofs reveals hardly anything about the Homeric
>
> parallel.[60]

The textual approach was, in a sense, awaiting a theoretical

paradigm that would situate its insights in the context of

wider claims about the nature of literary texts, and found

it in post-structuralism. Liberal humanist interpretations

had relied on a variety of assumptions including a coherent,

unified moral agent at the center of the novel, as well as a

semblance of traditional plot through which character

development can occur. But textual criticism had already

confirmed a view of the novel as tending away from character

and plot after about the eighth episode, with Joyce treating

linguistic play increasingly as an end in itself.[61] As a

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[60] Groden, *Ulysses in Progress*, 201.

[61] Groden makes the "Cyclops" episode the marker of an

important textual break in *Ulysses*, as the exemplar of the

"middle stage," an approach he updates with reference to new

result, interpretations that wring major plot elements from the final episodes necessarily appear strained.[62] But a method that privileges moments of internal self-contradiction and discontinuity while viewing the text as emanating from an endlessly ramifying tissue of intertextuality will find much to applaud in *Ulysses*: in fact, the novel could be seen as the paradigm of poststructuralist textuality.

Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer's introduction to *Post-Structuralist Joyce* acknowledges the Eliot- and Pound-influenced streams of criticism (which they refer to as "transcendentalist" and "empiricist" respectively) as well as the "moralizing" or "humanist" approach, before

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materials acquired by the National Library of Ireland in Michael Groden, "Joyce at Work on 'Cyclops': Toward a Biography of Ulysses," *James Joyce Quarterly* 44.2 (Winter 2007): 217-45.

[62] These might include Bloom forgiving Molly's infidelity through identification with her in *Circe*, the spiritual meeting of Bloom and Stephen in *Ithaca*, or Molly's internal reconciliation with Bloom in *Penelope*. See, for instance, the readings collected in *James Joyce's Ulysses: Critical Essays*, ed. Clive Hart and David Hayman (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1974).

inaugurating their own.[63] These arguments are difficult to generalize about, but suffice it to say they take a clear-eyed approach to the ideological assumptions embedded in former approaches' emphasis on the novel's unity. Indeed, in the ensuing years, critical practice had tended towards treating the novel's episodes discretely, with no obligation to locate signs of their putative unity. Moreover, debate within Joyce studies has shifted as a result from how best to defend Joyce's inclusion in the canon to how Joyce's texts might be read as a critique of the canon's ideological assumptions.[64] In other words, the poststructuralist account emphasizes the Joycean text as an active, dynamic participant in its own interpretation.

This view of the novel as a discontinuous, self-contradictory, even self-deconstructing artifice has important implications for its engagement with the ordinary. Despite frequently being cited as the very archetype of the one-day novel, the real sense of the ordinary in *Ulysses*

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[63] Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer, "Introduction," in *Post-Structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 5.

[64] Ibid., 8.

resides elsewhere.[65] Placing a strong emphasis on the one-day

conceit generates unsatisfactory interpretive choices, since

a day made up of such a volume of events, most of which are

linked together by elaborate concatenations of chance and

coincidence, would strain against the canons of Aristotelian

plausibility that the one-day conceit might otherwise be

thought to bolster. Moreover, the one-day novel might be

seen to undermine its "everydayness" by its very form: the

twenty-four hour time period denies the reader firm grounds

on which to tell apart routine from singular events, some

admixture of both of which is surely constitutive of

dailyness.

The ordinary in *Ulysses*, then, despite its apparent

ubiquity, is fugitive in the sense described by Maurice

Blanchot: "Le quotidien, c'est le suspect (et l'oblique) qui

toujours échappe à la claire décision de la loi."[66]

Blanchot's sense of the quotidian as that which eludes the

determination of the law, whether that be the law of the

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[65] See Robert Weninger, "Days of Our Lives: The One-Day Novel

as Homage À Joyce," in *Bloomsday 100: Essays on Ulysses*, ed.

Morris Beja and Anne Fogarty (Gainesville: University Press

of Florida, 2009).

[66] "The quotidian, is the suspect (and the oblique one) that

always escapes the clear decision of the law." Blanchot,

L'entretien infini, 356.

state or the law of genre, is a further reminder that the realist mode cannot lay any special claim on its depiction. Likewise, conceiving of the novel's symbolist aspects in terms of a comprehensive exclusion of the everyday might set up too stark a binary. It may be, then, that we are best served by proceeding from a de-centered view of the novel to consider the ordinary as a particular style of rhetoric that sometimes emerges from the interplay of realist and symbolist aesthetics.

As an example, take the conclusion of "Aeolus," where Stephen offers a response to Professor MacHugh's disquision on the cultures of Greece and Rome and their bearing on Ireland and Britain in the form of a parable. It is the story of a pair of spinsters who climb to the top of Nelson's Pillar on Sackville Street. At the top, they "settle down on their striped petticoats, peering up at the statue of the onehandled adulterer" (*U*, 7.1017-1018):

> —It gives them a crick in their necks, Stephen said, and they are too tired to look up or down or to speak. They put the bag of plums between them and eat the plums out of it, one after another, wiping off with their handkerchiefs the plumjuice that dribbles out of their mouths and spitting the plumstones slowly out between the railings.
>
> He gave a sudden and young laugh as a close.

(*U*, 7.1023-28)

MacHugh asks Stephen what he calls the story, to which he replies: "I call it *A Pisgah Sight of Palestine* or *The Parable of The Plums*" (*U*, 7.1057-1058). In an episode much given to doubling and reversal, Stephen's reference to a "onehandled adulterer" naturally implies a "twohandled adulterer," namely Charles Stuart Parnell, whose scandalous affair with Katharine O'Shea split the Irish Parliamentary Party and stymied the movement for Home Rule in 1890.

The spinsters take in the view of the city from atop the pillar: "They see the roofs and argue about where the different churches are: Rathmines' blue dome, Adam and Eve's, saint Laurence O'Toole's" (*U*, 7.1010-12). With this in mind as well as the allusion to Parnell, the meanings of Stephen's two titles become clearer: *A Pisgah Sight of Palestine* refers to the Book of Deuteronomy, in which

> Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that *is* over against Jericho. And the Lord shewed him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan…
>
> And the Lord said unto him, This *is* the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused

thee to see *it* with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go

over thither.[67]

<div align="right">(Deut. 34:1-12 KJV)</div>

The spinsters figure for the Irish people, who are granted a

vision of an Ireland redeemed by the Catholic Church, the

force responsible for Parnell's downfall but cannot enter

it, symbolically attributing Irish political paralysis to

Ireland's divided political and spiritual loyalties. Earlier

in the episode, MacHugh had constructed an elaborate

parallel between the Irish and the Greeks, united in

MacHugh's account by their "spiritual" nature and loyalty to

"lost causes": "Success for us is the death of the intellect

and of the imagination" (*U*, 7.551-2). There is an explicit

parallel with both nations' imperial conquerors, the English

and the Romans, who are posited as the embodiment of a crude

materiality: "The Roman, like the Englishman who follows in

his footsteps, brought to every new shore on which he set

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[67] It is also the title of a descriptive geography of the

holy land, Thomas Fuller, *A Pisgah-Sight of Palestine and

the Confines Thereof, with the History of the Old and New

Testament Acted Thereon* (London,: Printed by J.F. for John

Williams, 1650).

his foot (on our shore he never set it) only his cloacal obsession" (*U*, 7.491–3).[68]

MacHugh invokes a third and final analogy by quoting at length a speech by John F. Taylor advocating for the revival of the Irish language, in which Taylor figures the contest between Irish and English languages as a debate between Moses and an Egyptian priest: the latter touts the might of Egyptian culture as against that of the nomadic Israelites, but, Taylor argues, should Moses have acquiesced to these demands for assimilation, he would never have led the Israelites to the promised land. Stephen's parable takes up the analogy set out in MacHugh's recitation, but rather than aligning Parnell with Moses (the transgression that barred Moses from the promised land remained obscure, whereas

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[68] The irony of MacHugh's disdain for Roman and English "materialism" as embodied in their amenities is that the "spiritual" inhabitants of Dublin would not have the benefit of a central sewer until 1906. MacHugh's phrase "cloacal obsession" is also, of course, a neat jab at H. G. Wells, one of Joyce's most strident critics, who had coined the phrase in a review of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's* Ulysses, Revised and Enlarged ed. (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988), 137.

Parnell's was all too clear), he situates the Irish people themselves in sight of their goal but unable to reach it, precisely because of their spiritual commitment to the Catholic Church.[69] In other words, Stephen's parable reverses the terms of MacHugh's argument, and implies that, in fact, MacHugh's panegyric to Irish spiritualism represents the post-facto justification of the loser, an attempt to restore some dignity to the experience of defeat.

MacHugh, in short, who "mostly sees double" in the words of Lenehan's limerick, will view the Irish as Greeks one minute, Hebrews the next, in short anything to absolve himself and his compatriots from the difficulty of living as Irishmen in the present (*U*, 7.580). It is fitting that Joyce should nominate "rhetoric" as the art of the "Aeolus" episode, since rhetoric in its modern, pejorative sense—"mere," "empty" rhetoric—is all that the men who are assembled in Crawford's office are armed with to meet the Irish dilemma. Stephen's second title, then, *The Parable of the Plums*, focuses attention on the limits of rhetoric, and

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[69] And, it must be said, due to their commitment to spirits, to activate one of the latent puns that shadow every lofty invocation of "spirit" in the episode. J. J. O'Molloy's "hectic flush" and Myles Crawford's "incipient jigs" are only the most outward manifestations of a general condition (7.293, 366).

by extension, the limits of figurative language. The "plumstones" that the spinsters spit between the railings are metaphors for not having metaphors, symbols of the naked reality that resists rhetorical transformation, despite the earnest efforts of those assembled at the *Freeman's Journal*. From "Aeolus" on, *Ulysses* invokes the ordinary entirely from within the context of a consideration of the limits of figurative language. The episode thus represents a textual break within the novel, a decisive turn away from the symbolist and realist dialectic of the novel's first section toward the promiscuous textual play of its later episodes.

II. Transubstantiation of the Commonplace

The interpretive flexibility offered by the post-structuralist approach should not, however, obscure our sense of the novel's development, and it is equally clear that the novel treats the ordinary differently in the early episodes than it does from the later ones. *Ulysses* declares its interest in the ordinary in the novel's first spoken lines, as Buck Mulligan intones with mock-solemnity, "*Introibo ad altare Dei*": "I will go up to God's altar" (*U*, 1.5).[70] This "ordinary" is the ordinary of the Latin mass, that section of the Eucharist that remains largely unchanged

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[70] Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 13.

throughout the liturgical calendar. But the implements of Mulligan's mass are also notable for their ordinariness: a bowl of lather for his chalice, a dressing gown for his priestly robe (*U*, 1.2-3). At the center of the Eucharist is the mysterious process known to theologians since the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) as transubstantiation: the mundane stuff of bread and wine is transformed by God's power into the body and blood of Christ. The doctrine was elaborated in terms borrowed from Aristotle: substance and accident. Substance refers to the immaterial essence of the thing: "tableness," in the classic example, and accident to its outward manifestations: its dimensions, state of repair, type of material, and so on. In the ceremony of the Eucharist, the accidents of the host remain unchanged while its immaterial essence is transformed into the body and blood of Christ.[71] *Ulysses*, this opening scene seems to suggest, will be concerned above all with the sanctification of the ordinary: everyday life will maintain its outer appearance, but have its inner essence altered by the transformative power of artistic representation.

Transubstantiation was clearly an important trope to Joyce. Stanislaus Joyce recounts a disagreement with his

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[71] Diarmaid MacCullouch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2009), 405-6.

brother over attending a Good Friday Mass wherein he uses a similar formulation:

> Don't you think... there is a certain resemblance between the mystery of the Mass and what I am trying to do? I mean that I am trying in my poems to give people some kind of intellectual pleasure or spiritual enjoyment by converting the bread of everyday life into something that has a permanent artistic life of its own.[72]

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen comes to think of the artist as "a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life."[73] Much later, in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's affinity for linguistic pairings and substitutions continues to work on the metaphor of the Eucharist. If there can be transubstantiation, then according to Aristotle's binary, there can also be transaccidentation: the transformation of outer appearance while the inner essence remains the same. Thus in "Shem the Penman" (1.7),

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[72] Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years* (New York: Viking Press, 1958), 103-4.

[73] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), 240.

transaccidentation is (slightly mockingly) evoked as Shem's theory of art: "Reflecting from his own individual person life unlivable, transaccidentated through the slow fires of consciousness into a dividual chaos, perilous, potent, common to allflesh, human only, mortal."[74] Between *A Portrait*'s evocation of the Eucharist and its reversal in *Finnegans Wake*, we can discern the development of an increasingly playful attitude to these "Eucharistic" tropes, pushing their metaphorical potential ever further.

Joyce began borrowing from this particular cluster of ecclesiastical terms much earlier than *A Portrait*, already in some of his earliest writing: the "epiphanies" composed between 1900 and 1903. These pieces involved the search for "sudden spiritual manifestations," moments when "the soul of the commonest object... seems to us radiant." Some of these moments are even described as "Eucharistic."[75] The term epiphany, of course, denotes the announcement of God's presence in the world through the person of Jesus Christ by his appearance to the Magi.[76] And this wasn't Joyce's only

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[74] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 186.

[75] Cited in Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 87.

[76] "Epiphany, n.1" OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/63446 (accessed July 18, 2013).

such secular refashioning of a Christian concept in those early years. Following the commission from George Russell to write a short story for *Irish Homestead* that would lead to *Dubliners*, Joyce informed his university friend C. P. Curran, "I am writing a series of epiclets—ten—for a paper."[77] Ellmann explains that "epicleti, an error for *epicleses* (Latin) or *epicleseis* (Greek), referred to an invocation still found in the mass of the Eastern Church" calling on the Holy Spirit "to transform the host into the body and blood of Christ."[78] In other words, Joyce tended to frame the aim of his early work as the revelation of some kind of transcendent essence in the stuff of daily life. And, as Ellmann makes clear, the particular valence of the term, be it "epiphany," "epicleti," or "eucharist," is less important than the generalized sense of transformation from the mundane into something higher. That said, it is important to bear in mind that where they reflect on Joyce's

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[77] Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 169; James Joyce, *Selected Letters of James Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 22.

[78] Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 169. For a careful taxonomy of these terms in Joyce, see Robert Boyle, "Miracle in Black Ink: A Glance at Joyce's Use of His Eucharistic Image," *James Joyce Quarterly* 10.1 (Fall 1972): 47–60.

earliest work, Stephen's aesthetic theories in *A Portrait* are already being ironized.[79]

Tracing the development of this rhetoric, and in particular, the increasingly ironic manner in which Joyce invokes it, offers us a novel outlook on the vexed critical debate over the epiphany, which, having lain dormant for many years, has recently seen an upsurge of interest from critics concerned with the ordinary. Whereas Liesl Olson defines the aesthetic of the epiphany in opposition to the ordinary, Michael Sayeau reads them as "performative theorizations of modern narrative form and its limits."[80] Both agree, however, that in *Ulysses* Joyce discarded the aesthetic of epiphany in favor of something else, giving

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[79] See the debate between Hugh Kenner, who views the treatment of epiphanies in *A Portrait* as an index of Joyce's satirical intentions toward Stephen, and Robert Scholes, who disagrees with this reading. C.f. Scholes, "Joyce and the Epiphany: The Key to the Labyrinth?" in *Critical Essays on James Joyce's a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Philip Brady and James F. Carens (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 274.

[80] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 43; Michael Sayeau, *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 230.

rise in the novel to a new outlook on the ordinary. What that something else is can be explained by way of a different figure for the work of art drawn from a religious context, one evoked by Molly Bloom in "Calypso": metempsychosis. Fittingly enough, Molly picks up the word from the book she is reading, and asks Leopold to define it:

> — Metempsychosis, he said, is what the ancient Greeks called it. They used to believe you could be changed into an animal or a tree, for instance. What they called nymphs, for example. (*U*, 4.375–7)

Against the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation, with its unidirectional transformation of the mundane into the sacred, the pagan concept of metempsychosis evokes a perpetual cycle of transformation.[81]

At least one metaphorical valence of this cycle becomes clear at the end of the episode, in the celebrated scene of Bloom's defecation as he reads a "prize titbit" called *Matcham's Masterstroke*: "Quietly he read, restraining

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[81] Cf. James Ramey, who reads metempsychosis as a figure for the novel's intertextuality with Homer, et al. James Ramey, "Intertextual Metempsychosis in *Ulysses*: Murphy, Sinbad, and the 'U.P.: Up' Postcard," *James Joyce Quarterly* 45.1 (Fall 2007): 97–114.

himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently" (*U*, 4.506—8). After weighing the idea of collaborating on a story submission with Molly, Bloom completes his bowel movement: "He tore away half the prize story sharply and wiped himself with it" (*U*, 4.537). The exact simultaneity in this scene between defecation and the consumption of a "low" literary form has led many readers and critics to make the scene exemplary of modernist disdain for popular culture. But this reading neglects the cyclical motif at work throughout the episode. On his way to the jakes, for instance, Bloom stops to ponder his garden: "Want to manure the whole place over, scabby soil. A coat of liver of sulphur. All soil like that without dung" (*U*, 4.476–9). A certain faith that what might otherwise be considered waste can still be put to use animates the novel's engagement not only with popular and ephemeral forms of art, but by extension, with the whole massive ephemera of the ordinary and the everyday. Rather than seek its transubstantiation into some eternal, spiritual, form, the novel rather locates the ordinary in endless circuits of use, exchange, and reuse.

Kenner stresses that Bloom reorients the novel away from Stephen's solipsistic tendencies. "So portentous," writes Kenner, "is Bloom's appearance that the sun in the

sky is set back, and the day of *Ulysses* commences over at 8 a.m."[82] Bloom's mind might be taken up with the events of his day and the personalities surrounding him to be sure (Dignam's funeral and Molly's infidelity loom large), but these preoccupations mingle promiscuously with a capacious interest in nearly everything, and moreover, a delight in the imaginative transformations that can be wrought on this heterogeneous material. It is Bloom, rather than Stephen, who can legitimately be called the novel's artist of the everyday. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau celebrates the *bricoleur*, the ordinary person who "makes do," exercising his or her creativity through unexpected combinations of the stuff of daily life. Certeau reacts against a commonly held view of the consumer as a passive subject, particularly one who absorbs popular entertainments and consumer goods uncritically. We have come to accept this sort of account, he suggests, because of an over-reliance on empirical methods for studying consumer behavior:

> Once the images broadcast by television and the time spent in front of the TV set have been analyzed, it remains to be asked what the consumer makes of these images and during these hours. The thousands of people

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[82] Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses*, Revised ed. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 55.

who buy a health magazine, the customers in a

supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the

consumers of newspaper stories and legends—what do they

make of what they "absorb," receive, and pay for? What

do they do with it?[83]

With that question, Certeau re-conceptualizes the consumer

as an active participant in making meaning out of the

objects and texts they encounter. *Ulysses* is set at the dawn

of the social configuration we now call consumer capitalism:

only four years, for instance, before Henry Ford began

producing the Model T. But the novel already depicts a

society much affected by the mass production and

distribution of another kind of commodity: popular images.

The turn of the twentieth century saw an explosion in

the image-world of the modern city. Peter Fritzsche has

argued that "around 1900, the messy debris of print culture

seemed to overwhelm the well ordered archive of economic and

political power."[84] The metropolitan newspaper became the

indispensable guide to the city, not merely reporting on,

but directly influencing, the movements and patterns of

daily life. Fritzsche is concerned to show that this was

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[83] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 31.

[84] Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, MA and

London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5; ibid.

not, as some have assumed, a one-way process in which powerful interests orchestrated behaviors in service of a nascent consumer economy. Rather, in an era before mass consolidation of the press, the sheer variety of publications made the word-city a genuinely contested terrain:

> Words and narrative forms worked on the city in broad and unmistakable strokes, while they also generated countless alternative versions and editions. At every point, the word-city pointed out instability and inadequacy as well as predictability; it worked to startle and invite as well as to control movement; it showed the contradictory as well as the coherent.[85]

In short, the metropolitan newspaper can be read as a modernist text, especially insofar as it could be haphazard and discontinuous, avoiding "the literary form's claim to comprehensiveness, its narrative continuity, and its reliance on a stock of retrievable characters tended to enclose and harmonize the urban setting." For Fritzsche,

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[85] Ibid., 49–50.

this makes the newspaper a better exemplar of modernism even than the novels of Döblin, Dos Passos, or Joyce.[86]

    Part of *Ulysses*' unique purchase on the ordinary is its ability to resist these harmonizing and enclosing tendencies. But Fritzsche's description of the word-city as "an imaginary symbolic order that was as important as the city itself" and which encompassed a range of genres—"the novel, drama, vaudeville, photography, advertisements"—reminds us what is at stake in modernism's embrace of popular culture: not only the relationship between high and low art, but the character of everyday life in modernity. As such, Bloom is the avatar of a sort of counter-aesthetic to Stephen's epiphanies. Far from seeking an experience of the divine or the transcendent in ordinary things, Bloom tends to relish things as they are, with a zest for the bodily and the material apparent from the first moment he is introduced to the reader. That said, Bloom also possesses a vibrant and active imagination, and is the exemplar of "the polytropic potential that Joyce found in everyday language."[87]

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[86] Ibid.; See also Peter Fritzsche, *The Turbulent World of Franz Göll: An Ordinary Berliner Writes the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[87] Fritz Senn, "Book of Many Turns," *James Joyce Quarterly* 10.1 (Fall 1972): 42.

Importantly, however, Bloom's fantasies are less concerned
with transfiguring the world around him than with combining
and recombining the flotsam of his consciousness. Take this
example from "Calypso":

> Somewhere in the east... Walk along a strand, strange
> land, come to a city gate, sentry there, old ranker
> too, old Tweedy's big moustaches, leaning on a long
> kind of spear. Wander through awned streets. Turbaned
> faces going by. Dark caves of carpet shops, big man,
> Turko the terrible, seated crosslegged, smoking a
> coiled pipe. Cries of sellers in the streets. Drink
> water scented with fennel, sherbet. Dander along the
> way. Might meet a robber or two. Well, meet him.
> Getting on to sundown. The shadows of the mosques among
> the pillars: priest with a scroll rolled up. A shiver
> of the trees, signal, the evening wind. I pass on.
> Fading gold sky. A mother watches me from her doorway.
> She calls her children home in their dark language.
> High wall: beyond strings twanged. Night sky, moon,
> violet, colour of Molly's new garters. Strings. Listen.
> A girl playing one of those instruments what do you
> call them: dulcimers. I pass. (*U*, 1.84-98)

Bloom's moment of imaginative interiority is not an
epiphany; it does not reveal any sacred essence or

fundamental truth within the sunlit street. Indeed, virtually nothing in Bloom's reverie refers directly to his surroundings. Bloom imagines a scene in which fennel and sherbet scent the air; Molly's father, "old Tweedy," appears in the guise of a sentry; and a carpet seller adopts the guise of a pantomime character, Turko the Terrible; the color of the night sky is compared with that of Molly's garters. Bloom's fantasy mingles elements of orientalist stereotype, personal history, and popular culture, and is thus an example of the sort of combinatorial play that Certeau locates at the heart of the ordinary.

"Turko the Terrible" already appears with a more specific invocation in "Telemachus," while Stephen thinks of his mother: "She heard old Royce sing in the pantomime of *Turko the Terrible* and laughed with others when he sang..." (*U*, 1.257-8). The difference between Stephen's and Bloom's invocations of Turko speaks to a difference between them as characters, as well as an incipient difference between the novel's orientation in its opening episodes as against its later episodes. Stephen's invocation is freighted with emotional significance, and easily recuperable for the reader as a token of verisimilitude. "Old Royce," Edward Royce, did indeed perform the role of Turko in Dublin, according to an 1873 *Irish Times* review located by Cheryl

Herr.[88] Displays of historical detail like this are available

throughout the novel, waiting to be activated by a

sufficiently curious reader, but by no means needing to be.

These moments provide the evidence favored by those critics

and readers who view *Ulysses* as a work of hyperbolic

realism. Bloom's fantasy, on the other hand, while not

resistant to recuperation, is less freighted with

characterological significance, and more available to the

kinds of imaginative deformation that Bloom practices.

Cheryl Herr argues that the pantomime offered Joyce a ready

model for the sort of intertextuality he practiced

throughout *Ulysses*:

> The theatre of Joyce's day was highly and self-
> consciously intertextual. Melodrama begat burlesque,
> pantomime begat extravaganza, pantomime quoted
> burlesque, and music hall interpenetrated the lot...
> Joyce exploits this intertextuality of form in
> composing characters, showing the presence in their

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[88] "Mr Royce was very amusing as King Turco; his get-up was
extremely grotesque, and he infused an amount of spirit into
his part that had much to do with the success of the
pantomime." Cited in Cheryl Herr, *Joyce's Anatomy of Culture*
(Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986),
120.

thought and behavior of material that emanates from the self-quoting stage.[89]

Pantomime, in other words, is another component of the word-city that Joyce explores in *Ulysses*; moreover, it offers a model in miniature of the novel's own procedures.

Ordinary life in Joyce's Dublin is thus characterized by the rapid circulation of various communicative forms, some new (like the daily newspaper), some old (like the incessant stream of gossip that animates the city's pub denizens). The novel frequently offers scenes of characters who read and/or quote from their reading: Molly Bloom is an avid reader of romantic fiction (such as the fictional *Sweets of Sin*, procured for her by Leopold in "Wandering Rocks" (*U*, 10.641)), and Gerty MacDowell identifies as a reader of the *Princess Novelette* and the *Lady's Pictorial* (*U*, 13.110). The citizen reads snatches from a variety of newspapers in Barney Kiernan's pub, while the whole "Aeolus" episode is, of course, set at the offices of the *Freeman's Journal*, complete with mock newspaper headlines. In other words, Joyce's characters are immersed in a thoroughly citational culture, and use the circuits of text that make up the modern word-city to orient themselves in it. As R. B. Kershner remarks of the chiastic description that opens

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[89] Ibid., 120-1.

"Aeolus," the novel might be read as though "the circulation of mail, alcohol, and public transportation" are "the fundamental 'story' here and the business about Stephen, Bloom, and the newspaper hangers-on… mere detail."[90] As opposed to earlier writers working within the realist tradition, who were concerned to equip their characters with distinctive and memorable voices, disclosing their individuality, Joyce is alive to the extent to which his characters' thought and speech are interpenetrated by cliché, borrowing, and quotation. Intertextuality becomes a principle of realism. Or, to put it another way, *Ulysses* discloses that realism is founded not on a particular relationship between text and an extra-literary world, but on a relation between texts.

In the realist tradition, there is a scene so recurrent that it could be described as the genre's matrix: a scene of reading wherein a character encounters another genre of text. Erich Auerbach argues that Dante's *Commedia* should be read as a precursor to the realist novel insofar as Dante uses its otherworldly setting to scrutinize the earthly society of which he was a part.[91] For instance, Dante

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[90] R. B. Kershner, *The Culture of Joyce's Ulysses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 114-5.

[91] "In a spiritualist culture, where earthly happening was either disregarded or looked upon as a mere metaphorical

encounters the adulterous lovers Paulo and Francesca in Canto V of the *Inferno*. It is a commonplace of Dante criticism to assert that, in various ways, Canto V stands in a metonymic relationship to the *Commedia* as a whole.[92] Francesca da Rimini had been married to Giovanni Malatesta to settle a conflict between the Malatestas and the Lord of Rimini. Giovanni was a cripple, and Francesca soon fell in love with his brother, Paolo. When Giovanni discovered their affair, he killed them both, hence Francesca's remark "The realm of Cain / waits for the man who quenched us of our

existence leading up to man's real and final destiny, considered as the goal and meaning of earthly happening." Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 178.

[92] This is apparent in what Paolo Valesio describes as "the central axis of *Inferno* V": "the esthetico-ethical reevaluation of a love story as instancing the problematic connection between the autonomy of passion and the heteronomy of sin" (a theme that resonates with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*). Paolo Valesio, "Canto V: The Fierce Dove," in *Inferno: A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*, ed. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross, *Lectura Dantis* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 71, 73.

lives" (*Inferno*, V.106-7).[93] The decisive moment in Dante's encounter with Francesca occurs when he asks,

> "But tell me, in the season of sweet sighs,
>
>> how did it happen, what made Love give way
>>
>> that you should know the truth of your desires?"
>>
>>> (*Inferno*, V.118-20)

Francesca replies,

> "One day we two were reading for delight
>
>> about how love had mastered Lancelot;
>>
>> we were alone and innocent and felt
>
> No cause to fear. And as we read, at times
>
>> we went pale, as we caught each other's glance,
>>
>> but we were conquered by one point alone.
>
> For when we read that the much-longed-for smile
>
>> accepted such a gentle lover's kiss,
>>
>> this man, whom nothing will divide from me,
>
> Trembled to place his lips upon my mouth."
>
>> (*Inferno*, V.127-136)

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[93] Dante, *Inferno*, edited and translated by Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2003). All references in text are to this edition.

It is the adulterous romance of Lancelot and Guinevere that tempts Paulo and Francesca to transgress. Dante's invocation of the Lancelot and Guinevere legend encodes a rhetorical comparison between the *Commedia* and the genre of chivalric romance from which the legend derives. The latter, he seems to say, seduces its readers with lascivious appeals to base instincts; it is a literature of fantasy, while Dante's work, by contrast, situates such transgressions in a morally serious world and deals with their consequences. Readers of chivalric romance are prone, like Paulo and Francesca, to forget the line that divides reality from representation, a line firmly entrenched in Dante's world; the *Commedia* is aligned rhetorically with the real. In Charles Singleton's phrase, "The fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction."[94]

Three centuries later, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* employs a variety of metafictional devices to claim its descent from actual events. One of the most well known is Cervantes' insistence throughout the novel that he is relating actual events at second hand, by translating and assembling accounts from first hand witnesses. The most important of these is the Moorish chronicler Cid Hamet Ben Engeli, whose "History of Don Quixote de la Mancha" falls into the

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[94] Charles S. Singleton, *Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 62.

author's hands in Part 1, Chapter 9 of the novel, after his first source breaks off. Paradoxically, the claim not to have witnessed the events he describes directly helps Cervantes make a subtle claim for their authenticity:

> If there is any objection to be made about the truthfulness of this account, it can only be that its author was an Arab, and it's a well-known feature of Arabs that they're all liars; but since they're such enemies of ours, it's to be supposed that he fell short of the truth rather than exaggerating it.[95]

By blaming any lack of fealty to events on an intermediary author rather than himself, of course, Cervantes smuggles in the premise that those events actually happened in the first place.

As many critics have noted, the comedy of *Don Quixote* is of the second order: unlike, say, Ariosto, whose parody of the chivalric romance takes place in a thoroughly comic universe, Cervantes keeps the relationship between

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[95] Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote De La Mancha*, trans. John Rutherford (New York and London: Penguin Books, 2001), 76.

representation and the real in a constant state of tension.[96]
Another way that the novel does this is through its
explanation for Don Quixote's madness: that he has somehow
internalized the chivalric romances that dominate his
library, mistaking them for true accounts:

> Our hidalgo was soon so absorbed in these books that
> his nights were spent reading from dusk till dawn, and
> his days from dawn till dusk, until the lack of sleep
> and excess of reading withered his brain, and he went
> mad.[97]

Following his catastrophic first sally, Don Quixote's
friends, the priest and the barber, ransack his library with
the intention of burning the books responsible for his
madness. However, they quickly find themselves caught up
trying to adjudicate between the books' capacity to beguile

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[96] Singleton also compares the world of the *Commedia* with the
world of *Orlando Furioso*, noting that "one meets that voice
of the poet speaking out to declare, within the work and
with his peculiar irony, that these deeds are invented, that
they are spun out of a poet's brain." *Commedia: Elements of
Structure*, 63.

[97] Cervantes Saavedra, *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote De
La Mancha*, 26-7.

and their literary merit. Quixote's housekeeper gives the most direct expression to the fundamental distrust of representation in her reaction to Quixote's books:

> As soon as the housekeeper saw them, she ran out of the room and back again clutching a bowl of holy water and some hyssop, and said:
>
> "Here you are reverend father, take this and sprinkle the room with it, just in case there's one of those hoards of enchanters from those books in here, and he puts a spell on us as punishment for the torments they'll undergo once we've wiped them off the face of the earth."[98]

Thus, *Don Quixote*, too, draws a rhetorical distinction between the world according to chivalric romance, in which credulous readers are seduced by fantasy, and that of the novel, which, by treating its own relationship to the real as problematic, makes a stronger claim to realism.

Finally, another three hundred years later and with the realist novel in full flower, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* repeats a version of this rhetorical gesture when it describes the influence of her reading over the formation of Emma's personality. During her convent schooling, Emma

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[98] Ibid., 52.

becomes a voracious reader of romance novels supplied by an "old maid who came for a week each month to mend the linen." These novels

> Were all about love, lovers, sweethearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every relay, horses ridden to death on every page, somber forests, heart-aches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little boatrides by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, gentlemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains.[99]

The narrator's sarcastic tone alerts the reader that the vision of life that Emma imbibes from these novels will lead to inevitable disappointment. Meant as an escape from the tedium of convent life, Emma's reading only exacerbates her boredom during the provincial, married life that follows.

In his classic statement on realism in the literary tradition, Auerbach reads *Madame Bovary* as an attack on "the hollowness of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture":

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[99] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. and trans. Paul de Man (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1965), 26.

The essence of the happenings of ordinary contemporary
life seemed to Flaubert to consist not in tempestuous
actions and passions, not in demonic men and forces,
but in the prolonged chronic state whose surface
movement is mere empty bustle.[100]

But to push this reading too far would elide one of the
central ambiguities of the novel, not to mention Flaubert's
famous (and famously problematic) identification with his
heroine. If a straightforward condemnation of bourgeois
mores was all that was intended, much of the psychological
exposition devoted to Emma would be incidental, and she
could be allowed to play the part of a victim of
circumstance unambiguously. Likewise, if Emma were to be the
novel's unique object of condemnation, the social critique
that Auerbach identifies in the passage quoted above would
be superfluous. Auerbach, like the novel itself, refuses to
relinquish this ambiguous confection of individual blame and
social critique.[101] Flaubert provides the impetus for the
particular ethical torque Auerbach gives to the ordinary:

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[100] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in
Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 1953), 490-1.

[101] "A real tragic heroine she is not... the very
wretchedness of that life, in which she remains immersed...

The serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, on the one hand; on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background—these, we believe, are the foundations of modern realism, and it is natural that the broad and elastic form of the novel should increasingly impose itself for a rendering comprising so many elements.[102]

If Emma's culpability is at issue throughout the novel, then the scene of reading, in which she willingly acquiesces to fantasies that are nonetheless (in their mild way) illicitly supplied, can be read as a metonym for the book as a whole. Those romances, historical and otherwise, set in motion the whole gamut of fantasies that determine Emma's fate, and thus signify a maladjusted relationship with the real.

In each of these three instances, the scene of reading has functioned metonymically in relation to the work in

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excludes the idea of true tragedy... But neither is she comic." Ibid., 490.

[102] Ibid., 491.

which it occurs. Equally, the scene of encounter between realism and its others functions metonymically relative to the whole realist tradition. Throughout its history, realism has defined itself by excluding various generic others, ranging from the chivalric romances invoked by Dante and Cervantes to the historical romances of Walter Scott, cited by Flaubert.[103] This is one of realism's distinctive rhetorics of not having rhetoric: other genres produce illusions, while realism offers transparent, unmediated access to the real. By aligning literary artifice with other genres, realism disclaims its status as a convention-bound literary practice, naturalizing its own codes of representation and disguising its basic fact: realism is a relation of texts to other texts, not a relation to the real. *Ulysses*, however, refuses to cast out putatively inferior genres. Instead, recognizing their imbrication in ordinary life, it incorporates them into a new textual economy of recycling and citation.

III. "Cyclops" and the Two Economies of the Ordinary

In the "Cyclops" episode, the latent metaphors of text as economy and words as tokens in circulation are activated by elevating the contrast between the novel's earlier,

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[103] Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 26.

predominantly realist, style and the mode of linguistic excess favored by the later episodes to a structural principle. The episode's story is contained in the discourse of "Nameless," who reports on events in Barney Kiernan's pub in the manner of a classic unreliable narrator, whose prejudices and biases seep into his account of events in subtle ways: the "realism" of his discourse consists in its verbal and psychological acuity. But Nameless's narration is interrupted by thirty-two passages written in a variety of different styles, and clearly not issuing from Nameless. Scholars have tended to follow Don Gifford in referring to these interpolations as "parodies," highlighting their affinity with the pastiche of historical styles that makes up "Oxen of the Sun," but that term seems to me to presuppose too much about their role in the episode.

In the Gilbert schema, Joyce indicated "politics" as the art specific to this episode, and critics' discussions of it have tended to center on the Irish nationalism espoused by the citizen and his companions. Critics have tended to agree that how one reads the citizen's provocations, and more importantly, Bloom's responses to them, will determine much about the novel's politics. For Joyce's liberal humanist interpreters, Bloom's mild, pacific response condemns the citizen's bombast and the nationalist violence it endorses. But for more formally-oriented critics, the episode's politics are complicated by what we

might call its verbal dynamics: against the energetic
invective of the citizen and the vituperative asides of
Nameless, Bloom can only muster meek platitudes. Emer Nolan
summarizes the debate thus:

> Does Joyce *satirize* the invective of the citizen which
> is a kind of exaggerated version of the community's
> compulsive gossip, in order to side with the ungossipy
> Bloom, or does his implication in the same community's
> language make impossible the critical distance which
> the conventional reading implies?[104]

For Nolan, the question is not as simple as aligning Joyce's
approval with one side of the argument or another, because
"his depiction of this vernacular as the medium of
communication in a well-defined social group… obliges him to
engage with the associated demands made from within that
community for political recognition and autonomy."[105] While
Nolan seems right to draw attention to Joyce's authorial
complicity in the languages of Nameless and the citizen, her
reading does not give sufficient weight to the
interpolations and the structural conflict they introduce

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[104] Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London and New
York: Routledge, 1995), 93.

[105] Ibid., 113.

with the episode's realist discourse. Moreover, Nolan draws

a contrast between the "multivocal, playful and dialogic"

discourse of the interpolations, as against the "monological

stream of 'Fenian shibboleths' associated with the citizen,"

but counter-intuitively aligns Bloom's speech with the

interpolations.[106]

Andrew Gibson reverses Nolan's focus on the citizen's

discourse by locating the episode's satirical thrust in the

interpolations instead. In a reading that represents the *ne*

plus ultra of New Historicism, Gibson identifies the

interpolations as an attack on Celtic Revivalist

historiography. This is a view that was originally put

forward by Hugh Kenner, who identified them as parodies of

the "translatorese" that migrated from nineteenth-century

translations of the Greek epics to revivalist translations

of Irish sagas.[107] Gibson goes a step further in making the

Anglo-Irish revivalist history of Standish O'Grady the

"determining context" for the chapter's themes.[108] Hence the

listing that characterizes several of the interpolations;

O'Grady identified Irish culture with the "annals and

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[106] Ibid., 118.

[107] Kenner, *Ulysses*, 95.

[108] Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 107-8.

chronology" of scholasticism, and thus paratactic modes of organizing experience in general. Joyce responds by valorizing that which O'Grady rejects: "[his] historical imagination establishes itself partly in idealizing reaction to Catholic historiographers… By contrast, the Joyce of *Ulysses* clearly asserts a certain kinship with them."[109] The price of Gibson's historical precision is fidelity to the range of linguistic textures present in the interpolations, which are flattened out almost to the same extent in Kenner's and Nolan's readings.

Each of these critics tend to treat the interpolations as irritants, irruptions in the narrative flow of the episode that must be recuperated to that narrative somehow. But if we do try to describe the interpolations in a way that doesn't neglect their varying styles and textures, their defining characteristic must be their superfluousness: they do no narrative work whatsoever. Joyce nominated "politics" as the art of the episode, but it also returns to the questions about the status of rhetoric and figurative language that had animated "Aeolus" and "Sirens." But rather than aligning the interpolations with the empty speechifying in the offices of the *Freeman's Journal* or the nostalgic miasma of the Ormond Hotel, their superfluousness points to another reading: that they signify above all the generative

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[109] Ibid., 109.

properties of language, marking what Derek Attridge has described as an aesthetic of "potentially limitless profusion." Realist narratives, constrained by "the illusion that their language is tied to a set of events which predetermine their length and structure it," is being deliberately juxtaposed with a form of writing that celebrates the primacy of language over non-linguistic reality.[110]

The episode begins by figuring this juxtaposition quite directly as a kind of textual economy. Nameless is, after all, "a collector of bad and doubtful debts" (*U*, 12.24—25), and the first interpolation adopts the fussy, legalistic diction of a contract that Nameless has been tasked with enforcing:

> For nonperishable goods bought of Moses Herzog, of 13 Saint Kevin's parade in the city of Dublin, Wood quay ward, merchant, hereinafter called the vendor and sold and delivered to Michael E. Geraghty, esquire, of 29 Arbour hill in the city of Dublin, Arran quay ward, gentlemen, hereinafter called the purchaser… (*U*, 12.33—7).

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[110] Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 81.

In the first instance, "Cyclops" associates linguistic excess with kinds of economic exchange. Nameless's discourse is characterized by two kinds of meanness. The first is the sort of petty prejudice apparent in his discussion of Moses Herzog's Jewishness—"Jesus I had to laugh at the little jewey getting his shirt out"—that culminates in the citizen's confrontation with Bloom (*U*, 12.30-1).[111] The second is the economy of stinginess that governs social interaction at Barney Kiernan's, in which the buying of rounds—often using borrowed or otherwise committed funds—is a social obligation.[112]

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[111] For a consideration of "Jewish mercantilism" as a stereotype throughout the novel, see Amy Feinstein, "Usurers and Usurpers: Race, Nation, and the Performance of Jewish Mercantilism in *Ulysses*," *James Joyce Quarterly* 44.1 (Fall 2006): 39-58.

[112] For an account of the pub's treating culture as a "microcosmic version of the potlatch ceremony, an orgy of property destruction and gift giving found in many archaic societies," see Mark Osteen, *The Economy of Ulysses: Making Both Ends Meet* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 262-71. See also Daniel Shea's account of the social significance of gambling in the Dublin social scene, "'A

Mark Osteen regards the textual excess of the interpolations as a reflection of and satire upon "the political and economic excesses of the drinkers in barney Kiernan's pub." But by identifying excess on both sides of the textual equation, he neglects how robustly this set of social obligations is policed. In Nameless's view, "everyone is a con-man, thief or sponger."[113] Since he is privy to secret information about his fellow drinkers, he is able to reveal their hypocrisy to the reader, as in the case of Joe Hynes, who accompanies him to the pub, and proceeds to treat Nameless and the citizen to three rounds (*U*, 12.147; 749; 1410). Hynes nonetheless owes three shillings to Bloom: "Three bob I lent him in Meagher's. Three weeks. Third hint," he recalls in "Aeolus" (VII.119). Indeed, it is likely that the money Hynes spends at Barney Kiernan's was drawn at Bloom's suggestion, in a failed hint for Hynes to pay off his debt (*U*, 7.112-7). Ultimately, it is Bloom's refusal to engage in the ritual of exchanging rounds—"he'd let you pour all manner of drink down his throat till the Lord would call him before you'd ever see the froth of his pint" (*U*, 12.684-6), an accusation more suited to the citizen than Bloom—that precipitates their confrontation,

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Rank Outsider': Gambling and Economic Rivalry in *Ulysses*," *James Joyce Quarterly* 41.1 (Fall 2010): 75–88.

[113] Osteen, *The Economy of Ulysses*, 255.

underscoring that "the treating in Kiernan's is actually compulsory and self-interested."[114] Indeed, in that confrontation both forms of the episode's meanness coincide, as in Lenehan's malicious lie that Bloom is out "defrauding widows and orphans" when in fact he is trying to help persuade a lender to whom Dignam had mortgaged his life insurance to relinquish his claim on the policy (*U*, 7.1622).[115]

Osteen's potlatch interpretation of the drinker's economy has the advantage of pointing out its difference from a system wherein social prestige attaches to saving and acquisition, the remoteness of these bourgeois mores underscoring Dublin's economic disenfranchisement.[116] But the city-wide economy of debt and social obligation nonetheless rests on the expectation that there will be an eventual settling of debts, however long it is deferred or whatever the means necessary to bring it about; hence Nameless's occupation as debt collector. Nameless's anonymity, his

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[114] Ibid., 263.

[115] Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 339.

[116] For a reading inspired by an alternative anthropological paradigm—Girard's theory of the scapegoat—that nonetheless dovetails with Osteen quite well, see Michael Spiegel, "'The Most Precious Victim': Joyce's 'Cyclops' and the Politics of Persecution," *James Joyce Quarterly* 46.1 (Fall 2008): 75–95.

insight into the private affairs of his fellow citizens, and above all his role as the episode's narrator, make him a figure for authorship in general. Moreover, his discourse figures the textual economy of realism, in which words are held to correspond to an extra-linguistic reality, just as tokens of currency are held to correspond to some external source of value. As a narrator, Nameless is at pains to assure his audience that he is "good for it," so to speak: that his account can be redeemed for the set of events it purports to describe. Hence his frequent asides emphasizing its veracity: "As true as I'm telling you," "Faith, he was," and constant invocations of "Gob" and "Begob" (*U*, 12.207–8; 382; 496; 1060). These, in their way, amount to Nameless's own rhetoric of not having rhetoric: he anticipates his audience's incredulity in order to avert it.

All this is worth bearing in mind when we consider an interpolation of a slightly different kind, one on which a liberal humanist reading of the novel might hang. As conversation in Barney Kiernan's turns from British cruelty to the nature of nationhood, hostility to Bloom builds amongst the drinkers. First, Bloom makes an analogy between the Irish and the Jews: "I belong to a race too, says Bloom, that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant" (*U*, 12.1477–8). Bloom inadvertently restates an analogy made by MacHugh in "Aeolus," but rather than deploying it in service of bromides about Irish

spirituality, he points precisely to the historical fact of persecution that MacHugh's rhetoric had obscured. "We'll put force against force," the citizen declares, while John Wyse exhorts the Irish/Jews to "stand up to it then with force like men" (*U*, 12.1364; 1475), but Bloom demurs:

> — But it's no use, says he. Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life.
> — What? says Alf.
> — Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred.
>
> (*U*, 12.1481–1487)

Bloom departs, and the drinkers, led by the citizen, mock him, before an interpolation breaks in:

> Love loves to love love. Nurse loves the new chemist. Constable 14 A loves Mary Kelly. Gerty MacDowell loves the boy that has the bicycle. M. B. loves a fair gentleman. Li Chi Han lovey up kissy Cha Pu Chow. Jumbo, the elephant, loves Alice, the elephant… You love a certain person. And this person loves that other person because everyone loves somebody but God loves everybody. (*U*, 12.1493–1501)

The novel's whole attitude toward Bloom's "monistic decency," or his "rational and pacifistic attitude" seems implicated in the relationship between his statement and the interpolation.

Bloom's "philosophy of universal love" is bound to strike many readers as banal, the sort of well-meaning platitude that a knave might substitute for serious thought about matters of politics and history. According to this view, the interpolation mocks Bloom with its sickly-sweet gloss on his statement; love's commonality across cultures and even species degrades it, rendering it incapable of doing the political work that Bloom desires. On the other hand, perhaps Bloom's statement is deliberately and usefully utopian. Gilbert, for instance, describes the interpolation as "a little homily on love's sweet ubiquity."[117] The question of how much political weight such a vague principle as love can bear is also the question of how much value we accord to the ordinary. Bloom, after all, does not have access to the elaborate models of political and social change invoked by the novel's critics. The relationship between his statement and the interpolation is a deliberate challenge to our habitual association between triteness and

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[117] Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses*, 270.

falsehood.[118] Far from being an unambiguous endorsement of the ordinary, though, the episode nonetheless ends with an act of violence, however trivial: the citizen hurls a biscuit tin after the retreating Bloom (*U*, 12.1854-7). The philosophy of universal love has failed to move the apostles of nationalist violence.

The difficulty of resolving these sorts of hermeneutic cruxes is that the interpolations operate according to an entirely different textual economy than that of the realist passages, one that aligns the aesthetic itself with expenditure, excess, and prodigality: "Joyce's defiance of organic unity and the economic relationship of words to meaning violates that Jamesian 'sublime economy' of realism and replaces it with one of splendid waste."[119] Or, as Goethe described it:

> Bin die Verschwendung, bin die Poesie;
> Bin der Poet, der sich vollendet,
> Wenn er sein eigenst Gut verschwendet.[120]

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[118] For a defense of Bloom's limited "verbal and mimetic repertoire," see Senn, "Book of Many Turns," 33.

[119] Osteen, *The Economy of Ulysses*, 273.

[120] [I am prodigality, I am poetry;

I am the poet, who completes himself

In the act of wasting his belongings.]

It is fitting that Goethe's boy charioteer should deliver these lines during a triumph, precisely the kind of list-based form that Joyce deploys throughout the interpolations. Notable topics of lists in "Cyclops" include heroes (nominally Irish, but often not, *U*, 12.176–99), mourners (*U*, 12.556–69), clerics (*U*, 12.927–38), kinds of tree (*U*, 12.1268–78), geographical features (*U*, 12.1451–61), and saints (*U*, 12.1689–1719).[121] As I've said about the interpolations generally, these lists do no narrative work whatsoever; moreover, as Osteen argues, their "sheer excess" overshadows the parodic effect that they are often attributed with.[122]

   The status of the lists in *Ulysses* has lately become the focus of discussion about the ordinary in the novel. In *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Olson describes lists as "a method of recording fact that becomes realism's endgame, enacting the limitations of a purely factual style."[123] Lists

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Goethe, *Faust: Der Tragödie Ester Un Zweiter Teil Urfaust*, ed. Erich Trunz (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1972), 173; my translation.

[121] C.f. Osteen, *The Economy of Ulysses*, 272.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 35.

do indeed form a sort of test-case, but not only for realism. Rather, they mark the limits of literature as a whole: what minimal level of syntactical organization qualifies as a literary text? By abandoning the syntactical markers of causal coherence and spatial arrangement, they seem to offer us the real unmediated by literary artifice. There is a temptation to forget this rhetorical dimension and assert instead that the list's suspension of normal syntactic and semantic structures, which corral attention in certain predetermined ways, opens literature out to the real. Moreover, the list's potentially infinite extendibility is held to have a democratizing effect: no potential object of representation is too insignificant to be subsumed by it.

But the literary list remains fundamentally within the limits of literature, however much it promises to transcend them: "the list form may suggest the idea of inclusivity and expansive accretion, but literary compilations have a limit to the number of items they can hold, beyond which the addition of further units becomes detrimental."[124] Through the ambiguous phrase "realism's endgame," Olson frames lists as an extension of realism, its *ne plus ultra*. But realism, as I have argued in the previous chapter, depends on the

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[124] Robert E. Belknap, *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 31.

artful manipulation of forms of logico-causal and spatio-temporal coherence. Rather than "project[ing] a semiotic structure which the reader recuperates in terms of a fictional reality," lists reduce all semiotic structure to the most minimal level possible.[125] Rather than realism, the list offers a rhetoric of not having rhetoric. Olson chooses to focus on the materialism of the Joycean list, particularly apparent in the "Ithaca" episode. But to align the list straightforwardly with extra-literary reality is to elide the fact that there are multiple genealogies of the literary list, all of which are active to varying degrees in *Ulysses*. In other words, rather than leading back to materiality, the lists in fact point in precisely the other direction.

Finally, we can better characterize these two textual economies by extending the currency analogy. Whereas vraisemblance represents the gold standard backing the currency of realism, the mode of textual excess resembles a fiat currency, in which value is determined only by exchange. Late capitalism is commonly said to have provoked a crisis in representation, but it might equally be described as a crisis confined to criticism, which has struggled to find a language adequate to Joyce's aesthetic of excess. *Ulysses* suggests that a speculative textual

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[125] Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*.

economy is an ordinary feature of modernity, and thus that the value of the ordinary is to found there, and not through redemption by an ordered symbolist aesthetic, or by the increasingly narrow confines of realism. Above all, the ordinary can offer the material for that mode of linguistic superfluousness we know as the aesthetic. This is the side of Joyce that gave the profligate Gracehoper the final word over the prudent Ondt in his reworking of Aesop from *Finnegans Wake*:

> *Your feats end enormous, your volumes immense,*
> *(May the Graces I hoped for sing your Ondtship*
> > *song sense!),*
> *Your genus its worldwide, your spacest sublime!*
> *But, Holy Saltmartin, why can't you beat time?*[126]

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[126] Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 419.

Chapter 3: T. S. Eliot's Ordinary Ambivalence

Recent accounts of modernism and the ordinary have yet to address T. S. Eliot's works in detail, which might come as a surprise given the ongoing centrality of his work to the modernist canon. But the surprise is lessened somewhat if we consider those aesthetic and critical commitments to which Eliot was drawn beginning in the 1920s, and which I discussed in the previous chapter. Broadly classifiable under the rubric of classicism, though to varying degrees discernable in Eliot's work since well before his "conversion" as a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, anglo-catholic in religion" in 1927, this constellation of ideas seems to signify an aesthetic aversion to the ordinary.[1] Eliot sought, in Lyndall Gordon's phrase, "an escape from the sordid reality of daily life through 'aetherial rumours.'"[2] What this rhetoric was never fully able to efface, however, is the deviant streak in Eliot's aesthetic, the lurid attraction to terror, surprise, and spectacle that pervades his work, and which he himself

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[1] Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes*, vii.

[2] Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot : An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1999), 547.

expressed, echoing Aristotle, thus: "The strange, the surprising, is of course essential to art… The craving for the fantastic, for the strange, is legitimate and perpetual; everyone with a sense of beauty has it."[3] These formulations leave us at some remove from the aesthetic of decorum he articulates during his classicist mood, notably in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." But whereas, for instance, Joyce critics embrace multiple, contradictory Joyces, Eliot critics—even those who emphasize the latter Eliot over the former—have been concerned to show an underlying continuity and order to his career.

I. *Sweeney Agonistes* and Melodramatic Modernity

If, however, as Michael Sheringham argues, the ordinary is a matter of "hybrid indeterminacy" and therefore to be sought in writings that "signal a crossing of generic boundaries," the obvious place to look in Eliot's oeuvre is *Sweeney Agonistes* (1924).[4] Critics have commented at length on the poem's strange amalgam of genres, foremost among them

[3] T. S. Eliot, "London Letter," *The Dial* (July 1921), reprinted in Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, 186.

[4] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 345-6.

David Chinitz, who hears traces of "Vaudeville, music hall…
burlesque, jazz, and minstrelsy"[5] at work in it, and Rachel
Blau DuPlessis, who detects "tabloid shock, working-class
sentimental poetry, true-crime confession, [and] bartender's
parable."[6] Chinitz et al. have helped to reverse the received
understanding of Eliot's (and modernism's) relationship with
popular culture, showing that, throughout his career, Eliot
not only appreciated popular forms himself, but recognized
and coveted their appeal to larger audiences. Chinitz's
approach, however, reconstructs a coherent Eliot by making
his admiration of past cultural configurations the basis,
not the antithesis, of Eliot's affection for popular forms:
"*Sweeney* attempts to reground high art in popular culture,
and popular culture in ritual."[7] The whole project of looking
to atavistic cultural forms as a model for contemporary
literature, after all, casts ordinary life in the condition
of modernity as degraded.[8]

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[5] David E. Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*
(Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 107.

[6] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races and Religious
Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934* (Cambridge and
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 99.

[7] Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, 15.

[8] Critics have typically drawn attention to F. M. Cornford's
The Origin of Attic Comedy, which locates that origin in

Chinitz's aim is, in a sense, to find a point of reconciliation between the two terms of the piece's subtitle: "An Aristophanic Melodrama"; In January 1922, Ezra Pound wrote in reply to a letter from Eliot mentioning Aristophanes:

Aristophanes probably depressing, and the native negro phoque melodies of Dixee more calculated to lift the ball-encumbered phallus of man to the proper 8.30, 9.30 or even ten thirty level now counted as the crowning and alarse too often katachrestical summit of human achievement.[9]

"primitive vegetation rites" associated with fertility and the harvest. Eliot wrote to Cornford on 29 May, 1923, to solicit a contribution to the *Criterion* which never materialized. See Francis Macdonald Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (Gloucester, MA, P. Smith, 1968); T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot,* Vol. 2, *1923-1925*, ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 161-2.

[9] Ezra Pound to T. S. Eliot, 28(?) January 1922 in Eliot, ed. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot,* Vol. 1, 630.

Chinitz comments, "Pound's hint apparently inflected Eliot's reading, with the result that *Sweeney Agonistes* became a jazz Aristophanes."[10] Pound might thus have contributed to the inclusion of songs in the poem, and by August 1923, Eliot was referring to the work as a "jazz drama."[11] Critics have often cited Eliot's 1933 letter to Hallie Flanagan, who was then directing a production of *Sweeney* at Vasser, in which Eliot comments: "I had intended the whole play to be accompanied by light drum taps to accentuate the beats (esp. the chorus, which ought to have a noise like a street drill)."[12] Debate over whether that intention was formed at the time of the poem's composition or retrospectively can be

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[10] Though it is far from clear that Pound's comment represents in any sense an endorsement of those "native negro phoque melodies." Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, 111. Cf. Morris Freedman, "Jazz Rhythms in T. S. Eliot," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 51 (1952): 419–35.

[11] Letter to Alfred Kreymborg, 23 August, 1923, in Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot,* Vol. 2, 192. For a comprehensive account of the poem's composition and critical debate over Eliot's process of writing it, see Benjamin Madden, "Arnold Bennett and the Making of *Sweeney Agonistes*," *Notes and Queries* 58.1 (March 2011): 106–110.

[12] King's College Archive, Cambridge, *Papers of the Hayward Bequest*, V/7A.

settled by a letter of 6 November, 1923, to Gilbert Seldes,
in which Eliot states, "My play, if it is ever written, will
certainly appear as a text, although I intend it for
production with an orchestra consisting exclusively of
drums."[13] Seldes, Eliot's friend and editor of *The Dial*, was
a perspicacious commentator on 1920s popular culture, and
his remarks on jazz offer much more explicit encouragement
than Pound's. Seldes was an unabashed fan: "If... we give up
jazz we shall be sacrificing nearly all there is of gaiety
and liveliness and rhythmic power in our lives."[14] Seldes
draws a suggestive analogy between jazz and the machine age:

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[13] Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot,* Vol. 2, 268.; the
influence of Diaghilev, Stravinsky, and the *Ballet Russes*
cannot be underestimated here; see Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's
Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (Oxford and New
York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 110. Eliot's
attendance at Ballet Russes performances in London is well
attested to in his letters. See Eliot, *The Letters of T. S.
Eliot,* Vol. 1, 380, 666.

[14] Gilbert Seldes, "Toujours Jazz," *The Dial* (August 1923): 6.
The primitivism that other critics have discerned in *Sweeney
Agonistes* also appears in Seldes's enthusiasm for the
African-American origins of jazz, marred though it is by his
assumption of an opposition between African-American culture
and "civilization," however typical of its time: "He has

> All the free, the instinctive, the wild in negro jazz
>
> which could be integrated into [the bandleader Paul
>
> Whiteman's] music, he has kept; he has added to it, has
>
> worked his material, until it runs sweetly in his
>
> dynamo, without grinding or scraping. It becomes the
>
> machine which conceals machinery.[15]

Seldes is assiduous about distinguishing between individual
composers, performers, and bandleaders. Nonetheless, many
contemporary commentators used the term "jazz" to refer to
popular music generally, usually as an avatar of generalized
anxieties about modernity. Theodor Adorno is exemplary in
this respect, when he characterizes jazz as

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kept alive things without with our lives would be

perceptibly meaner, paler, and nearer to atrophy and decay...

[But] to any one who inherits several thousand centuries of

civilization [*sic*], none of the things the negro offers can

matter unless they are apprehended by the mind as well as

the body and the spirit" (9-10).

[15] Ibid., 13.

Music which fuses the most rudimentary melodic,
harmonic, metric, and formal structure with the
ostensibly disruptive principle of syncopation, yet
without ever really disturbing the crude unity of the
basic rhythm, the identically sustained metre, the
quarter note.[16]

"The lowbrow sects declaring themselves to be highbrow" he
argues, cannot solve the "reprehensible" division of culture
into low-, middle-, and highbrow. Jazz enthusiasts, he
ironically declares, mistakenly conflate jazz with "Eliot's
poetry and Joyce's prose."[17] According to Adorno, jazz has
"in its essence remained static," making it an "enigma that
millions of people seem never to tire of its monotonous
attraction."[18] The simultaneous attraction to and repulsion
from monotony is, we might note, one of the major themes of
Sweeney Agonistes.

If Adorno's attack on jazz is altogether too dour to
account fully for Eliot's engagement with the genre,

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[16] Theodor Adorno, "The Perennial Fashion—Jazz," in *The
Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Malden, MA and Oxford:
Blackwell, 2000), 268.

[17] Ibid., 274.

[18] Ibid., 269.

Chinitz's account is almost certainly too optimistic. The attractions of jazz for its listeners are figured in the poem as intoxicating:

> We're gona sit here and drink this booze
>
> We're gona sit here and have a tune
>
> We're gona stay and we're gona go
>
> And somebody's gotta pay the rent.[19]

Intoxication, in all of its metaphorical valences, was connected with jazz throughout the 1920s, especially in the United States, as a consequence of the jazz-fueled speakeasy scene created by prohibition. This representation of America was much remarked upon in the press, even in its limitations.[20] This connection comes to a comical—if macabre—

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[19] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 125. Hereafter cited in text as "*CPP*."

[20] *The Times*, for instance, reports the complaint of the American journalist Robert Barry that Americans are regularly depicted in the European press as "a nation of 'gun-toting bootleggers, Jazz-mad idlers, immoral-divorcees, and bloodthirsty lynchers.'" "Distorted Pictures of America: European Press Methods Condemned," *The Times*, Jun 14, 1922.

culmination two years after Eliot abandoned *Sweeney*, with the case of Dorothy Ellington. Dorothy, a sixteen-year old jazz aficionado, shot her mother after being forbidden to attend a party. "Jazz-Gin Craze Drives Girl of 16 to Kill Mother," screamed the *Chicago Tribune*.[21] The trial occasioned an enormous amount of press attention on both sides of the Atlantic. The *Daily Mirror*, for instance, ran images of Dorothy Ellington and her mother on its front page on Saturday, January 31, 1925.[22] The murder provided an early inspiration for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, but the matricide plot that he explored in early drafts largely fell away from the final novel.[23] But it is clear that jazz was frequently figured in the 1920s as more than just an accomplice to more direct forms of intoxication like alcohol, but as an intoxicating agent in itself.

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[21] "Jazz-Gin Craze Drives Girl of 16 to Kill Mother: Shoots When Parties Are Forbidden," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan 16, 1925;.

[22] "'Jazz Maniac' Shoots Mother For Scolding Her," *Daily Mirror*, Saturday, January 31, 1925; no. 6625; pg. 1.

[23] See James L. W. West, "Tender Is the Night, 'Jazzmania,' and the Ellingson Matricide," in *Twenty-First Century Readings of Tender Is the Night*, ed. William and Laura Rattray Blazek (Liverpool Liverpool University Press, 2007), 34-50.

The first of three songs in "Fragment of an Agon" is "Under the Bamboo Tree," by the famous song-writing trio of Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, and his brother, the future civil rights leader James Weldon Johnson. The song was immensely popular, so much so that Eliot could, according to Chinitz, "rely on an audience over twenty years later and in another country to remember the tune." Chinitz shows that the songwriters were able to fit a sly message of racial equality into an otherwise predictable love song by inviting the audience to identify with a "Zulu from Matabooloo" conducting a "modest and decorous"[24] courtship of a lady. It is difficult to overstate how thoroughly Eliot subverts this message in his revision of the song:

Tell me in what part of the wood

Do you want to flirt with me?

Under the breadfruit, banyan, palmleaf

Or under the bamboo tree?

Any old tree will do for me

Any old wood is just as good

Any old isle is just my style…

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[24] Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, 115.

(*CPP*, 123)

Far from "modest and decorous," this seduction is wanton in its indifference, an effect underlined by the listing (breadfruit, banyan, palmleaf, bamboo) and repetition (Any old…). The song evokes a sort of dehumanized sexuality reminiscent of the typist and the young man carbuncular in *The Waste Land*, whose affectless sexual encounter is expressed metonymically in the typist's "automatic hand" as she "puts a record on the gramophone" following her lover's departure.[25]

Eliot's re-writing transforms the chaste (if winking) sexuality of the song into a peon to promiscuity. The substitutability of various locales mirrors the substitutability of participants in the seduction, setting up an analogy between the modern subject and the objects of mass-production in the next song:

Well that's life on a crocodile isle.

There's no telephones

There's no gramophones

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[25] See Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land*, 68-9.

    There's no motor cars

    No two-seaters, no six-seaters,

    No Citröen, no Rolls Royce.

                    (*CPP*, 121)

The poem's characters—already rendered substitutable by
their organization into pairs (Doris and Dusty, Wauchope and
Horsfall, Klipstein and Krumpacker)—see their own
substitutability reflected in a parade of actual commodities.
Despite its blandishments, the songs seem to argue,
modernity is fundamentally as empty as life on the
"crocodile isle":

    My little island girl

    I'm going to stay with you

    And we wont worry what to do

    We won't have to catch any trains

    And we won't go home when it rains

    We'll gather hibiscus flowers

    For it won't be minutes but hours

    For it won't be hours but years.

(*CPP*, 123)

Doris is prompted to cry out: "That's not life, that's no life / Why I'd just as soon be dead" (*CPP*, 123). The "crocodile isle" offers no escape from the repetitive rhythms of the ordinary: "That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all, / Birth, and copulation, and death." Says Doris: "I'd be bored" (*CPP*, 122). Jazz, then, as the mass-produced output of the culture industry, enacts a formal critique of the ordinary under the condition of modernity.[26]

Pound's aside that the "native negro phoque melodies of Dixee" are "more calculated to lift the ball-encumbered phallus of man" reminds us of one of the poem's more striking choices of diction: its repetition of the word "copulation." All in all, the phrase "Birth, and copulation,

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[26] For the currency of this constellation, see the *New York Times Magazine* article entitled "Jazz is Linked to the Factory Wheel": "Above the hum of machinery in a German factory loud-speakers are blaring American jazz. Involuntarily, so the reports say, the thousands of workers quicken their speed as their hands begin to move to ragtime... The principle of the old spontaneous work-songs of hand labor is being artificially applied to the machine age." *The New York Times Magazine*, December 30, 1928.

and death" occurs in the poem five times (*CPP* 122).
"Copulation" is far from an ordinary synonym for "sex." It
is probably the poem's only conspicuously "learned" word,
heavy with overtones of legal or scientific discourse. The
OED notes—comically, in this connection—that it is now
"chiefly a term of zoology."[27] Copulation's other significant
appearance in Eliot's oeuvre is in his 1930 essay on
Baudelaire. Discussing Baudelaire's *Journaux Intimes*, Eliot
seizes on this line: "*la volupté unique et suprême de
l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le mal.*" Eliot
writes:

> This means, I think, that Baudelaire has perceived that
> what distinguishes the relations of man and woman from
> the copulation of beasts is the knowledge of Good and
> Evil… Having an imperfect, vague romantic conception of
> Good, he was at least able to understand that the
> sexual act as evil is more dignified, less boring, than

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[27] "copulation, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed.
1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 25 June 2010.
<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50049896>.

as the natural, "life-giving", cheery automatism of the modern world.[28]

The "cheery automatism of the modern world" emphatically evokes the themes of *Sweeney Agonistes*, and the sarcastic scare quotes around "life-giving" seem to underscore the point.[29] Under the condition of modernity, then, individuals are condemned more than ever to replicate involuntary modes of behavior conditioned by systems that exceed individual volition.

The songs in *Sweeney Agonistes* are therefore indexes of their own production. Churned out by the kind of song-writing factories epitomized by Tin Pan Alley, then disseminated by means of mass-produced scores ("Under the Bamboo Tree" sold 400,000 of them in six months) and gramophone records, the popular song becomes a microcosm of modernity's tendency to extend the principles of mass-

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[28] T. S. Eliot, "Baudelaire," in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 428–9.

[29] In this sense, *Sweeney* echoes the dismal view of human sexuality presented in the two Sweeney lyric poems, "Sweeney Erect" and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" from *Poems*, 1920 (*CPP*, 42–3, 56–7).

production into cultural life.[30] In this account, the endless repetition of the gramophone record spinning around on its plate figures for the endless mechanical reproductions of capitalist society. Adorno argues that

> Although the symbol of technology may be the uniformly revolving wheel, its intrinsic energies develop to an incalculable extent while remaining saddled by a society which is driven forward by its inner tensions.[31]

Sweeney Agonistes reflects the repetitiousness of popular music production in the diminuendo of "My Little Island Girl": "And the morning / And the evening / And noontide / And night / Morning / Evening / Noontime / Night" (*CPP*, 123). The diminuendo almost mimes the motion of the gramophone needle coasting towards the edge of the record. Popular culture, in other words, offers no escape from that mode of production; instead, it embodies it.

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[30] Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black leader, Black voice*; cited in Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, 115.

[31] Adorno, "The Perennial Fashion—Jazz," 272.

But the influence of jazz in *Sweeney Agonistes* extends well beyond the actual songs in the form of the poem's striking rhythm. It is comprised mainly of four-beat lines with variable numbers of unstressed syllables. The four-beat line is quite distant from the rhythms of ordinary speech, but it is nevertheless deeply ingrained in most readers though its use in such popular forms as the ballad and the nursery rhyme. This both underscores and undermines the poem's effort to invoke a demotic idiom. The poem's "stichomythic" technique has been noted before; this involves dividing lines into two halves of two beats each, voiced by separate speakers, creating a lively conversational effect:

```
     /  \ /    x /  x

   How about Pereira?

                      /  \ /    x /  x

                    What about Pereira?

   /  x     /

   I don't care.

                      /   x     /

                    You don't care!
```

```
     /  /    x  /

   Who pays the rent?

                              \   /  /    x  /

                            Yes he pays the rent



    x    /   /   /   x   /   /   /

   Well some men don't and some men do



    /   /   /   x   /   /   /

   Some men don't and you know who.

                                        (CPP, 115)[32]
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Put simply, the hallmark of the poem's metrical arrangement is its repetition. Even when the poem departs from its rhythmic pattern, it does so in a way that sets up a suspension of the reader's expectation that is immediately resolved to satisfying metrical effect, redoubling the

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[32] See Derek Attridge's *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* for an account of the system of scansion used here. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

poem's regularity. But what kind of figurative work does this rhythm do?

First, the rhythm underscores the banality of the characters' conversation. "Fragment of a Prologue," for instance, is taken up with a mode of speech between Doris and Dusty best characterized as gossip, an unusual subject for poetry but one prefigured by the speaker at the end of "A Game of Chess" in "The Waste Land." Maurice Blanchot has described gossip as a ubiquitous kind of everyday speech:

> What is essential is not that one particular person speak and another hear, but that, with no one in particular speaking and no one in particular listening, there should nonetheless be speech, and a kind of undefined promise to communicate, guaranteed by the incessant coming and going of solitary words.[33]

In other words, this stichomythic technique effects a sort of dramatic irony: the poem marks out the form of a conversation with line-breaks on the page, while in terms of sheer banality, the "conversation" is hardly a conversation at all. Hence the repetitiousness of Doris and Dusty's

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[33] Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 14.

speech: "I don't care. / You don't care!"; "I like Sam / *I like Sam*," etc. Doris and Dusty's gossip has a performative effect, displacing the reader's attention and the poem's focus from the meanings conveyed by language to the texture of language itself.

Second, the presence of the *same* rhythm throughout the whole poem gives the characters' speech a doubled quality; it emphasizes the sociality of their shared idiom, but at the same time emphasizes its likeness to the point of effacing the differences between characters. Indeed, had Eliot seen the work through to completion as the "jazz oratorio" he had envisioned, the drumming accompaniment would have given the characters' speech an undifferentiated substrate of sound, linking and flattening it out. Hence readings like Christine Buttram's, who sees the poem as testimony that "the modern world had become so mechanized that its rhythmical sensibility fused everyday language with the 'internal combustion engine' or 'street drill.'"[34] In the same letter to Hallie Flannagan that mentions the drumming, Eliot suggests that "the action should be stylized as in the Noh drama," and directs Flannagan to W. B. Yeats's introduction to Ezra Pound's *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*

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[34] Christine Buttram, "*Sweeney Agonistes*: A Sensational Snarl," in *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. David E. Chinitz (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 183.

(1916).[35] There, Yeats praises the rhythmic sensibility of the Noh plays: "The interest is not in the human form but in the rhythm to which it moves, and the triumph of their art is to express the rhythm in its intensity."[36] Not only that, but the actors in the Noh plays (like those in the Ancient Greek theatre, including Aristophanes' comedies) wear masks that identify them as their character. Stylization of the kind Eliot recommends dissolves individual differences and, perhaps, thereby the larger social fabric.

Third, the rhythm in *Sweeney Agonistes* departs from modernism's usual reputation for "roughened verbal textures and often startling juxtapositions."[37] Instead, it seems to epitomize what Stanley Cavell has called "the uncaniness of the ordinary." Cavell describes this as "the possibility or threat of what philosophy has called skepticism, understood... as the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in

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[35] King's College Archive, Cambridge *Papers of the Hayward Bequest*, V/7A.

[36] W. B. Yeats, "'Introduction' to Certain Noble Plays of Japan," in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 367.

[37] Felski, "Introduction," 608.

common."[38] This fear of communicative failure haunts *Sweeney Agonistes*, from Klipstein and Krumpacker's awkward introductions with Doris and Dusty:

> KLIPSTEIN: Well, no, Miss—er—you haven't quite got it
>
> (I'm afraid I didn't quite catch your name—
>
> But I'm very pleased to meet you all the same)
>
> (*CPP* 119)

to Sweeney's refrain in the second part of the poem: "I gotta use words when I talk to you" (*CPP* 125). In his essay on "The Uncanny," Freud departs from his lengthy etymological exploration of the *unheimlich* with a sharp extension of the concept, now defined as "vague notions of automatic—mechanical—processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person."[39] The leveling effect of the poem's rhythm hints that the characters themselves are like automatons. Do they really speak of their own accord, or does the rhythm speak through them? Autonomy

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[38] Cavell, "The Uncaniness of the Ordinary," 154.

[39] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Uncanny*, ed. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 135; Cavell, "The Uncaniness of the Ordinary," 155–6.

becomes a kind of automatonomy; by immersing its characters in the uncanny, the poem raises the question of agency: in other words, the rhythm extends the question of agency and volition that we first encountered in the guise of popular song.

The first section of *Sweeney Agonistes*, "Fragment of a Prologue," raises the kinds of question we have just posed of the poem's rhythm in another way. Whilst cutting the cards for the evening's entertainment, Doris and Dusty use the deck for an impromptu tarot reading, a figure for the act of literary interpretation:

DORIS: Now I'm going to cut the cards for to-night.
     Oh guess what the first is
DUSTY: First is. What is?
DORIS: The King of Clubs
DUSTY: That's Pereira
DORIS: It might be Sweeney
DUSTY: It's Pereira
DORIS: It might *just* as well be Sweeney
DUSTY: Well anyway it's very queer.

                                    (*CPP*, 117)

The cards, which already function as symbolic tokens, are made to represent other characters, and by extension,

linguistic signs. In this way, the card game plays with the status of literary language. We can push this analogy further: the cards represent a system of paradigmatic substitution—the characteristic mechanism of poetry—in opposition to a system of syntagmatic progression—the hallmark of narrative. This system of substitutions and the basic question Doris and Dusty bring to bear on it through the game of divination—systematic, or aleatory?—figure for the ambiguous status of the ordinary under the condition of modernity: a zone of chance, as the surrealists would have it, or territory colonized by deterministic systems?

　　The card game quickly takes a turn, though, when Doris declares, "It all depends on what comes next," and what comes next is most unwelcome:

> Dusty:　　　　　　　　　　　　The *two* of *spades*!
>
> 　　"That's the Coffin!!"
>
> Doris:　　　　　　　　　　That's the Coffin?
>
> 　　　Oh good heavens what'll I do?
>
> 　　　Just before a party too!
>
> Dusty: Well it needn't be yours, it may mean a friend.
>
> Doris: No it's mine. I'm sure it's mine.
>
> 　　　I dreamt of weddings all last night.
>
> 　　　Yes it's mine. I know it's mine.
>
> 　　　Oh good heavens what'll I do.
>
> 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(CPP 117)

Suddenly, the cards' status as literary artifice is foregrounded as they foreshadow Sweeney's grisly tale of murder later in the poem. But for Doris, the question of order versus fortuity is paramount. The specter of the uncanny reoccurs in the card game: is the appearance of the coffin truly aleatory, as Doris argues, or is it governed by a larger system, as Dusty insists?

Eliot is cunningly using the artifice of a game ("aleatory," after all, comes from the Latin for rolling dice) to figure the problem of genre that haunts *Sweeney*: its indecision between lyric and narrative forms. This in turn figures for the larger set of reconciliations that the poem tries to effect, between Aristophanes and melodrama, between modernity as dulling repetition and modernity as the aleatory or marvelous, and between an aesthetic of decorum and one of the histrionic.[40] Frank Kermode argues that "we are in love with the idea of fulfillment," and thus we "labor to reduce fortuity first, before we decide that there is a way of looking which provides a place for it."[41] Perhaps

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[40] Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land*, 50-1.

[41] Frank Kermode, "The Man in the Macintosh, the Boy in the Shirt," in *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 64-5.

the easiest way of reducing fortuity in a text is to make the fortuitous event into a symbol of fortuity, rendering it a metaphor for not having metaphors, like Kermode's reading of the man in the mackintosh.

Sweeney Agonistes, then, articulates a critique of the ordinary that marshals diffuse cultural anxieties surrounding those aspects of modernity discussed in my introduction. And, indeed, the poem associates itself in its subtitle with melodrama, a quintessentially modern genre. Theatrical melodrama came into existence in the aftermath of the French Revolution, pioneered by a French playwright named René-Charles Guilbert de Pixerécourt, whose *Cœlina ou l'Enfant du mystère*, written in 1800, was translated into English as *A Tale of Mystery, A Melo-Drame* two years later, by Thomas Holcroft. The rudiments of the genre are already established in this play. Characters do not develop; they embody fixed archetypes: the innocent heroine, her heroic lover, the villain who conspires to separate them, and so on. These archetypes represent subject positions in a fixed moral universe into which audiences can insinuate themselves, as a means of carrying out moral reflection on their own circumstances. Melodramatic plots, therefore, are often "about virtue made visible and acknowledged, a drama of

recognition."[42] So-called "sensational melodramas" in particular frequently revolve around a hero or heroine who possesses an unusual, indeed irrational, degree of trust in the virtue of his or her love object. The melodrama invites the audience to partake in this extreme conviction, which will then be tested by a series of obstacles as the plot develops, before being sensationally vindicated at the end of the narrative. These static conventions are repeated throughout the history of the genre with mechanical insistence.[43]

Brooks argues that a social context in which transcendental sources of value and assurance are missing necessitates ritualistic and hyperbolic affirmations of belief:

The heightening and hyperbole, the polarized conflict, the menace and suspense of the representations may be made necessary by the effort to perceive and image the

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[42] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 27.

[43] See Lawrence Rainey, "Pretty Typewriters, Melodramatic Modernity: Edna, Belle, and Estelle," *Modernism/modernity* 16.1 (January 2009): 105–22.

> spiritual in a world voided of its traditional Sacred,
> where the body of the ethical has become a sort of *deus*
> *absconditis* which must be sought for, postulated,
> brought into man's existence through the play of the
> spiritualist imagination.[44]

Brooks argues that the emergence of the genre ought to be
read against the background of the nineteenth-century
political and social upheavals, particularly the French
Revolution. These changes, so the argument goes,
necessitated reaffirming a moral world order after the
traditional loci of moral authority had collapsed. Eliot
continued to perceive a need for that reaffirmation in the
twentieth century; in the essay "Wilkie Collins and Dickens,"
he observes that "melodrama is perennial and… the craving
for it is perennial and must be satisfied."[45]

   Perennial though it might be, melodrama has also been
adapted by various authors to changing socio-economic
conditions. The office melodramas of the late nineteenth and
early twentieth centuries exemplify these adaptations. With
the development of the modern office, melodramatic plots

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[44] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 11.

[45] T. S. Eliot, "Wilkie Collins and Dickens," in *Selected
Essays* (London: Faber, 1932), 460.

begin to center around a new class of young women empowered to live alone in the city, much like Doris and Dusty. Rainey argues that these melodramas confront a specific feature of modernity: the pervasiveness of what Anthony Giddens has called "abstract systems."[46] Trust is, according to Giddens, "involved in a fundamental way with the institutions of modernity. Trust here is vested, not in individuals, but in abstract capacities."[47] In other words, the semantic cluster that Rainey identifies around "trust" in the sensational melodramas is mirrored in *Sweeney Agonistes* by Doris's pessimistic refrain, "A woman runs a terrible risk" and associated moments in the poem (*CPP*, 124). Giddens's central example of an abstract system is money, which, even prior to the introduction of fiat currency requires us to invest symbolic tokens with what Georg Simmel famously called "an element of social-psychological quasi-religious faith."[48]

According to Rainey's reformulation of Brooks, then, this psychological structure is analogous to the plot structure of melodrama, in which

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[46] Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 83.

[47] Ibid., 26.

[48] Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 3rd. enlarged ed., trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 192.

Readers… can expect a positive outcome only if they
bypass inductive knowledge and reasonable inference,
our everyday sense of trust and confidence; their
belief, instead, must consist of strong trust, a faith
in and a commitment to that abstract goodness whose
revelation is, at one and the same time, the unfolding
of the melodramatic plot and the disclosure of the
world, to which it claims to be a counterpart.[49]

Sweeney Agonistes inverts this central characteristic of the
melodramatic genre. Far from presenting an exemplary display
of conviction as a means to assuage its audience's
existential uncertainties, the poem presents a world in
which even the "everyday sense of trust and confidence" has
collapsed. The *deus absconditus* that Brooks identifies as
the hidden subject of melodrama is also that of *Sweeney
Agonistes*: the network of abstract systems that pervades
modernity. In Giddens's words, "attitudes of trust towards
abstract systems are usually routinely incorporated into the
continuity of day-to-day activities."[50] *Sweeney* achieves its
uncanny effects by dramatizing the disruption of that
continuity.

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[49] Rainey, "Pretty Typewriters, Melodramatic Modernity," 116.

[50] Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity*, 90.

The poem concludes with a figure for the literary stasis that arises from its incomplete generic amalgam in the form of Sweeney's anecdote of the Lysol bath murder. Sweeney wants to illustrate to Doris the point that "Life is death," and does so with a story that begins: "I knew a man once did a girl in." He describes a murderer who preserves his victim's corpse, "with a gallon of Lysol in a bath" (*CPP*, 124). The murder is foreshadowed earlier by the appearance of the coffin card in Doris and Dusty's tarot game. But just as the coffin card causes the girls to recoil and continue to play the game in the hopes of "break[ing] the spell," so the murder that Sweeney describes leads only to a state of uncanny repetition. Rather than a predictable story of crime and detection, the murderer remains immersed in the repetition of ordinary habits: "Nobody came / And nobody went / But he took in the milk and he paid the rent" (*CPP*, 124). After the murder, the residual ordinariness of daily routines—taking in the milk and paying the rent—adopts a sinister aspect.

In the midst of Sweeney's story is an object that epitomizes this duality: the Lysol in which the corpse is preserved. Lysol is "a solution of coal-tar oil in soap,"[51]

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[51] "lysol," n. *OED* Second edition, 1989; online version March 2012. <*http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/111706*>; accessed 25 March 2012.

commonly used as a cleaning agent or household disinfectant. An advertisement in *The Times* from 1920 describes the product as "indispensable" for "daily personal hygiene" (Fig. 1). Even more striking in the context of *Sweeney Agonistes* is the ad's claim that "Used in the bath [Lysol] provides a perfect skin tonic."[52] In other words, Lysol exemplifies the ordinary, everyday practices associated with cleaning and personal hygiene. In its undiluted form, however, Lysol was highly poisonous. Sweeney's story gives us no reason to assume that Lysol was the murder weapon, but contemporary newspaper archives give a sensational context to its appearance in the poem in that it featured in a rash of suicides during the 1920s.

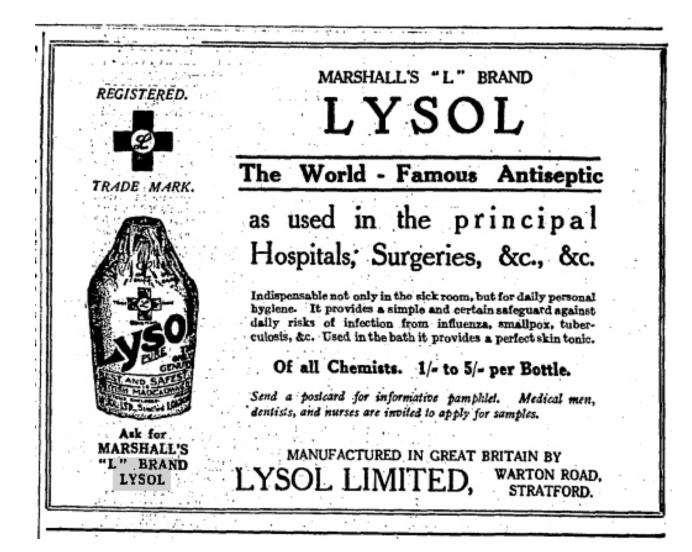[52] "Lysol Limited," *The Times*, Thursday, 22 April, 1920.

Fig 4.: Advertisement for Lysol Limited. *The Times* (22 April 1920): 7, Col. F.

No fewer than thirteen articles in *The Times* between 1920 and 1927 record suicides who poisoned themselves with Lysol. Titles like "A Chance Acquaintance: Nurse's Suicide in Mayfair Flat"[53] and "Major's Death in a Club: Suicide Due

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[53] "A Chance Acquaintance: Nurse's Suicide in Mayfair Flat," *The Times*, Wednesday, 24 March, 1920.

to Betting Losses"[54] underscore that this phenomenon also cut across class lines. Lysol, then, figures the ordinary as a kind of poison. The intoxication associated with jazz becomes literal. Monotony, routine, and habit become embodiments of the repetition that Freud describes as the essence of the death drive.

For the unnamed murderer, even such an extreme act as this is not enough to distinguish his personality from others: "Any man might do a girl in / Any man has to, needs to, wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in" (*CPP*, 124). This deep propensity towards violence is figured as a precise response to the deadeningly repetitive circumstances of modernity. The sense of looming threat—"Any man might do a girl in"; "A woman runs a terrible risk"—is suggestive of a genre identified by Rachel Blau DuPlessis as "tabloid shock," the prurient fascination with violence of the sensationalist press.[55] "These fellows always get pinched in the end," says Swarts, but Snow demurs:

Excuse me, they don't all get pinched in the end.

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[54] "Major's Death in a Club: Suicide Due to Betting Losses," *The Times*, Saturday, 18 December, 1926.

[55] Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934*, 99.

> What about them bones on Epsom Heath?
>
> I seen that in the papers
>
> You seen it in the papers
>
> They *don't* all get pinched in the end.
>
> (*CPP*, 124)

Snow's comment underscores the fact that the poem always defers narrative closure: like the card game, like the body in the bath, and like the poem itself, Sweeney's story trails off without a conclusion.

There is an obvious perversity in Eliot's account of the ordinary, which comes to the fore in his essay on Marie Lloyd (about which I concur with Chinitz, who argues that the essay is more central to Eliot's project than critics typically allow):

> In an interesting essay in the volume of *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia*, the psychologist W. H. R. Rivers adduced evidence which has led him to believe that the natives of that unfortunate archipelago are dying out principally for the reason that the 'Civilization' forced upon them has deprived them of all interest in life. They are dying from pure boredom.

Having indulged his proclivity for fairly wild anthropological theories, Eliot launches into a scabrous attack on the direction of Western culture:

> When every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones, when every horse has been replaced by 100 cheap motor-cars, when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bedtime stories from a loudspeaker, when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians.[56]

Fairness to Eliot demands that we acknowledge the qualification he adds in a footnote at the end of the essay: "These lines were written nine years ago." Nonetheless, the "Marie Lloyd" essay captures the paradox of modernity for Eliot which is a source of awe, wonder, shock, and the whole "machinery of extremism" that animates his work up to and including *Sweeney Agonistes*, and at once, an "immense

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[56] Eliot, "Marie Lloyd," 459.; See Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, 14.

panorama of futility," which, without the spiritual significance it was in Eliot's nature to seek, must seem, in a word, boring. *Sweeney*'s lysol figures for this ambiguity. The next phase of Eliot's career would take shape around one side of this binary only, activating and extending those conservative currents of his thought that had hitherto been ameliorated by the other.

II. The *Four Quartets* and Nostalgia for the Ordinary

Bryony Randall claims that everyday life studies has given too little consideration to the questions of temporality despite their obvious affinities.[57] In modernist studies more generally, however, discussions of temporality are ubiquitous; within Eliot studies alone, the influence of Henri Bergson's philosophy has been debated for decades.[58]

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[57] Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, 30-1.

[58] Cf. A. D. Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 26-9; Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism : T.S. Eliot and His Context*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 32-5; Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (New York: Simon, 1984), 40-1; Gordon, *T. S. Eliot : An Imperfect Life*, 55. Discussions of modernist temporality generally owe something

The *Four Quartets* have been traditionally interpreted as, in Ronald Bush's words, "Eliot's own meditation on the 'central mystery of the Incarnation,'" that is, the union of timeless divinity and time-bound man in the person of Jesus Christ.[59] In fact the real neglect, I would argue, has been of the connection between the condition of modernity and place. The field of human geography has added to our understanding of modernity by focusing scholarly enquiry on the ways that meaning becomes invested in a landscape. Much of this work has been organized around a simple dichotomy between *place* and *space*: "When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way) it becomes a place."[60] Space does not necessarily

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to Stephen Kern's controversial *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[59] Ronald Bush, *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 224.

[60] Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 10. See also the foundational text in the field of human geography, Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

precede place, and it is not strictly non-place.[61] By the
seventeenth century, the concept of space had taken on a new
practical importance, having been "geometrized" in the
philosophies of Newton, Descartes, and Leibniz, and in the
expansion of global trade and exploration.

The association between space and freedom is clear;
movement over large geographical distances requires a system
of navigation that does not depend on local knowledge.
Mastering space sets the scene for those features of
modernity that I have discussed in terms of Giddens's
concept of disembedding mechanisms. "The dynamism of
modernity," we recall, "derives from the separation of time
and space and their recombination in forms which permit the
precise time-space 'zoning' of social life [and] the
disembedding of social systems."[62] Modernity, in other words,
reorganizes time and space along systematic and
epistemologically open lines. The standardization of time

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[61] Edward S. Casey offers an exhaustive account of these
concepts' development in Western philosophy from the
Hellenistic and Neo-Platonist philosophers to the present.
See Hellenistic and Neo-Platonist philosophers see Edward S.
Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley,
Los Angeles and London: University of California Press,
1998), 76-7.

[62] Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 16.

telling and navigation produces a model upon which other abstract systems of knowledge can be built. Dependence on local knowledge to order the world is a barrier to every kind of exchange over geographical distance: commercial, cultural, linguistic, etc. One way of describing modernity is the condition under which systems of exchange begin to transcend the local, allowing disparate kinds of individual to come together in a social space constructed so that exchange between diverse groups on the basis of some common footing is possible. Disembedding is "the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space."[63]

Giddens offers a gloss of Casey's reflections on the philosophical history of place by way of clarifying its transformation by modernity:

"Place" is best conceptualized by means of the idea of locale, which refers to the physical settings of social activity as situated geographically. In pre-modern societies, space and place largely coincide, since the spatial dimensions of social life are, for most of the population, and in most respects, dominated by "presence"—by localized activities. The advent of

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[63] Ibid., 21.

modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others.[64]

Giddens, however, passes over an integral facet of our historical experience of modernity: that the triumph of space is never absolute. Space constantly butts up against the intransigence of place. The security, familiarity, and comfort of embeddedness make it as much a human need as the freedom and expansiveness of space. And, as modernity's process of disembedding proceeds, a political and philosophical reaction against it develops. This process is still underway around the world. From local building conservation efforts to movements for national self-determination, the tension between place and space, embeddedness and disembedding, is at issue whenever the prerogatives of local experience come into conflict with systemic forces from above or outside.

One of the more controversial applications of these ideas in twentieth century thought can be found in the later writings of Martin Heidegger. Despite their questionable politics, works like "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," "The Question Concerning Technology," and "The Age of the World-Picture" have had an enormous impact on fields including

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[64] Ibid., 18.

architecture, human geography and ecology. The late Heidegger builds on the anti-Cartesian precepts of his earlier philosophy: there-being (*Dasein*) presupposes the inextricable unity of mind and body. The Cartesian model, on the other hand, grants our physical substance its emplacement, but locates our mental or spiritual substance elsewhere, or to be more precise, nowhere (i.e. it is not included amongst *res extensa*.) But for Heidegger, extension is neither an a priori idea that organizes our experience, nor an ontological category; rather it is a way of being in the world. "*Space is not in the subject, nor is the world in space*. Space is rather 'in' the world in so far as space has been disclosed by that Being-in-the-world which is constitutive for Dasein… [which] if well understood, is spatial."[65]

Heidegger later elaborates upon his description of being-in-the-world through the concept of *dwelling*. "To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* insofar as he *dwells*, this word *bauen*, however, *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect."[66] The cultivation and preservation of

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[65] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 146.

[66] Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the*

place is thus essential to people as human beings, a fairly commonplace observation. Heidegger's mystical vocabulary, however, and his late emphasis on the "call" that language exercises on us, point to the negative connotations of place. Cherishing and protecting a locale also connotes excluding outsiders, and privileging cultural homogeneity. Heidegger's position is set against one of the most emancipatory (but for some, bewildering) features of modernity: unparalleled freedom of movement for millions around the world. The modern concept of public space—open to all, entered on the basis of an equality that disregards social, cultural, and economic distinctions—is anathema to Heidegger's world-view. Despite the overtly retrograde thrust of Heidegger's political beliefs, his assertion that dwelling is central to human beings must be taken account of. He has also outlined a connection central to the argument of this chapter between dwelling and poetry, in the essay "…Poetically Man Dwells…"[67] By insisting on the active power of language in his reading

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Task of Thinking (1964), Rev. and expanded ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 349-50.

[67] Martin Heidegger, "…Poetically Man Dwells…" in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 209.

of Hölderlin's *Germania*, Heidegger marks out the poem as a powerful means through which to build and dwell.[68]

Some of the affective qualities of space are shared by its opposite, enclosure. Both experiences can be characterized by temporal and spatial disorientation, and their various analogies with literature are treated in depth by Frank Kermode's essay "Solitary Confinement" in *The Sense of an Ending*.[69] Separated from ordinary markers of time and space, the subject faces an infinite and undifferentiated expanse; the natural response is terror. Casey borrows the term *horror vacui* from architecture to describe this experience, which Kermode seizes on in order to demonstrate "certain characteristic fictions in a pure state." Kermode hypothesizes that in such an extreme state, the imagination takes on a vitally important role. The smallest indications of regular change (in this case "the shadow cast by a gable

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[68] Timothy Clark, *Martin Heidegger*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2011), 118-19. For an application of Heidegger to Eliot that takes a sympathetic view of the former, see Dominic Griffiths, "'Now and in England': *Four Quartets*, Place, and Martin Heidegger's Concept of Dwelling," *Yeats Eliot Review* 29.1/2 (Spring 2012): 3-18.

[69] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 155-80.

on a wall") take on the function of a clock. "Burney," the prisoner whose account of confinement Kermode refers to, "Needed to apprehend the increasing pressure of an approaching end… If time ceases to be felt as successive, this end ceases to have effect; without the sense of passing time one is virtually ceasing to live, one loses 'contact with reality.'"[70] As it is for time, so it is for space. The pressure of an imminent end allows the succession of moments to be meaningful, just as the boundedness of locales allows us to invest them with meaning.

To a certain extent, however, the idea of an ideal, comforting embeddedness in place preceding the alienating onset of space is a prelapsarian fable. It is at this point that the intersection between text and space becomes clear. Kermode uses Burnley's experience to insist (using a vocabulary deeply indebted to Wallace Stevens) that the imagination must assert control over these myths, and remake them itself. Kermode glosses the series of historical transformations that separate modernity from pre-modernity differently from Giddens:

George Herbert, making metaphors for prayer, called it that which in an hour transformed the six-days world…

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[70] Ibid., 160.

It was a six-days world because God made it in six days. Music had six notes, one for each day of the creation, of which every tune reflected the harmony… In much the same way, encyclopaedists used to arrange the whole of human knowledge as a commentary on the six days of creation. To arrange it in terms of an alphabet is to make it conform to an arbitrary human formulation… The grand universal order of Genesis gave way to the spacious firmament of Newton, and this in turn yields to the subtle complementarities of modern physics… medieval randomness is transformed by the logic of Aristotelian plot, which is modified by the counter-logical devices of the modern novel.[71]

Kermode applies his description to the novel, but it holds equally well for lyric, as we shall see. Kermode, virtually paraphrasing Stevens, summarizes this transformation thus: "From a literature which assumed that it was imitating an order to a literature which assumes that it has to create an order, unique and self-dependent."[72]

Verse has a unique potential to ruminate on a topic or set of propositions; to put them forth, circle around them,

[71] Ibid., 165.

[72] Ibid., 166.

depart from them and return; verse is so named from the Latin *vertere* (to turn) for the act of "turning to begin another line."[73] And, after all, "stanza" is Italian for "room" or "stopping-place,"[74] suggesting the importance of structural succession in the poem to impart a sense of movement. That said, the main vessel for expressing movement in a poem, as in all writing, is the verb. At the outset of the modernist era, Ernest Fenollosa considered the role of transitivity in poetic syntax in his essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" (published posthumously by Ezra Pound). Fenollosa argues that the "transference of power" is the basic act of nature: "term from which ⇒ transference of force ⇒ term to which." The sentence, ideally, should mimic this natural set of relations as such: "agent ⇒ act ⇒ object." This basic form "brings language close to *things*, and in its strong reliance

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[73] "verse, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 29 September 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/>

[74] "stanza" *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 29 September 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/>

upon verbs it erects all speech into a kind of dramatic poetry."[75] Davie summarizes Fenollosa's prescriptions thus:

> The good poet will use, wherever possible, the full sentence driving through a transitive verb; that he will avoid, wherever possible, the copula; that he will rearrange, wherever possible, negations, so as to use a positive verb of negation; that he will avoid intransitive verbs; that he will be fond of verbs and cut down as far as possible the use of other parts of speech.[76]

Fenollosa's essay is written in a prescriptive mode, and there is no reason why poetry that takes this approach is necessarily better than poetry that doesn't, and Fenollosa's rhetoric of "closeness to nature" is deeply suspect. Davie is able to adduce several examples of canonical poems that are positively verb-averse. But Fenollosa's dichotomy between passive syntax and active syntax does highlight a distinctive difference between poetry and prose. Active syntax may be thought of as the ordinary mode for prose. It

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[75] Quoted in Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 36.

[76] Ibid., 39.

is certainly the most expedient mode for a forward-moving narration (hence its almost exclusive use in journalism). A prose piece that deliberately eschewed active syntax throughout would strike most readers as extraordinary. Contra Fenollosa, lyric poetry often tends towards just this state: the still and the purely descriptive. Description and rumination are often thought to be quintessential features of lyric (as opposed to *both* prose and epic). Aristotle, in Chapter 24 of the *Poetics*, draws just this distinction between epic and drama, citing the scene in Homer's *Iliad* where Achilles pursues Hector while the armies of Greece and Troy watch, not intervening. "The circumstances… would be patently absurd if put on the stage, with the men standing and refraining from pursuit… but in epic the effect is not noticed. The marvelous gives pleasure."[77] Aristotle is describing the distinctive kind of pleasure offered by lyric poetry; its ability to dwell on an image, a moment, or a motif unfettered by the demands of narrative progression or plausibility. The ordinary and the extraordinary are more emphatically related in lyric poetry.

Having looked briefly at structure and syntax, we must also consider the poem's materiality. Poems themselves are embodied objects when printed or written; they take up space. The arrangement of a poem on the page is integral to its

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[77] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 123.

nature as poetry, and to its repertoire of formal devices: the line break, for instance, usually depends on spatial arrangement. Georges Perec plays brilliantly on the physicality of writing in his *Species of Spaces*:

> This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbors, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet?[78]

The written work, like geographical place, is defined by a kind of boundedness: it delineates a certain set of possibilities from the linguistic infinite. In Perec's view, the paradox of the writer is that even though he remains always situated, always embodied—"Sitting deep in thought at their tables, writers are forming lines of words"[79]—he takes

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[78] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 13.

[79] Ibid., 15.

on an aspect of what Casey identifies as "kenotic models of the self-emptying creator-God."[80]

As we have seen, the lyric poem helps us to dwell on its subject, exploiting ambiguity to draw together conflicting arguments and complex sentiments. Is it capable, though, Stevens and Eliot ask, of helping us dwell in another sense: by imparting or embodying a sense of place, and of the everyday, amid the confusion and chaos of modernity? Eliot and Stevens both confront the problem of modern placelessness by insisting on the particular pertinence of lyric form to this question. That said, while Stevens insists on the arbitrariness and individuality of these imagined orders, Eliot's post-conversion poetry is often marked by a nostalgia for "the six-days world." Eliot, after all, may have been describing a similar shift in different terms with his notion of the "dissociation of sensibility." Both would agree, however, that the processes of social transformation animating their work do not cease. The purpose of this chapter then is to articulate the particular responses to these changes that Eliot and Stevens elaborate late in their poetic careers, and to examine the poetic means that they adopt in doing so.

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[80] Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 16.

The languages that describe space and place differ from one another. The first is essentially geographic, relying on cardinal directions to describe the relationship of spaces and objects to one another. The second is egocentric, its axes dependent on the orientation of our bodies (in front, behind, right, left). Egocentric directions turn with us when our bodies rotate; geocentric directions do not. Geographical directions guide us through space by means of an abstract system. As we have seen, a way to read the cardinal directions and navigate by them was the condition of possibility for the European Age of Discovery, and to that extent, of modernity itself. The system of geographical direction transcends the individual, while there are as many iterations of the egocentric system as there are people. Both of these orientations can be drawn on to figure for philosophies of the self. Geographical direction emphasizes the systemic to the detriment of the individual, while egocentric direction emphasizes subjectivity and embeddedness in place.

How might these two kinds of direction operate in the space of a poem? Eliot begins "Burnt Norton" with a sequence that mimes movement but produces only confusion, partly by manipulating an egocentric vocabulary of direction (my own emphasis):

Footfalls echo in the memory

Down the passage which we did not take

Towards the door we never opened

Into the rose-garden.

      Other echoes

Inhabit the garden. Shall we *follow*?

Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,

Round the corner. *Through* the first gate,

Into our first world, shall we *follow*

The deception of the thrush? *Into* our first world.

                      (*CPP*, 171)

The bird addresses readers in the imperative, coaxing us through an imagined landscape that we are assumed to recognize. "The passage," "the door," "the rose-garden," "the corner," and "the gate" are each appear with a definite article, suggesting familiarity, rather than the indefinite articles that would ordinarily attend descriptions of a new landscape. But we are not familiar with this landscape, nor can we be, despite the inclusive sense imparted by the first-person plural. The poem evokes a sense of frenetic movement, but in fact it only mimes it. In the absence of reliable co-ordinates, the reader is adrift in the realm of the uncanny: the spatial equivalent of the poem's preoccupation with the circularity of time. The first

section of "Burnt Norton" applies the grammar of place to an alien landscape, signaling placelessness as one of the poem's chief concerns.

Casey describes the experience of *horror vacui* thus: "the unbridled terror occasioned by the mere contemplation of an entirely vacuous space."[81] Locke describes infinite space as "the undistinguishable inane"; Newton describes infinite time as flowing "equably without relation to anything external."[82] Moreover: "If the time-line is spatial in its continuity and homogeneity, it is at the same time 'placial' in its constitution by means of *positions*, that is, a series of points arranges on the line and grasped, all together, *as* the line."[83] One consequence of this is that being lost in time bears comparison to being lost in space; the sense of being unmoored in the infinite, lacking coordinates, is much the same. The famous opening to "Burnt Norton" has often puzzled readers:

> Time present and time past
>
> Are both perhaps present in time future

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[81] Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), xi.

[82] Cited in ibid., 22.

[83] Ibid., 9.

> And time future contained in time past.
>
> If all time is eternally present
>
> All time is unredeemable.
>
> (*CPP*, 171)

One possible reading of the passage is to see the "eternal present" of time as analogous to an infinite expanse of space. Criticism has fastened upon the element of time in the poems, to the extent that Eliot's interest in place and space has been largely obscured.

One exception to this consensus is Nancy Hargrove, who considers the theme of place in her *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot*.[84] But she does so from a fundamentally anti-modern, and anti-Modernist, perspective. As her title suggests, she reads Eliot as a symbolist poet in an attempt to recuperate those moments of dissonance and contradiction that otherwise set Eliot's aesthetics apart. However, Hargrove's argument wholly ignores the aesthetic ruminations of "East Coker" II, which follow a passage satirizing just the symbolist garden motif that she seizes on frequently:

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[84] See Nancy Duvall Hargrove, *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978).

> That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory;
>
> A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
>
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
>
> With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.
>
> (*CPP*, 179)

The periphrastic nature of symbolism is precisely the problem, and this passage takes an implicit case for plain speech to a radical extreme. The second line above, mocking in tone and itself circumlocutory, right down to the obsolete "poetical", precedes the surprising declaration "The poetry does not matter." In the ongoing struggle between the poetic and the prosy throughout the *Quartets*, this represents the clearest statement of the argument for the latter.[85]

Despite the astuteness of her source-hunting, Hargrove makes a mistake to take passages like that beginning "Scorpion fights against the Sun…" at face value (*CPP*, 178-9). Lines like these ask to be read as parody in light of their uncharacteristically excessive rhetoric. As Gardner points out, Eliot adapts "Thunder rolled by stars /

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[85] Cf. Barbara Everett, "Eliot's *Four Quartets* and French Symbolism," *English*, 29 (1980): 1-27; Ruth Abbott, "T. S. Eliot's Ghostly Footfalls: The Versification of *Four Quartets*," *Cambridge Quarterly* 34.4 (December 2005): 374-5.

Stimulates triumphal cars" from Mallarmé's "Tonnere et rubis aux moyeaux" and "Du seul vespéral de mes chars," suggesting that symbolism is the object of that parody.[86] Gardner goes on to argue that "The degeneration of this way of writing in lines 68-9 ['That was a way of putting it…'] is a rejection of symbolism in favor of a poetry that wrestles with meanings." She neglects the fact that lines 51-67 perform that rejection themselves by satirizing the symbolist style.

What I mean is that the syntax of the stanza degenerates line by line, producing an incoherent succession of images. Incoherent, that is, without the determined hermeneutic work of the reader, and the product of that work will not likely amount to a fair return on his investment. As Gardner rightly points out, the passage is clearly modeled on the beginning of "Burnt Norton," section 2, but in fact there is also a marked difference between them.[87] Both begin with a figure for the effect of the stanza as a whole. In "Burnt Norton," the key term is "clot": "Garlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle tree." The stunning effect of the juxtaposition between "Garlic and sapphires" (and the series of juxtapositions that unfold as the stanza progresses) arrests both the reader's attention

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[86] Helen Louise Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 1978), 101.

[87] Ibid.

and the flow of the lyric—a perfect example of the lyric stillness discussed earlier.[88] In "East Coker," however, the equivalent stanza begins "What is the late November doing / With the disturbance of the spring…" The mystery is announced in explicit terms, as the reader begins to wonder what the stanza is doing with the "disturbance" of its various images. Whereas "Burnt Norton" proceeds immediately from its first, two-line, sentence to a second of equal strength—"The trilling wire in the blood / Sings below inveterate scars / Appeasing long forgotten wars."—"East Coker" obfuscates. The first sentence continues for a further five lines, the first three joined by the weakest conjunction in the English language: "And creatures of the summer heat, / And snowdrops writhing under feet / And hollyhocks that aim too high…" (*CPP*, 178). One is tempted to suggest that the hollyhocks figure for the aspirations of this deliberately overworked passage, which cannot help but appear rhetorically strained.

Later in the stanza, this kind of syntactic disconnect recurs with greater force. The stanza as a whole contains only two sentences, the second of which begins with the borrowing from Mallarmé mentioned above. It continues: "Deployed in constellated wars / Scorpion fights against the

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[88] Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, 23.

Sun," clearly writing back to "the boarhound and the boar" of "Burnt Norton," who "Pursue their pattern as before / But reconciled among the stars" (*CPP*, 172). Whereas "Burnt Norton" makes the stars a site of reconciliation, "East Coker" invokes war as a figure for its disintegration of symbolist technique. The stanza continues:

> Until the Sun and Moon go down
>
> Comets weep and Leonids fly
>
> Hunt the heavens and the plains
>
> Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
>
> The world to that destructive fire
>
> Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.
>
> (*CPP*, 178-9)

The heightened rhetoric in evidence here is underlined by the passage's syntactical complexity. "The heavens and the plains" seem on a first pass to be the object of the verb "hunt," while "Whirled," positioned at the start of a new line, presents itself as an intransitive verb waiting for a subject that will appear later in the sentence. "Plains" seems as though it ought to be followed by a comma. But a plausible subject never arrives, and the reader is forced to re-read "Whirled" as a past participle modifying "the heavens and the plains" in the line before. "The heavens and the plains," then, equivocates between its roles as

grammatical subject and object. The same pattern occurs twice earlier in the stanza, around the verbs "tumble" and "deployed." "Vortex" is thus the key figure of the passage, alluding both to a grammatical vortex and a vortex of symbolist imagery that reaches its culmination in the paradoxical juxtaposition of "destructive fire" with the reign of the "ice-cap."

"Ice-cap," as it happens, has an interesting history according to the OED. While its familiar present-day meaning, "A permanent cap or covering of ice over a tract of country," dates to 1875, it is preceded by an earlier meaning: "A bladder or elastic bag containing pounded ice, for application to the head in congestion of the brain, etc." dates from 1854.[89] Eliot, who was no stranger to treatments for neurasthenic conditions, might have appreciated the gesture of concluding such an overheated passage with the application of remedy for headache, if he did not intend this dual meaning himself. After all, there is no plausible reference to Christian eschatology that draws the two images of fire and ice, the second coming after the first. The King James Bible contains only three references to ice, all of them in the Old Testament, while there are five hundred and

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[89] "ice-cap" The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 1 September 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

six references to fire.[90] The Book of Revelation abounds with
references to "fire and brimstone," but nowhere is this
culmination followed by a new ice-age. The passage clearly
does not seek to evoke Christian eschatology. Pace Hargrove,
this invocation of celestial space does not "skillfully
convey the disorder and ultimate destruction of human
existence confined totally within the boundaries of time."[91]
Rather, it uses hermeneutic incompleteness to deride the
symbolist project of apportioning stable meaning to every
poetic landscape.

This chapter focuses heavily on "East Coker" for a
number of reasons. The poem is faced with a peculiar
rhetorical task: it has to effect the transformation of
"Burnt Norton" from the isolated coda of Eliot's *Collected
Poems* to the opening poem of a longer sequence. As Donoghue
observes: "The first readers of 'Burnt Norton' did not know
that they were rehearsing a quartet… Or that the poem was
the first of a sequence rather than what it appeared to be,
the last poem of *Collected Poems, 1909-1935*."[92] In order to

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[90] James Strong, *Strong's Concordance of the Bible*, A popular
ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 351—2, 506.

[91] Hargrove, *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot*,
152.

[92] Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New
Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 251.

open the poem out into a larger sequence, "East Coker" needs to undo each figure of reconciliation, symmetry, and resolution found in "Burnt Norton," setting up an aesthetic and philosophical problem upon which to elaborate. "East Coker," then, is one of the richest portions of the *Quartets* to read for aesthetic dicta. So, as Gardener and Hargrove note, "East Coker" II does indeed posit a war amongst the stars in reference to the outbreak of the Second World War, but it also rewrites "The completion of its partial ecstasy, / The resolution of its partial horror" from "Burnt Norton" II into the "fear and frenzy" of old men in "East Coker" II (CPP 173, 179).

That "fear and frenzy" signals Eliot's continued interest in an aesthetic of surprise and of the extraordinary throughout the *Quartets*, harking back to the "aesthetics of the histrionic" that animated much of *The Waste Land*.[93] The long verse paragraph following the lyric stanza in section II of "East Coker" is a case in point. The passage begins in a state of poetic confusion, having denounced the symbolism of the previous stanza. Philosophical confusion follows, as the poem's faith in the wisdom of tradition falters: "What was to be the value of the long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity / And the wisdom of age?" Then follows one

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[93] Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land*, 50—1.

of the poem's signal declarations: "There is, it seems to us, / At best, only a limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience" (CPP 179). The faltering syntax of the sentence redoubles the sense of confusion it expresses; saturated with commas and line breaks, its point is annoyingly deferred.

But this train of thought quickly gathers momentum; the next sentence is equally marked, but this time by its assurance:

> The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
> For the pattern is new in every moment
> And every moment is a new and shocking
> Valuation of all we have been. (*CPP*, 179)

The strident rhythm of these lines imparts philosophical certainty, but it is certainty of a humble kind, a vindication of flux and all of its creative potential. These lines mark a shift in rhetorical register through the arresting appearance of "shocking," the strongest adjective yet encountered in the passage. "The pattern is new in every moment," suggesting that each moment of the *Quartets* as they unfold holds the possibility of a "new and shocking valuation" of Eliot's poetics. At the same time, however, Eliot writes back to some of the signal features of his earlier work. In a late essay on "Eliot and the Shudder,"

Frank Kermode outlined a pattern that is also at work here: "'The bewildering minute' is the one during which the reader submits to the thrill—frisson, shudder—of the passage, and after which the critic must emerge from the spell and consider his or her experience."[94] The bewildering minute is ambiguous; its momentary frisson can open up new avenues of thought, but just as quickly, our critical faculties intervene and distance us from it. Eliot captures the pathos of this moment in the next line of "East Coker": "We are only undeceived / Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm" (*CPP*, 179). Each "new and shocking valuation" is an opportunity as well as a risk.

Eliot intensifies the point by pursuing it through a metaphorical landscape, bringing us back to the realm of place and space:

> In the middle, not only in the middle of the way
> But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
> On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,
> And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,
> Risking enchantment.
>
> (*CPP*, 179)

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[94] Frank Kermode, "Eliot and the Shudder," *London Review of Books*, 13 May 2010, 15.

Just like the earlier lines beginning "There is, it seems to us…," the syntax of this passage lacks a main verb, seeking out a secure foothold where none is available. The "dark wood" becomes a "bramble," becomes an even more obscure "grimpen"; then, like foliage parting to reveal an unexpected clearing, the aesthetic argument of the passage appears. "Menaced by monsters, fancy lights, / Risking enchantment" transforms the rhetoric of disorientation into that of surprise and delight. These lines almost achieve an objective correlative for the "bewildering minute": "menaced" though we might be, we are enticed by "fancy lights," and the risk after all amounts to "enchantment." The experience of being lost and disorientated, adrift in space, opens up the possibility of surprise and discovery. As Fisher has it:

> In a world not yet sufficiently familiar, the predictable response to the extraordinary is a feeling of alarm that the novelty will turn out to be dangerous to the fragile order that maintains the self.[95]

Like Fisher, Eliot recognizes that the "enchantment" a poem might offer ("enchantment" itself being etymologically related to the Latin *incantare*, "to sing") comes at the cost

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[95] Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, 48.

of a vertiginous moment of self-forgetting. By situating
that moment in the context of geographical displacement,
Eliot draws a link between dislocation and enchantment.

Four Quartets is surprisingly ambivalent on the
question of space and place. "East Coker" II gives an
eloquent account of disembeddedness as a route to the
aesthetics of surprise, but it joins on either side two
emphatically conservative approaches to the problem. There
are two master metaphors (or, indeed, metaphorical locales)
in the *Quartets* for the notions of embeddedness and
disembeddedness. The first we encountered at the beginning
of this discussion; it is the country, particularly the
manor house and its village. The second, which I will turn
to now, is the city, synecdochally rendered as the London
underground. Two of the Quartets are named after manors:
"Burnt Norton" and "East Coker". Both begin with elegiac
descriptions of the manor as place. As we have already seen,
"Burnt Norton" sets out from the start to give an account of
the locale centered on the relationship between the poet's
voice and the reader. "East Coker," however, takes a broader
social view. The abandoned or destroyed manor houses that
give their names to "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker" echo
other, similar metaphors for social change in modernism.
Woolf, for instance, turns the Ramsay family's decaying
holiday house into a vivid symbol of the transformations
brought on by the First World War, and the family's losses.

Like Woolf, Eliot is deeply concerned by what seems like the passing of a social order.

The distance of the idealized past to which Eliot looks back becomes fully apparent in the celebrated passage where he adopts seventeenth-century diction that refers to his forebear, Sir Thomas Elyot, a resident of the town of East Coker:

> The association of man and woman
>
> In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
>
> A dignified and commodious sacrament.
>
> Two and two, necessarye coniunction,
>
> Holding eche other by the hand or the arm
>
> Whiche betokeneth concorde…
>
> (*CPP*, 178)

Bush seems surprised to find himself in agreement with A. D. Moody that this passage, rather than conveying reverence and "solemn dignity," intimates only "the pastness of the past."[96] In fact, Eliot has already signaled that the past depicted here is no longer attainable. The stanza containing the Elyot passage begins with the warning "If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close…" (*CPP*, 177),

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[96] Bush, *T. S. Eliot*, 212-13; Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet*, 209-10.

giving a sense of the scene as a kind of fairy apparition that will dissipate should the reader step too close. It is difficult not to feel as well that Eliot's choice to revert to seventeenth-century diction reflects less a reluctance to "violate Renaissance wisdom with the inflections of his own age,"[97] than an impulse to confound and startle the reader. Eliot also uses two instances of direct address to startling effect:

> …Now the light falls
> Across the open field, leaving the deep land
> Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
> Where *you* lean against a bank while a van passes,
> And the deep lane insists on the direction
> Into the village, in the electric heat
> Hypnotised.
>
> (*CPP*, 177)

This passage acts out the spatial work of the poem, as the "deep lane" figures the lines of the stanza as they insist on the reader's direction. But in contrast to the urgency of "Burnt Norton" 1 ("Go, go, go, said the bird") this passage winds languidly on with "heavy feet in clumsy shoes," almost in a state of "hypnosis" (*CPP*, 177-8).

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[97] Bush, *T. S. Eliot*, 213.

Even when the poem insists most clearly on forward momentum it undoes itself by falling back on the necessary recurrences of lyric form. It is as though linear movement figures the traversal of space, while the recurrences of lyric figure a kind of rumination on place: a rhythm of constant departures and returns. "In my beginning is my end," says "East Coker's" repeated refrain. "Hypnosis," the onset of artificial sleep, but also a kind of fixation, figures the affect of place, the experience of embeddedness, as a primal comfort reflected in the "warm haze" and the "sultry light" of the scene. The opening stanza of "East Coker" 1 might appear to move forward through historical time at great speed: "Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, / Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place / Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass" (*CPP*, 177). The poem's syntax, however, persistently undermines the forward momentum of its temporal movement. Each of the last four lines of the stanza is introduced by a repeated conjunction ("And… / And… / And… / And…"). The weak conjunction "and" differs from other conjunctions by being purely connective; the two terms joined by it exist in no more specific or active a relation than simple parataxis. Despite their frequent invocations of time, these final lines lay out an immobile landscape. Earlier in the stanza, too, all of the action is conveyed through prepositions rather than verbs: "Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires, / Old

fire to ashes, and ashes to the earth" (*CPP*, 177). The "Houses" shift from grammatical subject of three intransitive verbs ("rise and fall, crumble") to the object of "extended," "removed," "destroyed," and "restored." None of these verbs even have a subject; human agency is nowhere to be found in this passage. Thus the "hypnosis" of the second stanza takes on a deeper meaning: the syntax of the opening stanza evokes a vortex of historical change in which no sure footing or stable perspective can be found.

Each of these syntactic features play into the dynamic of ordinary and extraordinary in "East Coker" I. The stanza's sweeping evocation of historical change, extraordinary in its scope, is rendered ordinary in relation to the Thomas Elyot passage, which contains the only instances of human agency expressed by transitive verbs. Men and women are "Holding eche other by the hand or the arm / Which betokeneth concorde" (*CPP*, 178). By adopting Elyot's diction, Eliot does more than signal the pastness of the past: he makes the "commodious sacrament" of marriage, usually an *ordinary* institution, one of the foundations of our social order, *extraordinary*. At this point it becomes clear that the romance of the manor house for Eliot is how it figures for a seemingly harmonious, hierarchical social order embedded in place. The conspicuous absence of transitivity elsewhere in the section suggests that agency itself, like the "commodious sacrament" here depicted

belongs to the past, visible only in a kind of reverie, and only "if you do not come too close." Both modernity and nature, on the other hand, grind on in their impersonal, systemic cycles of destruction and recycled creation.

"East Coker" III turns its focus to the modern malady of spiritual vacuity, invoked through a simile with the London Underground, which functions as a deliberate counterpoint to the manor house of section I. The setting invites a departure from the wistfulness of "East Coker" I towards a darker mood:

> O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
> The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the
>   vacant,
> The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters.
> The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the
>   rulers,
> Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many
>   committees,
> Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the
>   dark,
> And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha
> And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of
>   Directors,
> And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.

This is the daily katabasis of City men and other Londoners into the Tube, a ritual well known to Eliot from his days at Lloyds Bank, and indeed his time with Faber and Faber, when he would take the bus from Carlyle Mansions to Piccadilly Circus before riding the tube to Russell Square.[98] Here it is made, somewhat bizarrely, to figure for the necessity that everyone, regardless of social standing, must sooner or later confront a "dark night of the soul." The opening allusion to Milton's *Samson Agonistes* complicates what would otherwise seem a straightforward mock-heroic juxtaposition of the modern and the ancient. The echo of Milton's blindness adds a heightened pathos to the passage, but this does not wholly efface the bathetic effect of drawing an equivalence between a Tube station and a mythic underworld. The strangeness of this juxtaposition is heightened when Eliot ropes together the celestial and the chthonic: "They all go into the dark, / The vacant interstellar spaces." "The vacant into the vacant" is a particularly striking formulation; the first "vacant" wavers between referring to the "them" of the previous line the "vacant interstellar spaces" of line 2. In doing so it evokes a vertiginous image of vacant space folding in on itself. Nevertheless, the

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[98] Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life*, 277.

opening passage of the section effectively sets out its thematic concerns: the horror of vacant space, the remolding of familiar or historical landscapes, the social leveling already canvassed in section I, and the role of the poet in newly reconfigured kinds of public space.

"East Coker" III makes much use of the experience of *horror vacui*, which Casey locates at the center of Greek creation myths, and at the origin of Western literature:

> Even though Chaos qua Gap is neither disorder nor void (some early Greeks held that the primal gap contained air), as cosmic separation it remained threatening enough to call for filling… In these various ingenious moves to plug up the Gap, we already witness the phenomenon of *horror vacui*, that is, the intolerability of no-place-at-all.[99]

In one sense, certain passages of *Four Quartets* might be said to exhibit a kind of horror vacui; long verse-paragraphs that do not use a more disciplined stanzaic form (like "East Coker" III) tend to sprawl, their long lines inhabiting the page almost entirely. In this connection the earlier allusion to blindness takes on another meaning as well: Samson, "eyeless in Gaza," sees not nothingness as

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[99] Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 10.

such, but an expanse of nothingness. Eliot, in a move that might be as inspired as it is self-indulgent, invokes the *horror vacui* of an infinite expanse to describe the perceived cultural and spiritual vacuity of a contemporary human landscape.

That Eliot felt some disdain for collectives of all kinds, including the so-called masses as well as the contemporary intellectual scene is clear as early as 1923. In October of that year, Eliot wrote to Charles Maurras (a leading member of *Action Française*) to solicit a contribution to *The Criterion*:

> Only *The Criterion* frankly proclaims a philosophy which "democrassery" is bound to find reactionary, although, in our view, it is the only philosophy which offers the slightest hope of progress at the present time… I am certain that the *Criterion* group represents the body of opinion nearest to l'Action Française.[100]

Action Française, of course, was later notorious for espousing a variety of "Blut und Boden" rhetoric not out of step with that of the Nazis, and Maurras spent the remainder of his life after the Second World War imprisoned for

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[100] Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot,* Vol. 2, 238.

treason.[101] This is not to suggest for a moment that Eliot
harbored fascist sympathies (especially not on the basis of
a single letter). But the letter does state unequivocally
that Eliot felt at home with the profoundly anti-modern
sentiments of Maurras and his contemporaries. Eliot's
approving quotation of "democrassery" from Flaubert is
particularly telling in terms of the disdain for public
space apparent in *Four Quartets*. The fact that these
tendencies coexisted in Eliot with an appetite for dazzling
formal novelty *and* a craving for recognition by the same
public that he would happily condescend remains one of the
most stubborn paradoxes of his personality and his career.

This paradox is part of the indispensible background to
Eliot's representation of space and place in *Four Quartets*.
If the poem aspires to dwell, using stanzaic form and the
arrested temporality of lyric to engender a sense of place,
how does lyric go about representing, or even entering, the
public spaces of the modern metropolis? Eliot, of course,
was deeply ambivalent about the role of poetry in the public

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[101] David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism,
Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 1995), 88-9. Cf. Anthony
Julius's discussion of Maurras in *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism
and Literary Form* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge
University Press, 1995), 214-17.

sphere, and many critics, David Chinitz foremost among them, have argued that this ambivalence might account for Eliot's shift from poetry to drama. As Hallie Flanagan noted in *Dynamo*, Eliot once remarked after the performance of *Sweeney Agonistes* at Vassar: "It is dubious whether the purpose of poetry is to communicate anyway."[102] Chinitz expands on Eliot's dilemma:

> Eliot's dramatic writing after *Sweeney Agonistes* is governed by two competing forces already discernible in his first play: the vanguardist impulse toward austerity, "poetry," and frank ritualism; and the populist or theatrical impulse that urges avoidance of anything that smacks of "literature."[103]

Eliot's ambition to write a popular play is well attested to by his letters.[104] The theatre, it seems, was an acceptable kind of public space, preferable in some respects to the

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[102] Hallie Flanagan, *Dynamo* (New York: Duell, 1943), 84.

[103] Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, 129.

[104] Asked by Alan Downer how long he intended to work on drama rather than poetry, Eliot replied "Until I can convince people that I know how to write a popular play." Quoted in Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life*, 296.

solitude of the printed page, the imagined community of

poetic readership.

On the other hand, however, the theatre as a very

different kind of figure in "East Coker" III, weaved into

the larger spatial metaphor of the Tube:

> As, in a theatre,
> The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
> With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of
> > darkness on darkness,
> And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant
> > panorama
> And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away—
> Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too
> > long between stations…
>
> (*CPP*, 180)

There is a strange commingling of images here; having

absorbed the succeeding images of a changing theatrical set,

the reader who reaches the line on the "underground train"

is likely to feel as though he or she has been reading about

that all along. That is to say, the "hollow rumble," the

"darkness on darkness" and the "distant panorama" being

"rolled away" seem to figure also for the scenery of the

city as it rolls by, unseen, far above the underground train.

The passage illuminates a peculiar truth about the

underground: that by circumventing all the congestion and complexity of the urban landscape, avoiding its obstacles by going underneath them, it also subverts the city's sense of place. The rolling away of scenery into the darkness of the wings thus takes on a deeper meaning.

London as we know it today is in large part a product of the mass migrations of the nineteenth century. Francis Sheppard contrasts the "500,000 migrants [who] entered the London area during the first half of the eighteenth century" with the "almost 500,000 migrants coming to London in the single decade of the 1870s." "Ceaseless mobility, made possible by new means of transport," writes Sheppard, "became one of the hallmarks of modern urban civilization."[105] The Underground as a disembedding mechanism may be one of the clearest examples of the place-denuding effect of modernity. Characteristically, Eliot achieves an effect of the extraordinary though paradox; amidst this ceaseless mobility, he looks for stillness:

> Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops
> too long between stations
> And the conversation rises and slowly fades into
> silence

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[105] F. H. W. Sheppard, *London: A History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 126.

> And you see behind every face the mental emptiness
>
>   deepen
>
> Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think
>
>   about.
>
>   (*CPP*, 180)

This passage is striking for Eliot's palpable disdain towards the trappings of the modern metropolis. By leveling out social distinctions and denuding the city of its sense of place, the underground expresses the vacuity of urban space. The stopped underground train, almost paradoxical given its usual association with relentless, linear, motion, is a momentary concretion of the poem's constant play with abstract figures for timelessness, like "the still point of the turning word" (*CPP*, 175).

"East Coker" III demonstrates the same syntactic flatness that appears in "East Coker" I. In all, eleven lines of the passage begin with "and." Once again, weak conjunctions figure for stillness and an expanse of alienating space. The section closes with a perfect summation of the pathos felt by the imagination drawn to place adrift in a world of space: "And what you do not know is the only thing you know / And what you own is what you do not own / And where you are is where you are not." Thus, in those passages of the *Quartets* depicting the condition of modernity directly, as opposed to those describing pre-

modern settings like the manor house, lyric stillness

figures for the repetitiveness and vacuity of the metropolis.

The necessity of opposing the disembedded space of modernity

with its prelapsarian opposite, argued throughout the

Quartets, is reminiscent of the pre-modern nostalgia that

Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*. David Chinitz argues

that the *Quartets* indicate that Eliot "finally reconciled

himself to the everyday culture around him and managed to

enter the local human community," an extraordinary claim

when the poem aligns the ordinary with disaffection and

locates each of its visions of an integral community in the

past.[106]

Ronald Bush begins his study of Eliot with a question:

"How did the author of *The Waste Land*, one of the most

highly charged, dramatic poems of the twentieth-century,

come twenty years later to write a masterpiece of deferred

immediacy like *Four Quartets*?"[107] In other words, Bush holds

the view that there is a significant break of some kind in

Eliot's development. A more typical gesture amongst Eliot's

critics, though, is that of Ron Schuchard, who, surveying

his intellectual development during the 1910s, asserts that

"though Eliot's formal conversion to Anglo-Catholoicism was

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[106] Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, 17.

[107] Bush, *T. S. Eliot*, ix.

eleven years away, his *sensibility* was religious and Catholic."[108] Indeed, the concept of sensibility covers a multitude of sins, as in A. D. Moody's conclusion that the *Quartets* manifest an "essential conformity" with the "sensibility" of their age through the concept of alienation, common to both:

> Eliot… making a virtue of that alienation, would have the contemporary alien be a "spirit unappeased and peregrine", seeking his true home in the ideal. Thus the alienated man of Marx's analysis, and Eliot's spiritual aliens, may be joined in the one action; and in that way the poem may succeed in bringing its society towards "A condition of complete simplicity."[109]

Through this extraordinary sleight of hand, Eliot emerges as congenial spirit even at his most retrograde moment (though perhaps Moody succeeds more in laying bare a retrograde aspect to Marx than rehabilitating Eliot). It is little wonder that Eliot's critics should often be committed to smoothing out the latent contradictions of his work when he himself reaches for figures of reconciliation. "History is now and England," concludes "Little Gidding," but the

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[108] Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel*, 68.

[109] Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet*, 264.

syntactic rupture betrays the sentiment; the reader must be apt to reflect that "Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden" (*CPP*, 175, 197).

Chapter 4: Wallace Stevens and the Ordinary Imagination

I. What's So Ordinary about "The Ordinary Women"?

In *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine reminds us that the relative status of a given art form—opera, for instance, or musical theatre—is historically conditioned and susceptible to change.[1] Levine's study dates the emergence of a discourse of "high culture" in America to the late nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, the same cultural hierarchy that largely banished the emerging popular art form of cinema to its lowest rungs later exalted the difficult, foreboding monuments of modernist literature. It is all the more striking, then, to find reflections on the emergence of cinema within the canon of "high modernist" literature. "The Ordinary Women," the ninth poem in Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*, is exactly that. The poem was first published in *The Dial* (July 1922) as one of six poems grouped under the title "Revue." Each of these poems shares the linguistic exuberance of "The Ordinary Women," but most of them—

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[1] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

especially "Bantams in Pine-Woods," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"—have acquired a firmer place in the Stevens canon. It may be time to restore "The Ordinary Women" to its rightful place in this set by considering how shrewdly it raises questions about the relationship between low and high culture that are central not only to Stevens's whole oeuvre, but also to literary modernism in general.

In his essay "The Mass Ornament," Siegfried Kracauer argues that "the position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself."[2] In other words, the ordinary is a better guide to the character of an epoch than its products of critical reflection—specifically, the ordinary as embodied in popular culture. But criticism concerned with the ordinary in modernist literature has been reluctant to recognize the innate connection between the ordinary and "mass" or "popular" culture, and the extent to which modernism figures anxieties about the former through the latter.

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[2] Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75.

Stevens was inclined toward giving his poems ironic titles, seeming to delight in putting a proposition at the head of the page that would be undermined by even the first line of the poem. As the reader enters a realm of "lacquered loges," "girandoles," "canting curlicues," and "explicit coiffures," the question naturally arises, "What's so ordinary about the ordinary women?" (*SCPP*, 8–9) Some of the more famous critics of Stevens certainly feel that the poem's style goes beyond mere exuberance and tips into bad taste. Even critical adversaries as implacable as Harold Bloom and Hugh Kenner are united in their condemnation. For Bloom, the poem's "gaudiness" indicates "a kind of desperation," while for Kenner the poem forces "the reader, as he puts down his dictionary… to reflect that sense can look strangely like nonsense when words do not look as if they meant what they do."[3] In short, the poem's language is anything but ordinary.

However playful, though, *this* poem's title is not obviously ironic. It really is concerned with the ordinary, or rather, with the means by which we escape from it and suspend it momentarily. Has the time the women spent

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[3] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 82-3; Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 52.

watching a film been an escape from "poverty" into a world of aesthetic fulfillment? Or is it a diversion from one kind of poverty to another, film being a hollow artifice, or worse, a vehicle of ideological mystification? How are we to read the poem's linguistic excess: as playful exuberance, relieving the tedium of the everyday, or as garish, hollow embellishment?

In order to address this question, we must rehearse some details of the poem's setting: a particular form of cinema known as the American movie palace, which lends the poem an excuse for some of its more exotic language. That "The Ordinary Women" is set in a movie theater has been recognized at least since A. Walton Litz's 1972 *Introspective Voyager*. For Litz, the poem is about "the theatre of mere artistry becom[ing] the theatre of the imagination," momentarily at least.[4] But none of Stevens's critics have yet to demonstrate how important the aesthetic debates surrounding early cinema are to the poem.

Over the twenty years following the invention of the motion picture projector in 1895, early cinema went through roughly three stages prior to the emergence of the Hollywood studio system and the appearance of cinematic styles and

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[4] A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 111.

genres that we would recognize today. There was the pre-Nickelodeon period (before 1905), the Nickelodeon period (from 1905-1912), and the movie palace period (from about 1912 on). Nickelodeons, or small storefront theaters, began to replace the vaudeville show as the main setting for the presentation of films from 1906, and by 1910, there were as many as 10,000 in the United States.[5] According to Charles Musser, "It is not too much to say that modern cinema began with the nickelodeons."[6]

After 1910, however, a variety of factors conspired to eclipse the nickelodeon. The arrival of multi-reel films from Europe challenged the short-show, quick turnover model of the nickelodeons. Competition between theaters inspired the development of more impressive, attractive, and comfortable theaters.[7] Some nickelodeons developed a reputation for vice as off-putting to families as the

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[5] Richard Abel, "Nickelodeons," in *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 479.

[6] Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1990), 417.

[7] David Robinson, *From Peep Show to Palace: The Birth of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 147.

saloons that they had replaced as "the principal social center in many working-class (especially immigrant) residential areas."[8] The culmination of each of these trends arrived in the form of the movie palace, also known as the picture palace or the palace cinema. The Mark Strand Theatre in New York City is generally considered the first of its kind, opened in 1914 at a cost of one million dollars and designed by Thomas W. Lamb, who would go on to establish himself as the foremost cinema architect of his time. In terms of physical size, seating capacity, and available amenities, the movie palace dwarfed its predecessor, the nickelodeon. The Strand, for instance, could seat 3,500 patrons.[9]

Beyond their physical size, perhaps the most startling feature of these buildings was their wild architecture and extraordinary ornamentation. A capacious eclecticism brought together a mix of architectural styles from every age and culture, producing a kind of fantasy environment. Trade periodicals quickly began to tell a story of "blue-collar crowds… being replaced by refined upper-class bejeweled

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[8] Abel, "Nickelodeons," 479.

[9] Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1990), 133.

audiences arriving at the theater in automobiles."[10] In other words, the nickelodeon as working-class community center had given way to the picture palace as middle-class evening entertainment. These middle-class cinemagoers might be the kind of pleasure-seekers depicted in "The Ordinary Women," entering a world of "explicit coiffures," "diamond point," "sapphire point," and sequined "civil fans" (*SCPP*, 9).

The palace cinemas embodied a startling disjunction between form and function. The motion picture projector was, of course, a new technology at the time, and emblematic of the wonders of modernity. Why, then, did architects and cinema owners decide that the appropriate architectural form in which to host these new devices should be a pastiche of atavistic decorative forms? It was not until the art deco style of the 1930s became widespread that the function of these buildings was reflected in an architectural style that might be considered fully modern. The cinema architects gleefully discarded Louis Sullivan's admonition that "form ever follows function."[11] Indeed, the form of the palace cinemas goes so far as to disguise function.

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[10] Ibid., 121.

[11] David Van Zanten, *Sullivan's City: The Meaning of Ornament for Louis Sullivan* (New York: Norton, 2000), 1.

Fig 5.: Oriental Theatre (1926), Chicago. Courtesy of the Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society, Elmhurst, Illinois, U.S.A.

The architectural excess of the historic movie palaces emphasizes their remove from workaday concerns. Form overwhelms function through elaborate ornamentation as a deliberate rebuke to more pragmatic styles of architecture.

"The Ordinary Women" is constructed around these ambiguities. While the poem's extraordinary idiom is explained by its extraordinary setting—perhaps an extraordinary style applied to an extraordinary setting amounts to the ordinary—that idiom is nonetheless shot through with ambiguities. For instance, in the lines "The canting curlicues / Of heaven and of the heavenly script," much depends on the definition of the unusual verb "canting" (*SCPP*, 9). First, it suggests "tilting, sloping, turning over or about," a vivid description of gilded ornamentation. Second, "canting" suggests "cant," or language "taken up and used for fashion's sake, without being a genuine expression of sentiment."[12] If the ornaments are canting in this sense, they are lying or dissembling, even disguising something. Third, we might choose to emphasize the Latin root *cantus*, meaning "Singing, musical sound" and giving us the word "chanting," reasserting its aesthetic qualities. The lines "The moonlight / Fubbed the girandoles" present a similar

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[12] "cant, *n.¹*," "cant, *n.³*" in *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second edition, 1989; online version November 2010. <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/27198>; accessed 14 March 2011.

problem (*SCPP*, 8). Faced with the unusual verb "to fub,"
readers may focus on its aural quality, and think of the
moonlight glinting on gilded candelabras (or girandoles).
But "fubbed" in fact means "to cheat, impose upon,
put off deceitfully."[13] The sheen of the candelabras, then,
is deceptive at the same time as it is beautiful.

It may be that the palace cinemas reflected the kind of
anxiety about the cinema as an artistic form that Walter
Benjamin gave expression to in his most famous essay:

> *The technology of reproduction detaches the*
> *reproduced object from the sphere of tradition.…*
> The social significance of film, even—and
> especially—in its most positive form, is
> inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic
> side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in
> the cultural heritage.[14]

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[13] "fub, *v.*," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second edition,
1989; online version November 2010.
<http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/75176>; accessed 17 March 2011.

[14] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its*
Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media,
trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
Press, 2008), 22.

Fig. 6.: Fox Theatre (1929), San Francisco. Courtesy of the
Terry Helgesen Collection, Theatre Historical Society,
Elmhurst, Illinois, U.S.A.

In other words, film's capacity to generate likenesses and illusions mechanically and therefore ad infinitum threatens cultural tradition by undermining the uniqueness of the art objects that make it up. According to Benjamin's outlook, the infinite reproducibility of film is directly antipathetic to the aura that surrounds genuine art.

A further anxiety is apparent in the association of the nickelodeon with the "lower classes" and, due to repeated attacks on the new medium from the pulpit and the press, with vice. However, as film historians frequently note, fixing the demographic makeup of early film audiences is difficult. In the context of a disjunction between the public's obvious enthusiasm for film and its vociferous detractors in the public sphere, the movie palace might nevertheless be read as a hyperbolic assertion of the new medium's cultural validity. Movie palace architecture clads the machinery of technological reproduction in the ornamentation of not just one cultural tradition, but seemingly of *every* cultural tradition. While ample provision of porters, restrooms, air conditioning, and every other available comfort worked to allay middle-class audiences' concerns about cleanliness and vice, the ostentatious design of the buildings themselves worked to soothe subtler concerns about the cultural legitimacy of the medium—and of modernity itself. To those who feared that film might signal the death of culture, the palace cinemas proclaimed

themselves the new temples of culture. Indeed, in keeping with the spirit of disjunction, the movie palaces' architects seemed unconcerned with the profound contradictions in their project: the palace cinemas are themselves works of reproduction. Despite this particular Benjaminian irony, middle-class audiences flocked to them.

Whether or not Stevens himself was among those audiences is a question that we may not be able to answer due to lack of evidence. Stevens refers to movie theaters only twice in his published letters. In a letter to his wife of February 23, 1934, he describes his impressions of Key West, Florida, including: "The movie theatres are little bits of things." More than ten years later, on May 2, 1945, he refers to an advertisement at a cinema in Hartford reading "Wilde and Weird," appropriating the phrase to describe a series of illustrations that would accompany the Cummington press edition of *Esthétique du Mal*.[15] Neither of these instances give the impression of Stevens as a devoted cinema-goer, but the first one does suggest that he was accustomed to a much grander style of cinema architecture than Key West at the time had to offer.

Stevens could hardly have failed to notice the emergence of the palace cinemas onto the urban landscape in the latter part of his sixteen-year residence in and around

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[15] Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 268, 498.

New York (1900-1916). The Stevenses were living at 441 West

21[st] Street when the Mark Strand Theatre, frequently cited as

the first purpose-built palace cinema, opened at 1579

Broadway in 1914, two blocks east and twenty-two blocks

north of their home (*SCPP*, 961). Stevens would have also had

ample opportunity to observe the development of a variety of

theatrical architectures along Broadway, particularly

clustered around Times Square.[16] Even as late as 1954,

Stevens recalled walking along Broadway frequently during

his time in New York, and the street is mentioned repeatedly

in his letters.[17] Nonetheless, letters from his period in New

York generally characterize Stevens as absorbed in reading

and writing. If he was participating in an emerging film

culture, he did not regard that participation as important

enough to feature in his correspondence.

 Stevens's lack of interest toward cinema—in contrast to

his well-attested love of theatrical and musical stage

performances—might be interpreted as a kind of mandarin

disdain for "low culture." Such an outlook would imply an

analogy between the poem's view and Adorno's concept of the

"culture industry." This is the first theory of art that we

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[16] Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins,

New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism between the Two

World Wars (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 229.

[17] Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 63, 78, 177, 845.

might, as it were, test against the poem: popular culture in general, and film in particular, intrinsically embodies a dominant ideology. As Benjamin argues, "The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily."[18] In other words, film extends the repetition and technological reproduction characteristic of capitalist modernity into the leisure time of its subjects, producing the assumption that this mode of production's ubiquity equates with its inevitability. A Benjaminian reading of the palace cinemas would suggest that the relationship such institutions posit between film and high culture is really a strategy for legitimizing social transformation. Few of us today would adhere to an unmodified version of Benjamin's position, but his categories allow us to sharpen our insights into the poem's suspicion toward film, particularly as that suspicion relates to the poem's no less obvious concern with surface, illusion, and repetition. Hence the question with which I began this discussion: do the women in the cinema encounter something that might properly be called art, or are they duped somehow, seduced by mere appearances?

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[18] Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, 26.

The poem's structure offers two contradictory answers to this question through the two levels of its organization. The first level is proceeds by blocks of two stanzas at a time: the women leave their "poverty," flinging "monotony behind" and crowding the "nocturnal halls" of the cinema; they observe their surroundings ("they leaned and looked"), the show begins, and the women "read"—that is, view—"right long"; the show continues, intensifying its effects, as the "coiffures" become "explicit"; and finally, "Puissant speech" cries "quittance" and the women go home (*SCPP*, 8-9). This narrative is linear, suggesting development through time. At the very least, the women arrive at a different point than the one from which they set out. This level of organization may be read in a number of ways—it is probably what the reader notices first, and suggests progress, and the possibility of change.

However, a second, chiastic level of organization undermines the linear narrative. Chiasmus is a rhetorical trope in which a statement, grammatical construction, or concept is repeated in reverse order, as in Shakespeare's "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (see also Keyser). The components of the statement form an a / b / b / a structure, held to resemble the Greek letter chi, or X. Chiasmus suggests stasis, equivalence, and repetition. It is above all a figure for reversibility, one side liable to transform into its opposite. In "The Ordinary Women," the final stanza

repeats the first stanza almost completely; the second stanza's "nocturnal halls" become the penultimate stanza's "wickless halls"; and the third stanza's "Mumbled zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay," becomes the seventh stanza's "Rumbled a-day and a-day, a-day" (*SCPP*, 8-9). The latter two stanzas also share references to moonlight, which respectively "Fubbed the girandoles" and "Rose on the beachy floors." In fact, the whole poem could be diagrammed to show a series of chiastic correspondences between the 10 stanzas: 1 / 10, 2 / 9, and so forth.

At a thematic level, this structure suggests that the women at the end of the poem, having "read right long" of "beta b and gamma g" are just the same as the women at the beginning of the poem. The poem begins, "Then from their poverty they rose," but the same line also begins the poem's final stanza, suggesting that in fleeing their poverty, all that they found was more of it. The aesthetic is merely another kind of poverty, and the women have been duped, taken in by a world of surfaces and illusions. Indeed, the doubleness of the chiasmus is prefigured in the multiple meanings of words like "fub" and "cant" that I have already noted. This use of chiasmus corresponds to the theory of popular culture outlined above, in which film embodies the repetitious and dehumanizing aspects of capitalist modernity. The women's entertainment is as impoverished as their

working lives, "their want," a world of insubstantial simulacra.

The chiasmus, then, is the poem's governing rhetorical scheme and organizational principle. One final consideration further underscores its importance: the chiastic "X" shape invokes the camera obscura, a precursor to the modern photographic camera and, therefore, the film camera as well. In the camera obscura, light passes through a small opening and projects onto a surface at the back of the box, producing an upside-down image, like so:
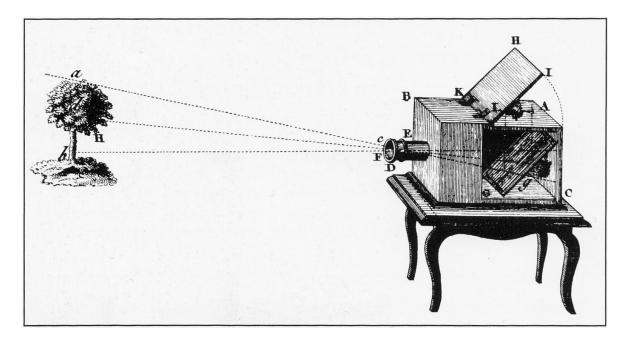

Fig. 7.: Camera Obscura, from M. Brisson *Dictionnaire raisonné de physique* (Paris: A la Libraire éonomique, 1800), n.p.

As we have seen, the poem's final stanzas amount to a reverse image of its opening stanzas. The poem's structure thus aligns both film and the ordinary with the scheme of chiasmus, suggesting that stasis and repetition are part of their natures.

However, this reading is interestingly complicated by a crucial consideration: the poem's chiastic structure is notably imperfect. For one thing, the first and final stanzas are not quite identical, in ways that are meaningful. Although the last stanza reverses "From dry catarrhs, and to guitars" to make "From dry guitars, and to catarrhs" (*SCPP*, 8-9), giving the poem a ring structure, the preceding line of each stanza—"Then from their poverty they rose"—remains unchanged. It would have been easy to turn "from" into "to," completing the symmetry and mirror effect, but Stevens chose not to. More importantly, a properly chiastic arrangement of stanzas would form the pattern 1-2-3 / 8-9-10, but in the poem, the pattern is 1-2-3 / 7-9-10. The eighth stanza breaks the pattern. Again, it would have been easy to switch the seventh and eighth stanzas: the poem, so altered, would read just as coherently. But as I will show, its meaning would change significantly.

The content of the eighth stanza gives us our best clue as to what kind of thematic work this broken chiasmus is doing:

          How explicit the coiffures became,

          The diamond point, the sapphire point,

          The sequins

          Of the civil fans!

                   (*SCPP*, 9)

The exclamation "How explicit" is appropriate, as the poem centers our attention on its verbal excess. The diamond point and sapphire point are a hyperbolic touch, literal jewels adorning a poem that already drips with ornaments; repetition (in "The diamond point, the sapphire point") emphasizes their superfluous luxuriance. The stanza also departs from a pattern established throughout the poem, in which the second line of each stanza includes an internal rhyme. In this stanza, rhyme gives way to exact repetition, emphasizing its singularity. The sentence that makes up the stanza is essentially a rhetorical exclamation, devoid of any semantic content beyond sheer emphasis—the whole stanza is an exclamation, not a communicative statement in the ordinary sense.

    The stanza therefore bears comparison with another strange exclamation earlier in the poem: "Ti-lill-o!" This is not a stock expression like "tallyho," which it slightly resembles. Whether or not "Ti-lill-o" bears any meaning at all is unclear. No amount of looking for homophonic clues or speculating about etymology will settle the word's meaning.

Likewise, the chiastic pair of expressions "a-zay, a-zay" and "a-day, a-day" elude definition. These neologisms are not quite onomatopoeic—indeed, there is no rhetorical term to describe them, underscoring that they have no argumentative function.

In other words, each of these instances can be read as moments of linguistic excess, or exuberance that overwhelms meaning. They might be described as play in the deconstructive sense, gestures of sheer excess that resist the totalizing system of the poem's structure and mirroring symmetry. The point of the broken chiasmus is to open up a window out of the chiasmus's associations of repetition and monotony. It rebukes the interpretation of film and the palace cinemas as vapid simulacra, and suggests that just as the rogue stanza breaks out of the poem's structure, aesthetic experience offers a viable escape from the monotony of the everyday. This is an idea we also find reflected and enacted in other poems from "Revue," most famously in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream."

If we wanted to push our interpretation of these moments further, we could suggest that they recreate the birth of the aesthetic as a completely superfluous activity, a form of pure surplus. This, then, is the second theory of art that we will set against the poem: the familiar high

cultural sense of the aesthetic as excess that we have seen in Goethe:

> Bin die Verschwendung, bin die Poesie;
>
> Bin der Poet, der sich vollendet,
>
> Wenn er sein eigenst Gut verschwendet.

> [I am prodigality, I am poetry;
>
> I am the poet, who completes himself
>
> In the act of wasting his belongings.][19]

In other words, poetry and the aesthetic as a whole are defined by their exemption from forms of value derived from the market. "Even so I am immensely rich," declares the Charioteer, "And consider myself Pluto's equal." Art is valuable precisely because it is useless. Popular culture, by contrast, is inherently degraded because it shackles the artistic impulse to the dictates of the market. Stated this starkly, the argument is quite untenable, of course: when have artists ever been free from the necessities of feeding themselves and keeping a roof over their heads? Nonetheless, the idea that art should be a realm of values free from the intrusion of the technological modernity that Benjamin so distrusted still exercises a powerful attraction.

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[19] Goethe, *Faust*, 173; my translation.

This alternative sense of value is part of the repository of romantic beliefs about the transcendent nature of art that a century's worth of materialist criticism has failed to eradicate completely. "The Ordinary Women" is carefully poised in the middle of this debate. So, to reformulate our original question slightly in light of these reflections: does the women's visit to the movie palace amount to an experience of high art, autonomous and aesthetically pure, or of popular culture, tainted by ideology and the marketplace? I think that no amount of careful consideration of the poem will decide the question one way or the other, and that this ambiguity is central to the poem's appeal.

Siegfried Kracauer was perhaps the earliest critic of film attuned to those ambiguities. His essay on Berlin's picture palaces, entitled "Cult of Distraction," neatly summarizes cinema's aspiration to the status of high culture:

> To begin with, the architectural setting tends to emphasize a dignity that used to inhabit the institutions of high culture. It favors the lofty and the sacred as if designed to accommodate works of eternal significance.… The show itself aspires to the same exalted level, claiming to be a finely tuned

> organism, an aesthetic totality as only an artwork can
> be.[20]

In fact, Kracauer proves to be largely indifferent to whether or not film actually achieves its artistic ambitions. For him, its significance rests elsewhere: "Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions… its disclosure in distraction is therefore of moral significance."[21] *Distraction*, defined in this passage as a condition in which surface functions as a critique of depth, and decoration as a critique of content, is Kracauer's characteristically optimistic account of modernity.

Stevens's ordinary women are ordinary in that, like the cinema audiences of their time, they seek distraction from the workaday world at the movies. What they find there in the "lacquered loges," the "girandoles," and the "canting curlicues," is the glittering reflection of a fragmented and disorderly era (once again we find ourselves confronted with a kind of chiasmus). For Kracauer, if cinema audiences could have approached their experience with the right spirit of

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[20] Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," 327.

[21] Ibid., 326.

critique, they would have stumbled upon the great secret of capitalist modernity: "the masses . . . so easily allow themselves to be stupefied only because they are so close to the truth."[22] Like the theoreticians of the everyday, he believes that the ordinary, the popular, and the commonplace are the domain of ideology. The evidence of Stevens's own life and the sly chiastic strategy of the poem suggest that he would have inclined toward a dismissive reading of cinema. But the poem, like Levine's study of cultural hierarchies, also looks to a future in which cultural categories overlap, and indeed, mix promiscuously: "Evidence of what appears to be a growing cultural eclecticism and flexibility is everywhere at hand."[23] Cultural eclecticism is often taken as an avatar of postmodernism, but "The Ordinary Women" shows that the juxtaposition of "high" and "low," collapsing both categories, was at the heart of "high modernism" too. I prefer a reading that is alive enough to cinema's aesthetic pull: this is the role of the poem's fractured chiasmus, which complicates too straightforward a reflection of reality. The story that the women see at the cinema, of "beta b and gamma g," and of the "marriage-bed," is the story of their romance with the aesthetic. This is "Puissant speech, alike in each": the illusion of the ordinary that is

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[22] Ibid., 328.

[23] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 243.

briefly yet powerfully transfigured into the extraordinary through the medium of film.

II. "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and the Modernist Grid

Critical assessments of Wallace Stevens have always gravitated towards his late long poems, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," as summative expressions of the poet's worldview. But one of their most crucial aspects has frequently been overlooked: their shared form. Helen Vendler's comment on the tercets that Stevens uses for each of these poems is typical of critics' lack of interest: "Those triads, as everyone has recognized, somehow organized his mind in its long stretches better than any other alternative."[24] To say that "everyone" agrees that "somehow" Stevens's favored stanza form was useful to him is not terribly helpful. A more refined account is clearly needed. Such an account should articulate what kind of metaphorical work the specific formal arrangement of these poems does.

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[24] Helen Hennessy Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3.

Recently, critics in a number of fields have brought an historicist agenda to bear on questions of form as a corrective to the tendency amongst some practitioners of historicist and postcolonial criticism to favor readings centered on content. "We have come to treat artworks as 'bundles of historical and cultural content,' a simpleminded mimesis replacing the dynamic formalism that characterized early new historicism," according to Marjorie Levinson.[25] These critics acknowledge that the politically-informed readings that have obtained in most areas of literary research over the past few decades have been a necessary corrective to the hermetic bent of the New Criticism and its spurious assumptions about the autonomy of literary works.[26] That said, questions of form have never been far from the surface where modernist works are concerned, so it is a welcome development that they are being treated with a renewed sense of historical and political urgency.

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[25] Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?" 561. See also Susan Wolfson, "Reading for Form," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (March 2000): 1–16.

[26] The most sophisticated efforts in this direction are James Longenbach's *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), and Alan Filreis's *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Recent works on modernism and the ordinary, however, have continued to manifest this bias towards a reading of content divorced from form. Indeed, some studies on the topic regress even further in the direction of a naive biographical criticism in an effort to make the rather banal point that the specific kinds of ordinariness to be found in modernist texts reflects the specific kinds of ordinariness that characterized modernist authors' lives. Form, as Levinson reminds us, was held by Lukàcs to be "the truly social element in literature."[27] While we needn't go quite that far, it is clear that form is a direct expression of those "processes and structures of mediation through which particular discourses... come to represent the real."[28] Therefore, if we come to view the modernist ordinary along these lines, as a novel structure of mediation for representing the real, we ought to seek it at the level of form.

This will be my aim in reading Stevens's *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven*: to describe the poem's formal arrangement in relation to its thematic preoccupation with the ordinary. The theme is clearly expressed in the poem's title: the relationship between place and the ordinary. It is odd, then, that *place* in the poem is barely commented on

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[27] Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?" 568.

[28] Ibid., 561.

in two recent treatments of its relationship with the ordinary, Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary* and Phillips's *Poetics of the Everyday*.[29] Olson's reading of Stevens is particularly vague about the relationship between the particular and the general in Stevens's later poetry, and that relationship's bearing on the politics of the work. Again and again Olson describes Stevens's turn towards generality in his later work without acknowledging that this move might in fact denude the quality of the everyday in that work. In other words, what is the everyday without its particulars but a blank set of repetitions, the mere fact of having habits? Everyday practices have histories, whether Stevens choses to disclose them or not; and the choice not to is as inherently political as the content of those histories themselves. Phillips elides this problem entirely, and instead relies on a series of pronouncements in Stevens's contemporary prose (collected in *The Necessary Angel*) to articulate the aesthetic aims according to which Stevens's late poetry should be judged. According to

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[29] "The Poetics of Place in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens" was the topic of a special issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* edited by John Serio, but the essays contained therein treat place separately from the question of modernity. See *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 27.1 (Spring 2003).

"Imagination as Value," the commonplace should be contemporary poetry's response to an era of ideological extremes.[30] All well and good, but Phillips gives no account of how it does so.

It is difficult to see how an assertion like "Stevens's lifelong interest in the commonplace, not the abstract, [is] the most defining feature of his finest work"[31] sits alongside "The poems I have singled out… engage with war deeply but obliquely, never identifying specific dates, events, or facts."[32] The distinction between "commonplace" and "abstract" seems to demand the furnishing of specific dates, events, and facts, all the more so since "commonplace" is such a relational term: commonplace for whom? Olson takes it as axiomatic that the commonplace can critique ideological extremes from the standpoint of the "normal," but the relativity of terms like "normal," "everyday," and "commonplace" makes this a tendentious proposition at best. By denuding the everyday of content and locating within it an ideology-free standpoint from which ideological critique can be conducted, Olson risks validating the normativity of Stevens's claims.

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[30] See "Imagination as Value" in Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 724–39.

[31] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, 116.

[32] Ibid., 128.

Some resolution to this problem might be found by attending to the question of setting, which I alluded to earlier. Peter Monacell has argued that Stevens's poetry addresses the suburbanization of American cities that took place between the 1910s and the 1940s, as did his contemporaries Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky. Each of these poets was concerned, according to Monacell, with the question of whether or not the suburbs could play host to "pastoral spaces."[33] This emphasis on the pastoral—counterintuitive in the context of modernism—invokes an argument about American poetry that runs from Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* through Hugh Kenner's *A Homemade World*, suggesting that the pastoral ideal has been central to the American imaginary since Jefferson.[34] "I'm ploughing on a Sunday, / Ploughing North America," Stevens declares in *Harmonium* (*SCPP*, 16). Urbanization, in this mode of thought, represents a defilement of America's new-world potential and an importation of old-world social problems onto "virgin soil." The naivety of this view should have been apparent from the outset, and by the modernist era the

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[33] Peter Monacell, "In the American Grid: Modern Poetry and the Suburbs," *Journal of Modern Literature* 35.1 (2012): 122.

[34] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Kenner, *A Homemade World*.

triumph of the Hamiltonian vision of America as a fiscal-industrial power was complete.[35] It is remarkable, though, that the anti-modern, pastoral vision of American experience continues to reverberate in American poetry and criticism.

In her essay about "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," Marjorie Perloff takes a strong stand on this question. For Perloff, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (and, by extension, Stevens's long poetry generally) strives to exclude both context and the ordinary:

> It is a lyric sequence that makes repeated gestures toward what Stevens would call "the normal" of "actual available social dialects," towards the Chaplinesque figure in the sagging pantaloons; but the poet's deep-seated suspicion of "the impurities of everyday life"…

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[35] Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 736—38.

can find an outlet only in the extravagant

metaphoricity that is Stevens' signature.[36]

In other words, Stevens's poetry is too flamboyantly poetic, too apt to avail itself of the resources of lyric, to represent the ordinary, or at least the ordinary untransfigured by lyric attention. But when Perloff invokes "extravagant metaphoricity" to describe Steven's poetry in general, she neglects the clear diminution of *Harmonium*'s linguistic extravagance in the late poems, which correlates with their increasing preoccupation with the ordinary.[37]

Phillips and Olson concur that the events of the Great Depression and the Second World War coincided with an impulse in Stevens to examine the circumstances of daily life in greater depth. They also claim that dailyness, or the ordinary, remained the central subject of his poetry for

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[36] Marjorie Perloff, "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 61–62.

[37] See also the discussion in chapter 16, "It Must Be Humdrum," of Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, 264–5.

the rest of his career. However, little attention has so far been given to the shifting attitudes towards the ordinary that his poetry manifests across this period. In other words, these critics neglect the question of Steven's development leading up to the late poems in which ordinariness takes on such central importance. This will also provide a means of testing Perloff's assertion about the poetry's disconnect from its context. I want to read a couple of earlier poems in line with the foregoing observations about place's pertinence to the ordinary, starting with Canto XXX of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," from 1937.

This passage has taken on much importance in recent critical effort to situate Stevens in the aesthetic and political debates of the nineteen-thirties. Al Filreis reads the poem as a sort of dialogue between modernist aestheticism and its detractors, particularly leftist critics advocating social realism.[38] Filreis charts the poem's strategy of appropriating the idiom of Stevens's detractors—most importantly, the charged phrase "things as they are"—and turning it to its own purposes, thus pointedly

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[38] Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, & Literary Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 253.

insisting that "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" (*SCPP*, 135).

    After thirty cantos couched largely in an abstract idiom, the poem makes an equally typical gesture by turning to a representative figure to advance its argument:

> From this I shall evolve a man.
> This is his essence: the old fantoche
>
> Hanging his shawl upon the wind,
> Like something on the stage, puffed out,
>
> His strutting studied through centuries.
> At last, in spite of his manner, his eye
>
> A-cock at the cross piece on a pole
> Supporting heavy cables, slung
>
> Through Oxidia, banal suburb,
> One-half of all its installments paid.
>
>   (*SCPP*, 149)

This figure, according to Filreis, is Crispin transformed into "a lineman for the electric company."[39] The ambiguities

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[39] Ibid., 276.

surrounding the lineman make him a provocative response to the demand for writers to engage more with social realities. For one thing, he is described explicitly as a puppet: "that old fantoche," "Like something on the stage." The worker-as-puppet figure might appeal to a leftist reading that regards all working people as "puppets" of the prevailing economic system, their agency denied by the system that exploits their labor. But this worker is also, as a fictional creation, a puppet controlled by the poet, who stands against him in a relation far more god-like than between employer and employee.

This points to a larger problem with social realism as a whole: no amount of emancipatory intention on the part of authors can overcome the fictionality of their creations. This may be another way of stating the vertiginous paradox that lies at the heart of all rhetorics of non-rhetoric. Filreis quotes Horace Gregory, poetry editor of *New Masses*: "Newer poetry is less affected by an early acquaintance with Joyce, Eliot and Pound and… is no longer concerned with *mere verbal experiment*"; a preferable style would have "a hard, clear surface" [my emphasis].[40] It should be readily apparent, though, that a rhetoric of non-rhetoric is still a rhetoric, and Filreis underscores the point by gleefully adducing a series of contemporaneous "social realist" poems

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[40] Ibid., 253.

that nonetheless fall back on traditional verse forms.[41]

Stevens's own way of assaying this dilemma, at least in the

Oxidia canto, is more subtle than even Filreis gives him

credit for. Other critics have tended to collapse the final

line of the canto—"Oxidia is Olympia"—into the preceding

lines:

> Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
>
> Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,
>
> Oxidia is the soot of fire,
>
> Oxidia is Olympia.
>
> (*SCPP*, 149)

So for Bloom, Oxidia "is revealed to be a version of

Olympia, but only as the soot of fire is also the fire."

Misinterpreting the metaphor, Bloom seems unaware that a

number of tree species rely on the extreme heat of wildfires

to crack their seedpods. The heat of Oxidia's industrial

landscape fuels its transformation into Olympia. In other

words, the metaphorical transposition of Oxidia into Olympia

is the culmination of the canto, not at all mitigated by the

preceding lines. The bluntness of this metaphorical

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[41] Ibid., 253—4.

transposition repudiates the realist demands of the guitarist's interlocutors.

Again, a leftist reader could interpret the transformation of industrial Oxidia into mythical, utopian Olympia as a vindication of the hope for a proletarian revolution. But in concluding the canto on such a triumphal note, Stevens nonetheless underscores the fact that the vision of a world transformed by revolution depends on metaphorical thought in order to be envisaged. Contra the claim that "clarity of style" is the proper aesthetic principle of socially conscious literature, Stevens asserts that the inherent ambiguity of metaphor, its dependence on the interpretive work of an audience or reader, is inescapable. Moreover, this metaphorical transformation is a willful act of the mind, available at any time; any place might, in principle, become a better place by means of metaphor. But whether or not this represents a denial of or a flight from reality, a retreat into a world of fantasy, is a question that took on new urgency for Stevens in the context of the Second World War. In his postface to *Parts of a World* (1942), Stevens claims that

> it has been easy to say in recent times that everything
> tends to become real, or, rather, that everything moves
> in the direction of reality, that is to say, in the
> direction of fact. We leave fact and come back to it,

come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it

was, not to what it has too often remained. The poetry

of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the

fundamental and endless struggle with fact. (*SCPP*, 251)

The imagination is a means of pursuing "the struggle with fact," a struggle that in Stevens's account joins the epistemological struggle to establish just what the facts are with the political struggle to resist their determinism—in other words, "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar."

This principle is reiterated in the Oxidia canto by the figure of the electrical wires—"heavy cables"—sailing over the suburb. Through them, the poem transforms mundane objects not only into the subject of poetry, but the means of making poetry itself: they are a version of the guitarist's strings. Al Filreis connects Stevens's figure to two precedents, first Muriel Rukeyser's "The Tunnel" from *Theory of Flight*:

Speak to me

world hissing over cables, shining among steel

strands,

plucking speech out on a wire, linking voices

reach me now in my fierceness, or I am drowned.[42]

And, through it, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*:

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,

(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)

Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,

Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry...[43]

But these precedents seem to be operating according to different aesthetic principles from Stevens's poem. Both explore the musical potential of the cables (one a set of telegraphic cables, the other the suspension cables of Brooklyn Bridge) through a heightened rhetoric associated with extreme emotional states. The speaker of Rukeyser's poem awaits the message delivered over the wires with the urgency of life and death, while Crane's speaker adopts a purposefully heightened style, full of apostrophe: "*O* harp..." "*Thy* choiring strings..." etc. Both take ordinary objects as their *materia poetica*, but they lift them out of

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[42] Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).

[43] Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2006).

the context of the ordinary, thereby transfiguring them. Crane's bridge is not only a bridge, but also an "altar."

    To this genealogy we might add an even earlier source, a passage from Thoreau's journal:

> Yesterday & today the stronger winds of Autumn have begun to blow & the telegraph harp has sounded loudly… The tone varying with the tension of different parts of the wire. The sound proceeds from near the posts where the vibration is apparently more rapid. I put my ear to one of the posts, and it seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music...[44]

Belying his reputation as an anti-modern recluse, Thoreau is surprisingly foresighted about the impact of the telegraph, writing just seven years after the technology was first demonstrated in 1844 between Washington and Baltimore.[45] "To have a harp on so great a scale—girdling the very earth—& played by the winds of every latitude and longitude," he writes with amazement; all the more so because "we have yet attributed the invention to no God."[46]

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[44] Henry David Thoreau, *A Year in Thoreau's Journal, 1851* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 231.

[45] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 691.

[46] Thoreau, *A Year in Thoreau's Journal, 1851*, 231.

The telegraph epitomizes several aspects of modernity: The world-embracing ubiquity that Thoreau alludes to, not to mention the communication revolution brought about by decoupling communication from transportation. This latter aspect is an early example of what has been called the dematerializing tendency of modernity, opening up the possibility of the kind of disembedding described by Giddens. Thoreau's multivalent approach to the telegraph—celebrating it as a wonder in its own right, while at the same time appropriating it for his own aesthetic ends—models an approach to incorporating the shifting definitions of the ordinary necessitated by technological change into the work of art. Moreover, the telegraph network is a forerunner of one of the most influential grids of all: the power grid, which we encounter in Oxidia. Just as the grid in visual art "compel[s] our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame," the "heavy cables, slung / Through Oxidia" situate the "banal suburb" in the wider world of modernity. Thoreau, like Stevens, displays some ambivalence towards this world, but the remarkable thing about his telegraph harp is that rather than seeing modernization as a force that severs us from the wellspring of natural beauty, it produces a kind of accidental music. The ordinary, in other words, need not be a kind of pastoral, infected with nostalgia for a lost world of authenticity and a spurious organic unity with nature. While Oxidia remains an emblem of discontentment with the

modern urban environment, it differs in its moderation from other contemporary expressions of the same sentiment.

Stevens took up this theme in a cluster of poems from *Parts of a World*, the most important of which is "The Common Life." This poem explores the public spaces that play host to the commonplace:

> That's the down-town frieze,
>
> Principally the church steeple,
>
> A blank line beside a white line;
>
> And the stack of the electric plant,
>
> A black line drawn on flat air.
>
> It is a morbid light
>
> In which they stand,
>
> Like an electric lamp
>
> On a page of Euclid.

<div align="right">(SCPP, 204)</div>

The modern city's rectilinear shapes are laid out here like a perspective drawing, as the poem puns on the word "line" to denote both a line of poetry and a geometric figure. The "church steeple" and the "stack of the electric plant," or tradition and modernity, counterpoint one another in an uneasy balance. The poem shows, at the very least, that

Stevens was thinking about urban space in geometric terms. However, thematically speaking, it merely rehearses a cliché of urban oppressiveness. Moreover, the pun on "line" positions the speaker at a distance from the landscape described. The "down-town frieze" is observed from outside, like a literal frieze, and not actually dwelt in. This marks a major point of difference with "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in which the speaker is emphatically situated within the world that the poem describes.

This departure notwithstanding, "The Common Life" should be regarded as a precursor poem to "An Ordinary Evening." Its title even looks forward to the "commonplace," that key expression from the later poem, and this juxtaposition reminds us that Stevens frequently indulged in puns based on splitting words—the commonplace (or the ordinary), therefore, becomes a question of the *common place*. The nature and the quality of these common places emerges as one of the most persistent themes in Stevens's work, and a hallmark of his approach to the ordinary. This theme receives its highest expression in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." In a letter to Katharine Frazier of the Cummington Press on May 14, 1942, Stevens carefully describes how the poem should be arranged, emphasizing its geometric order: "There will be 30 poems, each of seven verses, each verse of three lines. In short, there will be

21 lines of poetry on each page."[47] Perloff notes that with
"one poem per page, ten poems per section, seven tercets per
poem, the three group titles on separate pages," the poem
possesses what she describes as "a geometric perfection."[48]
This concern with geometry is reflected in the design of the
volume, which features on its title page two perpendicular
lines, a circle, and a point. While the circle and point are
almost certainly in reference to the poem's first canto, a
meditation on "The inconceivable idea of the sun" (*SCPP*,
329). But they also represent, intriguingly, a typology of
the grid.[49]

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[47] Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 406—7.

[48] Perloff, "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and
the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," 43.

[49] Here defined, in Jack Williamson's terms, as "a
proportional system of coordinates intersected by vertical
and horizontal axes." Jack H. Williamson, "The Grid: History,
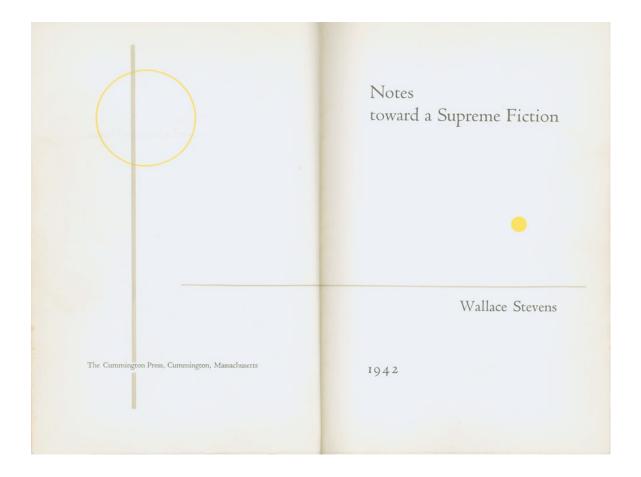Use, and Meaning," *Design Issues* 3.2 (Autumn 1986): 15.

Fig. 8.: Cover of Wallace Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (Cummington, MA: The Cummington Press, 1942).

Stevens carries that careful arrangement of stanzas and cantos over into "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which differs from its predecessor in abandoning the section headings, and having six tercets per canto, instead of seven. We can go further than Perloff in emphasizing the geometry of the poem if we conduct a sort of thought experiment: if we take the poem out of the linear sequence of the book page and arranging it in two dimensions, we find a grid. This arrangement invites a style of reading that

departs from the norm of approaching a long poem in a linear fashion, but there are reasons to think that this might be justified in the case of "An Ordinary Evening." First, Stevens himself abridged the poem both in the context of public readings, and in a version published first in the *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, and then in the Faber & Faber volume of his *Selected Poems*.[50] This version condenses the poem from thirty-one cantos to eleven, and inserts canto twenty-nine after cantos thirty and thirty-one, suggesting that the order of the full poem is not immutable.

More importantly, the poem itself includes a number of cues to read it without the assumption of linearity. The first canto declares the poem's intention to present "The vulgate of experience," and suggests that it will take the form of a "never-ending meditation," dramatized in the first stanza by the lines "Of this, / A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—" (*SCPP*, 397). Later, Stevens draws on the language of the Book of Revelation to describe "Reality [as] the beginning not the end, / Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega..." and concludes that "Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end" (*SCPP*, 400). These lines

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[50] See J. M. Edelstein, *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973).

overlay the poem's linear structure with a succession of cycles. The sense of an ongoing, endless meditation is reiterated in both rhetorical and syntactic characteristics present throughout the poem. The closing lines are a prime example:

> 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.
>
> (*SCPP*, 417)

These lines avoid the sense of a conclusion through a cluster of rhetorical techniques. First, the main verb in these lines, "traverse," is in the simple present tense. As George T. Wright notes, when the simple present appears absent the kinds of temporal, conditional, or metaphysical qualifiers that usually accompany it in ordinary speech, it does a special kind of rhetorical work. By describing "a physical action perhaps repeatable but taking place once as far as we can judge" in a line of poetry, the simple present conjures a "realm outside our normal conscious time world, where every event must be assigned a more precise temporality."[51] In other words, the simple present takes us

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[51] George T. Wright, "The Lyric Present: Simple Present Verbs in English Poems," *PMLA* 89.3 (May 1974): 565.

out of the realm of linear time. Second, the final lines of the poem—"a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade"—form a chiasmus, a rhetorical trope formed by the arrangement of repeated words in the form a/b/b/a, in this case shade/traverse/traverse/shade. This is only one of seven chiastic formulations in the poem. The essence of the chiasmus is reversibility; it establishes an absolute equivalence between its terms and suggests that any movement from term a to term b will be counterbalanced by a symmetrical movement from term b to term a. In other words, it too invokes an alternative to linearity.

So it is clear that the poem is invoking another code of reading than that of linear narrative. What this might be, exactly, is suggested by the poem's peculiar willingness to paraphrase itself, suggesting that no single formulation is final, that it is instead provisional, substitutable. An example of this occurs in one of the poem's most famous passages:

> Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven
> Before and after one arrives, or, say,
>
> Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,
> Sweden described, Salzberg with shaded eyes
> Or Paris in conversation at a café.

<div align="right">(SCPP, 414)</div>

These rather disparate locales are held together in the context of a list, suggesting that each is as good as the next. Indeed, "and" and "or," which appear twice in these lines, rather than "but," or "so," or "for," are in a sense the presiding conjunctions of the poem. In other words, the poem engages throughout in parataxis, the trope of placing words or statements side by side with little in the way of connective syntax to impart an order or hierarchy. Parataxis implies that, at least within the context of the passage in which they appear, these words or statements are substitutable with one another. The next stanza—

> This endlessly elaborating poem
>
> Displays the theory of poetry,
>
> As the theory of life...

<div align="right">(SCPP, 415)</div>

—joins the notion of substitutability with the idea of meditation described earlier. The rhetoric of meditation, as opposed to dialectic, suggests exactly this "endless elaboration," rather than the aim to arrive at a conclusion. The modus operandi of meditation, the poem suggests, is substitutability. The meditative poem demands a mode of reading that moves through a series of variations on a theme

without elevating any single one to the status of a conclusion. Another way of putting this is that the poem conspicuously counters what Barthes described as poetry's inherent tendency towards the syntagmatic imaginary by invoking a certain paradigmatic uncertainty. The grid is an apt metaphor for this paradigmatic/syntagmatic uncertainty: the two orders are, of course, usually described as axes, and where two axes coincide, we find ourselves once again face to face with the grid. In her classic essay on grids from her book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Rosalind Krauss claims that grids "explicitly reject a narrative or sequential reading of any kind."[52] When the poem counters syntagmatic progress with paradigmatic uncertainty, it exploits a realm of linguistic potentiality as opposed to one of action. It evokes, in Stevens's own phrase, "the pleasures of merely circulating."

Krauss argues that

By virtue of the grid, the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric. Thus the grid

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[52] Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1986), 13.

operates from the work of art outward, compelling our

acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame.[53]

That is to say, any particular instance of the grid can

potentially be extended in all directions along an infinite

plane. Similarly, the paradigmatic axis has the potential of

an infinite recycling of terms, just as the syntagmatic axis

allows any formulation, in principle, to be infinitely

extended. So, in short, the rhetorical strategies that the

poem employs to circumvent linearity are reflected in its

grid-like formal organization. Moreover, these

characteristics bear witness to the poem's concern with the

ordinary in that the ordinary is characterized by the

circular logic of repetition, habit, and routine rather than

teleological, linear time. Forestalling the tendency of

artistic representation to impose narrative order, then, is

one strategy for mitigating its transfiguring effects, and

maintaining the ordinariness of the commonplace.

Cook approaches this aspect of the poem from a

slightly different perspective; she is concerned to show

that the poem is, in her terms, anti-apocalyptic. The key to

this reading is a pun in the name of one of its few

"characters," "Professor Eucalyptus." "Eucalyptus," as a

botanical term invented in the eighteenth century, means

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[53] Ibid., 18.

"well covered." The contrast with "apocalypse," from the ancient Greek *apokalypsis*, or "uncovering," is clear. Cook is concerned not to place too much weight on this dichotomy, though. To avoid doing so, she evokes Stevens's own attempt to break through a dichotomy by introducing a third term:

> These fitful sayings are, also, of tragedy:
> The serious reflection is composed
> Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace.
>
> > (*SCPP*, 408)

Cook's reading of the poem's anti-apocalyptic orientation is, in effect, another way of describing its approach to the ordinary, although she herself does not make this connection explicit. As Frank Kermode has demonstrated, we expect narrative to be, to some degree, apocalyptic in the broad sense of moving towards an end. The constructor of that narrative manipulates an economy of knowledge which, at its conclusion, sets all preceding events into a comprehensible totality. "Narrative," in fact, might be too narrow a category, for we frequently expect even non-narratival forms, poetry in particular, to structure themselves according to a principle of finitude, in part so as to reassure us that our own lives possess a coherent structure and direction:

If there is one belief (however the facts resist it) that unites us all, from the evangelists to those who argue away inconvenient portions of their texts, and those who spin large plots to accommodate the discrepancies and dissonances into some larger scheme, it is this conviction that somehow, in some occult fashion, if we could only detect it, everything will be found to hang together.[54]

The ordinary takes place prior to, or beneath, these retrospective assemblies of experience, and by resisting the urge to order things teleologically, literature comes closer to representing it.

The grid thus stands for a fundamentally different structure than the one that Kermode describes, one that connects the poem with a broad stream of modernist aesthetics in the visual arts from Malevich to de Stijl to Mondrian. Grids figure prominently in the work of these artists, as strident declarations of their work's modernity. In view of what I have already said, it is no surprise to find Krauss declaring that, in painting, "the grid

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[54] Kermode, "The Man in the Macintosh," 72.

announces… modern art's… hostility… to narrative."[55] In
painting, the grid also opposes perspective. Rather than
mapping the space of a room or a landscape, or a group of
figures onto the surface of a painting, it maps only the
painting itself, forcing the physical and the aesthetic
planes to coincide. This kind of mapping is certainly
apparent in Stevens's conscientious instructions on the
layout of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" to the Cummington
Press; one is reminded of nothing so much as George Perec's
Species of Spaces, in which artfully arranged typography
exposes and plays upon the materiality of the page on which
it occurs. The aesthetic space of the poem, in other words,
is mapped directly onto the physical space of the page.
According to Krauss,

> Those two planes—the physical and the aesthetic—are
> demonstrated to be the same plane: coextensive, and,
> through the abscissas and ordinates of the grid,
> coordinate. Considered in this way, the bottom line of
> the grid is a naked and determined materialism.[56]

But this materialism is often contradicted by the attitudes
of those artists who use the grid in their work. For

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[55] Krauss, "Grids," 9.

[56] Ibid., 10.

Mondrian and Malevich, the materiality of the painting is not the point at all; rather, "from their point of view, the grid is a staircase to the Universal."[57] One example of this spiritualist perspective is to be found in Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist manifesto of 1915. The manifesto declares that pictorial abstraction is a means of representing pure feeling untethered to the objects of the material world, which is more or less a secularized description of the spiritual realm. Similar sentiments are reflected in Mondrian's manifesto, *Neo-Plasticism in Painting*.[58] The grid is the quintessence of abstraction, and therein lies its spiritual dimension.

As a result, the grid takes on a special status in modernist aesthetics. In the context of a secularizing world, as described in Weber's famous thesis of modernity as disenchantment, artists faced a seemingly stark choice between material and spiritual modes of expression. According to Krauss, "the curious testimony offered by the grid is that at this juncture," those artists "tried to

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[57] Ibid., 11.

[58] See Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003); Piet Mondrian, *The New Art / the New Life: The Collected Writings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987).

decide for both."[59] Krauss attributes the longevity and ubiquity of the grid in modernist art to its power to make us "able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)."[60] Krauss's binary between materialism and belief easily becomes another, that is, Stevens's famous definition of poetry as the conflict between reality and imagination. But whereas "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and "The Necessary Angel" both insist on the intractability of this conflict, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" strives for its resolution in the recognition of a higher unity between the two, as in lines like "Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven / Before and after one arrives..." An even stronger statement of the same principle occurs in canto XI:

> In the metaphysical streets of the physical town
> We remember the lion of Juda and we save
> The phrase...
>
> ....

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[59] Krauss, "Grids," 12.

[60] Ibid.

> The phrase grows weak. The fact takes up the
>
> strength
>
> Of the phrase. It contrives the self-same
>
> evocations
>
> And Juda becomes New Haven or else must.
>
> (*SCPP*, 403)

Juda refers to the historical Kingdom of Judah, specifically its capital, Jerusalem. The ordinary city, New Haven, is made to coincide with the spiritual city of Jerusalem. Why then, is the desired resolution between reality and the imagination so resolutely situated in a particular place, and why New Haven?

To answer this question, I'd like to shift my focus on the grid from the painting to architecture. Indeed, the practice of town planning has brought the grid into the daily lives of far more individuals than modern art ever could. In her recent work *The Grid Book*, Hannah Higgins takes an appealingly trans-historical approach, and draws particular attention to the Greek city of Miletus, rebuilt on a grid plan over three centuries after an earthquake in 479 BCE, to draw an analogy between the modernist pictorial grid and the urban grid. To quote Alan Waterhouse's *Boundaries of the City*, in Miletus "everywhere the grid boundaries confirmed the sense of being embraced by the landscape, carrying the eye beyond the confines of the

street to the revered forests, outcrops, and hills shaped in the image of the deities."[61] In other words, the grid reconciles the opposites of built and natural environments, orienting the city to its surrounding landscape. Waterhouse reads the grid as an expression of the general tendency in Greek myth to favor the reconciliation of symbolic opposites. In Higgins's phrase, "the Hellenistic [grid] expressed both rational and irrational ideas, or perhaps an irrational belief in rational form."[62] Higgins's comment looks forward to the age of reason, in which grid plans took on a utopian aspect on the assumption that urban form could profoundly influence human behavior. The utopian aspirations associated with the grid were renewed in the modernist period by Le Corbusier. Surveying this history from Miletus to the 20th C. in *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, Le Corbusier declares "Where the orthogonal is supreme, there we can read the height of a civilization... When man begins to draw straight lines he bears witness that he has gained control of himself and that he has reached a condition of order."[63] This is not the place to offer a comprehensive

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[61] Cited in Hannah B. Higgins, *The Grid Book* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2009), 59.

[62] Ibid., 60.

[63] Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1987), 43.

history of the urban grid; even Higgins's study stops far short of that. Suffice to say, the uses and aspirations associated with the grid have often reflected prevailing tendencies in intellectual history.

Le Corbusier also argues that "we must have the courage to view the rectilinear cities of America with admiration. If the aesthete has not so far done so, the moralist, on the contrary, may well find more food for reflection than at first appears."[64] This point reminds us of another paradox implied by the grid: that it is at once historical and trans-historical. It emerges as the result of a determined human effort to order the built environment, and comes in and out of favor throughout history. At the same time, however, as Le Corbusier and Hannah Higgins remind us, the grid reflects the fundamental order of the universe as described in Euclidean geometry. By "the rectilinear cities of America," Le Corbusier means gridded cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, where the grid was chiefly a matter of facilitating easy transportation and efficiently parceling out real estate. But the earliest American grid cities were designed in mind of spiritual considerations as well.

The earliest gridded city in colonial north America, as it happens, was New Haven itself. New Haven was founded

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[64] Ibid., 10.

in 1638 by the Rev. John Davenport, a wealthy Puritan merchant, and is, according to James Kornwolf's *Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial North America*, "exceptional among early New England towns in having been conceived as a 'model' community with a perfectly square, nine-block gridiron plan dominated by a central village green and with pragmatically arranged streets leading out from the town to the harbor and the surrounding countryside."[65] The generous public green, with the community's place of worship at the center of it, gives material expression to the spiritual aspirations of the Puritan settlers towards a sober, ordered, and communally-focused society. New Haven itself represents the desire to make the physical world congruent with spiritual ambitions. Indeed, as Cook points out, Stevens's poem exploits a pun on New Haven and New Heaven that went to the heart of the aspirations of its Puritan founders. In fact, the poem goes further even than Cook had suspected, in that its "geometrical perfection," to use Perloff's phrase, mimics the principles along which the town itself was designed.

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[65] James D. and Georgiana W. Kornwolf, eds. *Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial North America*, Vol. 2 (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1009.
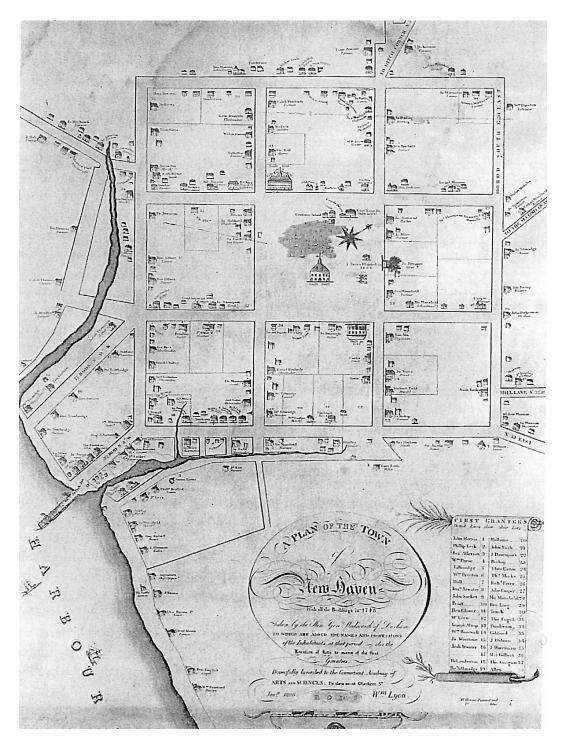
Fig. 9. New Haven, detail from 1806 engraving by William L.
Lyon based on a 1748 drawing by James Wadsworth, in

The poem frequently invokes New Haven precisely when it tries to mediate between the conflicting demands of matter and spirit or heaven and earth, for instance in canto XV:

> The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:
> The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his
>   room,
> The gay tournamonde as of a single world
>
> In which he is and as and is are one.
>
> (*SCPP*, 406)

The instinct for heaven and the instinct for earth are separately delineated before being reconciled in a single world, a world in which "as and is," or simile and identity, or imagination and reality, are one. The same principle finds a slightly different formulation earlier in the poem, in canto XII:

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it.
>
> (*SCPP*, 404)

Res, Latin for "thing," invokes Descartes' *res extensa*, or corporeal substance. The poem belongs to the world of things

themselves, not a derivative world of representations. These lines encapsulate a whole modernist discourse of artistic autonomy. The grid, too, is implicated in this. The grid, somehow abstract and referential at once, carefully poised on the dividing line between realism and literary artifice, may ultimately be a metaphor for not having metaphors. It is a form that underwrites the poem's repeated claims not to be a poem at all, a part of, and not about, the world.

These claims, however, do not entirely succeed, nor could they. "An Ordinary Evening" remains a work of art, despite its willingness to claim otherwise. The poem even recognizes this ambiguity in canto XXIX:

> In the land of the lemon trees, yellow and yellow
>   were
> Yellow-blue, yellow-green, pungent with citron-sap,
> Dangling and spangling, the mic-mac of mocking
>   birds.
>
> In the land of the elm trees, wandering mariners
> Looked on big women, whose ruddy-ripe images
> Wreathed round and round the round wreath of
>   autumn.
>
> They rolled their r's, there, in the land of the
>   citrons.

> In the land of big mariners, the words they spoke
>
> Were mere brown clods, mere catching weeds of talk.
>
> (*SCPP*, 415)

The "big women" are certainly descendants of the "fat girl terrestrial" who appeared as a figure for reality at the end of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Here, the poem resorts to an elaborate metaphoricity (to use Perloff's term) familiar from Stevens's earlier poetry, even adopting some of the characteristic images of *Harmonium*.[66] Perloff connects the canto with a passage from Stevens's letter to Hi Simon in a letter of January 12, 1940:

> Of course, I don't agree with the people who say that I live in a world of my own; I think that I am perfectly normal, but I see that there is a center. For instance, a photograph of a lot of fat men and women in the woods,

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[66] Marie Borroff describes these passages in "Notes" as typifying "the prodigality of Stevens's inventiveness, an ever-accruing wealth which need never hoard itself but can be spent at once." *Language and the Poet: Verbal Artistry in Frost, Stevens, and Moore* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 74.

drinking beer and singing Hi-li Hi-lo reminds me that

there is a normal that I ought to try to achieve.[67]

The ordinary, that is to say, need not be a version of "reality grimly seen," but can with the aid of the imagination take on a celebratory aspect. Steven's decision to end the abridged version of the poem with this canto reminds us that there is an irreducible element of the aesthetic to every instance of poetry. As Stevens wrote to Henry Church on January 21, 1946, "For myself, the inaccessible jewel is the normal and all of life, in poetry, is the difficult pursuit of just that."[68]

I have tried to show that the formal organization of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" imitates its subject, the "common place" of New Haven. The challenge for any work of art that seeks to represent the ordinary is that once the ordinary is taken into the charmed circle of art, within the frame, as it were, it is thereby transfigured and ceases to be ordinary. Having worked through the demands made by social realist critics in the 1930s, Stevens positions the ordinary beyond, or perhaps below, realism. The poem marginalizes the question of context, but not in the way

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[67] Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 352.

[68] Ibid., 521.

that Perloff claims. The poem abandons the codes of

realistic representation in favor of a different set of

aesthetic aspirations altogether. Stevens's response to this

aesthetic dilemma, like Mondrian and Malevich before him, is

to dissolve the frame by forcing abstraction and

representation to coincide. "An Ordinary Evening" discards

the aspiration to *represent* the ordinary in favor of

insinuating itself into the ordinary. The grid is Stevens's

metaphor for not having metaphors, a figure for the

resolution of opposites that his poetry tries to achieve.

Coda: Don DeLillo and the Half-Life of Modernism

Debate over the meaning, nature, and morality of consumerism has been a perennial feature of economic and political debate in the West since the term was popularized by Vance Packard's *The Waste Makers* (1960). Packard forecasted that increased global competition for resources would soon mean that "something will have to give—either mode of living or population growth or both—long before a mere century has passed."[1] His warning must have seemed anything but timely when it was issued; during the 1950s, the OECD countries averaged a 4 per cent annual rate of economic growth, rising to nearly 5 per cent during the 1960s.[2] But as that rate of expansion subsided to around 3 per cent annually during the 1970s, and against the backdrop of oil shocks and a profitability crisis in the American corporation, public opinion began to endorse Packard's

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[1] Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1960), 214.

[2] Stephen A. Marglin, "Lessons of the Golden Age: An Overview," in *The Golden Age of Capitalism: Reinterpreting the Postwar Experience*, ed. Stephen A. Marglin and Juliet Schor (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1.

concerns. "Moments of breakdown and disruption," Frank Trentmann has argued, "allow us to see what is needed to keep ordinary consumption practices going."[3] In the 1970s, concepts like peak oil suggested that those ordinary consumption practices were demanding more resources than the earth could provide. As a result, now-ubiquitous practices like recycling transitioned from the countercultural world of *The Whole Earth Catalogue* to the mainstream.[4] The end of the post-war boom, we might say, precipitated a wholesale reconsideration of the status of waste. Only recently, however, has the topic of waste become central to discussions of consumption, anxieties about which have become perennial.[5] Indeed, waste offers a useful supplement

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[3] Frank Trentmann, "The Politics of Everyday Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 524.

[4] "Whereas only two cities operated municipal recycling programs in 1970, more than two hundred did in 1982." Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), 284.

[5] Major studies of consumer culture from the 1990s, for instance, tend to lack any sustained discussion of waste, the inevitable byproduct of consumption (e.g. Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (London and New

to the theory of consumption put forward in Michel de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*, in which consumers are imagined as "unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts," and use is refigured as the production of meanings that exceed the bounds of the system that generates commodities.[6] Consumers are also producers in a literal sense: producers of waste.

The impact of this revaluation of waste on the academy is exemplified by the archaeologist William Rathje's "Garbage Project," beginning at the University of Arizona in Tucson, in 1972. Rathje's work applied an ethno-archeological methodology to contemporary American households, comparing analyses of their household garbage with self-reporting about their consumer habits. Comparison of these two sources revealed illuminating discrepancies between ordinary people's actual habits of consumption and their self-reporting, notably in the case of socially opprobrious behavior like beer or red meat consumption.[7]

York: Routledge, 1993); Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997)); Strasser's *Waste and Want* seems to bridge this divide for the first time.

[6] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xviii.

[7] Jeanne E. Arnold et al., *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012), 9.

"What people have owned—and thrown away," argues Rathje, "—can speak more eloquently, informatively, and truthfully about the lives they lead than they themselves ever may."[8] Rathje is drawn to the frisson of the unknown in the ordinary, the sense that the most intimate sphere of our own lives might be where we know ourselves the least: "Would we ourselves recognize our story when it is told, or will our garbage tell tales that we as yet do not suspect?"[9] Garbage, in other words, has the potential to reveal the consumerist id of its producers. The sense that waste can tell us something fundamental about our own culture is not, of course, unique to Rathje; its significance was one of the basic arguments of Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*:

> Dirt [i]s matter out of place.... [This] implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order.... Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate

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[8] William L. Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 58.

[9] Ibid., 11.

elements. The idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism.[10]

Despite their different emphases, Douglas and Rathje share the conviction that waste offers a subterranean map of the society in question, a sort of night-time inverse of day-time world we are more familiar with.

This sense of waste as offering a privileged insight into the mysteries of the ordinary is central to work of the novelist Don DeLillo. *White Noise* (1985), the novel that set off a groundswell of interest in DeLillo, is preoccupied not only with the sorts of mundane objects that fill the station wagons delivering students to their college at the start of the academic year in the book's opening pages, but in the obverse of this "brilliant event": the waste and detritus of consumer society.[11] Later in the novel, having discovered that his wife Babette has been cheating on him to gain access to an experimental drug that abates the fear of death, the protagonist, Jack Gladney, finds himself rooting through the family's compacted rubbish to locate a vial of the drug:

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[10] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 35.

[11] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 2009), 3.

I unfolded the bag cuffs, released the latch and
lifted out the bag. The full stench hit me with
shocking force. Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had
we created it? I took the bag out to the garage and
emptied it. The compressed bulk sat there like an
ironic modern sculpture, massive, squat, mocking. I
jabbed at it with the butt end of a rake and then
spread the material over the concrete floor. I picked
through it item by item, mass by shapeless mass,
wondering why I felt guilty, a violator of privacy,
uncovering intimate and perhaps shameful secrets. It
was hard not to be distracted by some of the things
they'd chosen to submit to the Juggernaut appliance.
But why did I feel like a household spy? Is garbage so
private?[12]

Gladney's meditation on the possible meanings of household
waste gives way to the paradoxical pleasure of listing items
of garbage:

I found crayon drawings of a figure with full
breasts and male genitals. There was a long piece of
twine that contained a series of knots and loops. It
seemed at first a random construction. Looking more

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[12] Ibid., 297.

closely I thought I detected a complex relationship between the size of the loops, the degree of the knots (single or double) and the intervals between knots with loops and freestanding knots. Some kind of occult geometry or symbolic festoon of obsessions. I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swaps, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed dental floss, fragments of ballpoint refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. There was a pair of shredded undershorts with lipstick markings, perhaps a memento of the Grayview hotel.[13]

Gladney thus adopts the role of an amateur garbologist, wringing meaning out of "the size of the loops, the degree of the knots (single or double) and the intervals between" them, turning garbology into a figure for reading itself.

The theme of waste expands its significance in *Underworld* (1997), a novel whose title evokes a whole constellation of tropes to do with waste and reuse. Indeed, the novel seems to have been catalyzed in part by the rise of garbage studies since the 1970s. When Brian Glassic, Nick

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[13] Ibid., 297–8.

Shay's colleague in the waste management business drives too far south on the Jersey side of the Hudson river en route to Manhattan, he finds himself with a view back towards the city over the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, formerly the largest landfill site in the world:

He imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza—only this was twenty-five times bigger… Brian felt a sting of enlightenment. He looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about. Not engineering or transportation or source reduction. He dealt in human behavior, people's habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences but their kindness too, their generosity, and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us.[14]

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[14] Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 2011), 184. Glassic's point of reference for the size of the Fresh Kills site is drawn directly from Rathje, who opens *Rubbish!* with his own evocative description of the site: "It is the largest active landfill in the world. It is twenty-five times the size of the Great Pyramid of Khufu at Giza, forty times the size of the Temple of the Sun at Teotihuacan."

As the novel develops, it quickly becomes apparent that this metabolism extends beyond municipal waste to encompass the whole economy—cultural and material—of twentieth-century America. To an even greater extent than in *White Noise*, DeLillo's characters in *Underworld* seek out what he describes in an interview as

> a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments. In *White Noise*, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailyness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred.[15]

The most prominent figure in *Underworld* for this radiance, which clearly evokes the autonomy and irreducibility of the

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Rathje and Murphy, *Rubbish!*, 4. Nick Shay's colleague Detwiler, whose own fascination with waste began with a career as a "garbage guerrilla who stole and analyzed the household trash of a number of famous people," recalls A. J. Weberman, the gonzo journalist who performed similar excavations on Neil Simon, Muhammad Ali, and Abbie Hoffman, also recounted in *Rubbish!*, 17.

[15] Don DeLillo and Thomas DePietro, *Conversations with Don Delillo* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2005), 70-1.

aesthetic, is the waste that abounds throughout the novel in the full range of its metaphorical guises.

The peculiar aptness of waste to anchor an "epic counterhistory" of the cold war is summed up by Joshua Goldstein, who argues that it

> mark[s] multiple boundaries—between past and present, public and private, value and its opposite. Waste is disruptive, poorly differentiated, marginalized, and hence (and herein lies a major challenge for the historian) goes unaccounted and often undocumented. Waste is not just un(der)known and un(der)valued because it lies at the edge of our attention and value systems, but because it is intrinsically destabilizing of forms of knowledge and systems of value.[16]

The underworlds of DeLillo's novel encompass a variety of unknown and unvalued forms of knowledge, including official secrets, repressed personal histories, and the detritus of

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[16] Catherine Morley, *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction: John Updike, Philip Roth and Don Delillo* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 127. Joshua Goldstein, "Waste," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 328.

popular culture. Rathje invokes the archaeologist Gordon R. Wiley, who argued on the basis of his field work ("only partly in jest") that "*Homo sapiens* may have been propelled along the path to civilization by his need for a degree of organization sufficiently sophisticated, and a class structure suitable stratified, to make possible the disposal of mounting piles of debris."[17] Narrative, we might say with only a hint of metaphorical overreach, serves a similar purpose: to organize the detritus of experience and establish out of it a manageable order.

In *Underworld*, that process of making order out of waste and detritus is explored through a series of author-surrogates: a sculptor, Klara Sax, a graffiti artist Ismael Muñoz (Moonman 157), and the outsider artist Simon Rodia, creator of the Watts Towers in Los Angeles.[18] Klara Sax is the exemplary artist-as-bricoleur: her early work earns her the moniker "the bag lady" for her use of found objects. "We took junk and saved it for art. Which sounds nobler than it was. It was just a way of looking at something more carefully."[19] Later (though this is recounted earlier in the

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[17] Rathje and Murphy, *Rubbish!*, 33.

[18] See Jesse Kavadlo, "Recycling Authority: Don Delillo's Waste Management," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42.4 (2001): 284-401.

[19] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 393.

novel), Klara presides over a project to turn a vast graveyard of B-52 bombers in the New Mexico desert into an art installation:

> We're painting, hand painting in some cases, putting our puny hands to great weapons systems, to systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, millions of components stamped out, repeated endlessly, and we're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's a sort of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct—to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are.[20]

The bombers, like the Bomb itself, are a form of waste now that the cold war has ended, and Klara's art works to exorcise the dread of that era by reclaiming its materials. Quoting Oppenheimer, who described the bomb as "merde," she explains: "something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit… It's also shit because it's garbage, it's waste material." "What I really want to get at," she concludes, "is the ordinary thing, the ordinary life behind the thing."[21] The parallels between her work and Nick's are stated clearly:

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[20] Ibid., 77.

[21] Ibid.

> We were the Church fathers of waste in all its
> transmutations. I almost mentioned my line of work to
> Klara Sax when we had our talk in the desert. Her own
> career had been marked at times by her methods of
> transforming and absorbing junk.[22]

Nick and Klara are joined then, by more than a youthful
sexual escapade (precisely the kind of buried personal
history the novel tries to redeem): they share a fascination
with waste, its coded data, and its place in the cultural
and artistic economies they are a part of.

   Furthermore, at different points during the novel, they
both visit Watts Towers, the Los Angeles landmark built out
of steel rods and pipes, wire mesh, and mortar, and
decorated with found objects including ceramic tiles, soft-
drink bottles, and seashells over thirty-three years by
Italian immigrant Sabato Rodia. The Watts Towers are an
exemplary instance of outsider art. Nick Shay visits the
towers and finds in Rodia, a figure reminiscent of his
disappeared father Jimmy, himself an immigrant from Italy.
Rodia's work appears to Nick as "a kind of swirling free-
souled noise, a jazz cathedral, and the power of the thing,
for me, the deep disturbance, was that my own ghost father

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[22] Ibid., 102.

was living in the walls."[23] For Klara, whose visit is relayed later in the novel but occurs chronologically earlier than Nick's, the Towers are "a place riddled with epiphanies"; "She didn't know a thing so rucked in the vernacular could have such an epic quality."[24]

The Watts Towers are an emblem of the novel's own procedure, as well as the aspirations of its characters: not the mere transformation of waste into art, the transfiguration of the commonplace described by Arthur Danto, but rather the reconciliation of the ordinary and the aesthetic in the figure of waste, which invokes simultaneously both the unruly, unsystematic stuff of the ordinary and the splendid excess of Goethe's charioteer: "Bin die Verschwendung, bin die Poesie."[25] The charioteer goes on: "Auch ich bin unermeßlich reich / Und schätze mich dem Plutus gleich…" ["Even so I am immensely rich / And consider myself Pluto's equal."][26] DeLillo reports that the title of *Underworld* originates from a comparable set of connotations: "I first hit upon *Underworld* when I started

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[23] Ibid., 277.

[24] Ibid., 492.

[25] See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Theory of Art* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[26] Goethe, *Faust*, 173.

thinking about plutonium waste buried deep in the earth. Then about Pluto, the god of the dead and ruler of the world. New connections and meanings began to suggest themselves…"[27]

This double valence of waste as it is explored throughout *Underworld* has broad ramifications for the vexed debate over DeLillo's modernism or postmodernism, which given DeLillo's exemplary status amongst contemporary American novelists, offers an insight into the issue of literary periodization in the twentieth century generally. In the course of this debate, critics have deployed one or both versions of postmodernism, as a cultural condition and an aesthetic agenda. Catherine Morley reads DeLillo's fiction as "truly postmodern," because it "resists critical and theoretical schematicism or totalizing theories," a version of Lyotard's sense of the postmodern.[28] In Paul Gleason's view, "like Baudrillard and Jameson, [DeLillo] holds that postmodernism is a cultural condition determined by mass-market capitalism… They reject twentieth-century waste culture."[29] Peter Knight likewise invokes Baudrillard

[27] Jonathan Bing, "The Ascendance of Don Delillo," *Publishers Weekly*, August 11, 1997.

[28] Morley, *The Quest for Epic*, 124.

[29] Paul Gleason, "Don Delillo, T. S. Eliot, and the Redemption of America's Atomic Waste Land," in *Underwords:*

in a discussion of DeLillo's characters who seem to "no longer have an unmediated access to an authentic self and perhaps no longer even have an authentic self."[30] Paul Giaimo offers an unconvincing account of DeLillo as neither "modernist" nor "postmodernist," but "neo realist."[31] On the other hand, Philip Nel argues for DeLillo's continued indebtedness to modernism, ultimately situating DeLillo as a modernist writer addressing a postmodern situation.[32]

The net effect of these debates has been to aggressively reify the concepts under discussion for little gain in our understanding of DeLillo. Nel's account of modernism amounts to familiar bromides like "DeLillo shares with his modernist (and Romantic) ancestors a faith in the value and power of linguistic art," and "an emphasis on the

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Perspectives on Don Delillo's Underworld, ed. Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman, and Irving Malin (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), 142.

[30] Peter Knight, "Delillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Don Delillo*, ed. John N. Duvall (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 31.

[31] Paul Giaimo, *Appreciating Don Delillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 20.

[32] Philip Nel, "Delillo and Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Don Delillo*, 17.

role of the artist as hero."[33] Likewise, Knight falls back on

the dated postmodernist criticism that "the foundation of

modernism was built on the notion of 'art for art's sake,' a

championing of the realm of pure aestheticism in the face of

the life-sapping influence of the market and mass culture."[34]

Such dated accounts of modernism and postmodernism produce

perverse readings of the novel that unambiguously align

DeLillo with the critics of "consumer culture":

> Viewed in connection with *Underworld*'s structure, the
>
> central diagrammatic axes of the novel—consumer excess
>
> and nuclear waste—allow the novelist-historiographer to
>
> reveal the dark information hidden inside the smallest
>
> event: the subterranean fractures, erosions, and

[33] Ibid., 19, 23.

[34] Knight erroneously aligns Anthony Giddens with Frederic

Jameson and David Harvey as theorists who argues for

postmodernity as a description of cultural and social

conditions in the present. For Giddens's actual stance on

"radical modernity," see below. Knight, "Delillo,

Postmodernism, Postmodernity," 28-9, 35.

poisons that punctuate the progression of techno-industrial society.[35]

Mark Osteen offers one of the few alternative accounts in the available criticism:

> In the efforts of Ismael, Sabato Rodia, and Klara Sax, and in the ambiguous transformation of a dead girl into an angel, DeLillo offers the potential for phoenixlike resurrection out of the ashes of capital, holding out the bare possibility of a new kind of connection.[36]

Yet once again the figures of "phoenixlike resurrection" and "the ashes of capital" invoke a prelapsarian mythology that DeLillo himself seems at pains to dispel. The remarkable thing about DeLillo's writing is that it figures the ordinary under the condition of modernity as a process of continuous transformation, and concludes the novel on a note

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[35] Salah el Moncef bin Khalifa, "Don Delillo's *Underworld* and the Inscriptions of the Commonplace," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 13.1 (April 2008): 160.

[36] Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don Delillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 254.

of comic reconciliation and optimism about the integrity of the social whole.[37]

Many, though by no means all, of these misreadings of modernism owe something to the arguments put forward by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, which amount to one of the most resilient accounts there is of literary periodization in the twentieth century. Huyssen follows Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* by separating modernism from the historical avant-garde, and drawing a line of continuity between the latter and postmodernism. Whereas the avant-garde and postmodernism embrace mass culture and everyday life in the context of an explicitly progressive politics, modernism is characterized by a "paranoid" view of the masses, and an anti-democratic, reactionary impulse towards aesthetic autonomy. "It is not surprising," argues Huyssen,

> that major American writers since Henry James, such as T. S. Eliot, Faulkner and Hemingway, Pound and Stevens, felt drawn to the constructive sensibility of

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[37] In the novel's spectacular conclusion, "J. Edgar Hoover, the Law's debased saint," is "hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar—a single fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information. Everything is connected in the end." DeLillo, *Underworld*, 826.

modernism, which insisted on the dignity and autonomy

of literature, rather than to the iconoclastic and

anti-aesthetic ethos of the European avantgarde which

attempted to break the political bondage of high

culture through a fusion with popular culture and to

integrate art into life.[38]

Throughout *After the Great Divide*, Huyssen posits an

aversion to the ordinary as a defining characteristic of

modernism: the modernist work is, he claims, "totally

separate from the realms of mass culture and everyday

life."[39] Reading modernism for the ordinary as I have done

throughout this thesis makes it apparent how radically wrong

Huyssen's account of modernism must be.

Part of the uncaniness of Huyssen's argument arises

from a radically expanded modernist canon: one so capacious

in fact, and so indifferent to the institutional aspect of

the modernist enterprise, that it skirts incoherence. Thus

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*-indeed, the specific passage I

discuss in chapter 2—becomes a paradigmatic text in the

argument that modernism defines itself by hostility towards

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[38] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1986), 167.

[39] Ibid., 53.

mass culture. "Woman (Madame Bovary) is positioned as reader of inferior literature—subjective, emotional and passive—while man (Flaubert) emerges as writer of genuine, authentic literature—objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means."[40] Moreover, "the repudiation of *Trivialliteratur* has always been one of the constitutive features of a modernist aesthetic intent on distancing itself and its products from the trivialities and banalities of everyday life."[41] Seeming to acknowledge that this account of modernism will struggle to account for Joyce, Huyssen draws an entirely ad hoc distinction within his modernist canon between a "Mallarmé-Lautréamont-Joyce" axis and a "Flaubert-Thomas Mann-Eliot" axis.[42] One of the foundational moves of the new modernist studies, and one borne out in this thesis, has been to draw attention to the full extent of modernism's imbrication with popular forms, and especially that its attitude to those forms is far from unalloyed condemnation.

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[40] Ibid., 46.

[41] Ibid., 47.

[42] In doing so, Huyssen already departs from influential comparative models, like Gerald Gillespie, *Proust Mann Joyce in the Modernist Context* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

Frederic Jameson, too, whose authority is frequently invoked by postmodernism's advocates, establishes a distinction between modernism and postmodernism by attributing characteristics already manifest in the former to the latter:

> If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity… to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural production of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory.[43]

This could stand just as well as a description of the ordinary under the condition of modernity, and the subject's dissolution therein; moreover, even the phraseology recalls Eliot. Jameson's championing of the concept of "late capitalism" as the social condition under which postmodernist art arises has also begun to wear thin.[44] Even

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[43] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 25.

[44] Cf. Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 246–7.

as putatively postmodernist trends in literature appear exhausted in the face of, amongst other things, a resurgence of realism, capitalism itself seems in little danger of the imminent collapse that the adjective "late" implies. The "crisis in historicity" that Jameson identifies seems chiefly to affect postmodernist critics, whose determination to identify postmodernism with a concrete historical break now seems less persuasive than an alternative like Giddens's radicalized modernity.[45]

Moreover, as the example of DeLillo shows, despite the radicalization and globalization of modernity, and the total interpenetration of everyday life by abstract systems, the ordinary retains its irreducible affinity with the aesthetic. I have argued that every literary representation of the ordinary is also a representation of its impossibility; nonetheless, in pursuit of this paradoxical aesthetic aim, modernism and its descendants constitute an exploration of the limits of literary representation unprecedented in its breadth. We might recall Nick Shay's interview with Father Paulus in *Underworld*:

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[45] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 22; Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 163.

"Everyday things represent the most overlooked knowledge. These names are vital to your progress. Quotidian things. If they weren't important, we wouldn't use such a gorgeous Latinate word. Say it," he said.

"Quotidian."

"An extraordinary word that suggests the depth and reach of the commonplace."[46]

In these straitened times, when we are constantly called upon to articulate the "value" of the humanities, we might be led finally to assert with the discipline's detractors that the humanities are indeed a "waste," but ready to counter that where there is waste there is a system, and in waste—the splendid excess of art—there is the potential to resist it, or at the very least to understand it. "Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts?"[47] Only by attending to the ordinary can we find out.

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[46] DeLillo, *Underworld*, 542.

[47] DeLillo, *White Noise*, 297.

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