Creative Writing, Cosmopolitanism, and Contemporary American Literature

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to answer a puzzling question about the historical trajectory of twentieth-century American literature. The dominant literary practice of the early twentieth century, Anglo-American modernism, places a premium upon the juxtaposition of discourses and voices from an enormous variety of cultural contexts and languages. It insists upon the importance of grounding literature in cultural tradition, while at the same time practicing an experimentalism that attempts to remodel ossified forms of representation into literary modes of expression adequate to historical circumstances changing at a precipitate rate. Postwar and contemporary American fiction and poetry no longer count polyvocality amongst their most important characteristics, no longer insist upon the importance of literary tradition, and have become markedly less experimental. What accounts for this? I claim this development stems in large part from the institutional reconfiguration of contemporary American literature around the graduate creative writing program. The narrowing of American poetry and fiction from these formal perspectives corresponds to a narrowing of the typical institutional path of American poets and writers of fiction. A short preface sets out the argument and the structure of the thesis. Chapter 1 sets out the central dynamics of the argument at greater length, and shows the influence of the creative writing program upon postwar and contemporary American poetry through detailed readings of a wide variety of poems from different stylistic contexts. Chapter 2 sets out the relationship between institutional experience and poetic practice in a representative modernist case, that of the poet Ezra Pound. Chapter 3 explores stylistic questions of creative writing program fiction with reference to the novelist Saul Bellow. Chapter 4 examines an especially representative case of poetic success in the creative writing program through a consideration of the contemporary American poet Jorie Graham. Chapter 5 explores institutional effects upon the conditions of literary expression by looking at the fiction and teaching practice of the novelist David Foster Wallace.

Contents

Preface

> He said I am put together with a pot and scissors
> Out of old clippings
> No one took the trouble to make an article.[1]

These lines appear in an early fragment by T. S. Eliot collected in *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996). I take Eliot's speaker to be describing a kind of *ars poetica* of Anglo-American modernism *avant la lettre*, figured here as pastiche of other forms of discourse, 'old clippings' that do not come together to form a seamless whole, but rather show the traces of their imperfect assembly. Anglo-American modernism demands to be understood as form of representation that places a premium upon the close juxtaposition of voices drawn from an extraordinary variety of intertexts, and interpreters must account for the ways in which these different voices speak—or do not speak—to each other. The American literature that has emerged in the wake of Anglo-American modernism no longer demands to be interpreted in this way. Why? This thesis argues that this large-scale formal change has come about as the result of the institutional reconfiguration of American literature around the graduate creative writing program.

The theoretical frame of cosmopolitanism links an individual's social and institutional context with questions of epistemology and representation, describing the capacity to engage with forms of experience and discourse rooted in cultural contexts not one's own. Anglo-American modernism appears characteristically cosmopolitan in its impulse to assimilate texts and discourses drawn from a vast diversity of cultures and historical times, while postwar and contemporary literature has not shown this impulse. I demonstrate that this development stems in significant part from the increasing dominance of the creative writing program as the typical institutional context for the postwar and contemporary American writer. Following a modernism that developed significantly

[1] T. S. Eliot, 'He said: this universe is very clever,' *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 71, 13-15.

in the great capitals of Europe, the creative writing program has become established most influentially in the Midwestern United States. Compared to a modernism that aggressively assimilated foreign-language literatures into its texts, the creative writing program appears resolutely monoglossic.

I set out this literary historical comparison and explore its implications over five chapters. The first chapter serves as a more synoptic, prefatory consideration of the crucial dynamics that the thesis goes on to address in the subsequent four chapters, all of which focus upon one author.

Chapter 1 functions as a long introduction to the question of legacies of modernism in postwar and contemporary American creative writing. It describes the scholarly background to this question, as well as the existing literary criticism that has examined the influence of the writers' workshop on American literature. It then takes the first steps in demonstrating this influence by considering a wide sample of poetry that has emerged from the creative writing program. The first section of this consideration notes an unusual proliferation of poetry that turns around the image of the porch, and claims that this proliferation stems in part from the porch's appropriateness as a metaphor for the institutional condition of creative writing. The creative writing program, like the porch, functions as a liminal space between interior and exterior, partially sheltering writers from the literary market by providing them with a teaching salary, but these writers' professional fortunes also depend to some degree upon the judgments and opinions of the wider literary field. The second section takes up a tranche of self-referential poetry that reflexively considers the creative writing program as a context of composition. Next, this chapter discusses each of the subsequent author-based chapters in light of the earlier-developed arguments around modernism and representation. Finally, the chapter provides a basic statistical picture of the creative writing field as context for the literary critical analysis to come.

Chapter 2 focuses upon the work and career of Ezra Pound. It investigates Pound's poetics in detail, and provides a benchmark of one hugely influential form of modernism against which more

recently literary practice can be measured. The chapter describes Pound's fraught and contradictory relationship with institutions, connects this institutional background to his poetics, and concludes with a wider survey of modernist attitudes towards the university in the first half of the twentieth century.

Chapter 3 begins by explicitly taking up the question of the style of the creative writing program in the domain of fiction, and considers the pronouncements of leading program figures on prose style and representation. It argues that the fiction of Saul Bellow stands as a revealing exception to the stylistic paradigm of the program, and connects Bellow's exceptional status to his unusual (for a novelist) institutional position as a professor of the humanities at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought. It concludes with a consideration of Bellow's beliefs and practices regarding literary professionalism with respect to modernist antecedents.

Chapter 4 takes the contemporary American poet Jorie Graham as a case study. Graham, arguably the most institutionally successful American poet now writing, has claimed a number of Anglo-American modernists as crucial progenitors. I argue that Graham's poetics actually lie counter to modernist poetics of representation; I further claim that her rise has been exemplary of an creative writing institutional structure that rewards a different set of virtues than the modernist literary field.

Chapter 5 considers the work and career of the novelist David Foster Wallace, who has been hailed by critics as the American creative writing figure *par excellence*. I argue instead that Wallace developed a penetrating critique of the possibilities for the representational capacities of literary language under the creative writing regime. I further argue that he never managed to act on this critique, but instead maintained relationship of paralysing self-frustration with the writers' workshop. Wallace relentlessly produced biting satire of the program's institutional conditions while remaining in a troubling *status quo* of perpetual discontentment for the duration of his career.

I conclude with an afterword that offers brief remarks regarding certain interpretive problems that have attended literary criticism related to the creative writing program, and I sketch

directions of further enquiry that seem to me either especially necessary or especially promising in light of this research.

Chapter One

Introduction: Legacies of Modernism in American Creative Writing

In a preface written to mark the tenth-anniversary reissue of her highly successful first novel, *Free Food for Millionaires* (2007), the Korean American novelist Min Jin Lee describes an eleven-year fiction writing 'apprenticeship' that began with Lee leaving her job in a Manhattan law firm at age twenty-seven due to chronic liver disease, a miscarriage, a difficult pregnancy that ended with the birth of a healthy son, and close family members collapsing under the burden of catastrophic levels of debt, which she and her husband then felt compelled to assume. In the face of these immense challenges, Lee finds herself driven to pursue a course of self-education as a fiction writer; for this she believes she requires professional instruction:

> the more I studied fiction, the more I realised that writing novels required rigorous discipline and mastery, no different than the study of engineering or classical sculpture. I wanted to get formal training. Nevertheless, after having paid for law school, I could not hazard the cost of an MFA. So I fumbled around and made up my own writing program.[1]

The remainder of Lee's preface details the extraordinary lengths to which she goes to fulfill her self-conceived program, and the shame she feels at not belonging to a recognised institution. A new mother with a serious health condition and a highly precarious financial situation, she spends every last resource of energy and money on her substitute MFA. She takes sporadic adult education writing classes whenever she can at the Asian American Writers' Workshop, the Gotham Writers Workshop, and the 92nd Street Y. She manages to gain a competitive place at the Sewanee Writers' Conference and spends $1000 she can ill afford on the fee. Once there, she discovers many other conference participants had received funded places, and endures with shame an overheard conversation in which another attendee casually mocks 'the housewives who had paid full freight to

[1] Min Jin Lee, 'On the 10th Anniversary of *Free Food for Millionaires*,' *Free Food for Millionaires* (New York: Grand Central, 2017), xii.

attend the conference.'[2] She receives a grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts, which she uses to pay for more writing classes in California. She takes prosody classes at the Y to gain a deeper understanding of cadence and sound in fictional prose.

Lee describes, in brief, a condition of authorship that has become associated so strongly with the institution of the graduate creative writing program that not belonging to a recognised program constitutes grounds for grave emotional distress, and an MFA culture that has attained such significance in the minds of aspiring writers that Lee proves herself willing to endure extraordinary personal sacrifices in order to access it in a kind of surrogate form. As this thesis will show, the extent of the imbrication of literary practice and institutionalised education constitutes a literary historically novel state of affairs, and has reshaped the American literary field from a number of different perspectives, from the types of genres that make up the field, to the ways writers sustain themselves financially, to the available forms of consecration and prestige. This thesis attempts to register the literary effects of this novel state of affairs across twentieth-century American fiction and poetry from an historically comparative perspective.

The literature now called Anglo-American literary modernism characteristically incorporates discourses and voices from a surpassingly wide variety of intertexts, often in different languages. Ezra Pound's *Cantos* include English, French, Provençal, Portuguese, German, Italian, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Arabic and Chinese characters, among others. In 1917 T. S. Eliot wrote:

> It's not to disgust anyone
> Nor is it due to the taste of the sewer of my own Ego
> That I've made verses out of different things
> That smell a little bit too much of sauerkraut.

But Eliot wrote these verses abnegating poetry of the ego and valourising polyvocal pastiche in French:

> Ce n'est pas pour qu'on se dégoute
> Ou gout d'égout de mon Ego
> Qu'ai fait des vers de faits divers

[2] *Ibid.* xiii.

Qui sentent un peu trop la choucroute.[3]

Compare these lines, rendered after the late-nineteenth century verse of Tristan Corbière, to the work of some postwar and contemporary poets. One of the most influential collections of American poetry to appear after the Second World War, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), contains by contrast only small fragments of foreign language text—*coup de grâce*, *spumante*—despite unfolding in such locations as Rome, Paris, and Rapallo; a more recent heralded American collection, Jorie Graham's *The End of Beauty* (1987), contains no foreign language text whatsoever.[4] This does not come from want of competence: Lowell produced a volume of translated European poetry, *Imitations*, in 1961, while Graham speaks French and Italian fluently. Furthermore, neither Lowell's nor Graham's poems have been 'made up of different things,' or different voices, in the manner of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922; originally titled 'He Do the Police in Different Voices') or Pound's *Cantos*; their poetry does not unfold through juxtaposition or collage. Lowell's poetry seems to emanate from an autobiographical or 'confessional' subject; Graham's from a volatile, though ultimately consistent, singular perceptive consciousness.

These examples begin to suggest some of the ways in which the range and modes of literary engagement have changed in the passage from modernism to the American literature of the postwar and contemporary literary period. This thesis aims to offer an historical explanation for some of these changes in literary form, changes many critics of modernism and its aftermath have perceived. Eliot's assemblies of literature out of different things, and different languages, forms a crucial part of the conception of modernism that Langdon Hammer has pithily labelled 'Janus-faced,' at once committed to experimental practices that would open ossified forms towards the possibilities of the future, and a traditionalism that would recover permanent features of human experience across time

[3] T. S. Eliot, 'Petit Epître,' *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 71, 13-15. I am indebted to, but have modified slightly, the translation in Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 174.
[4] Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Vintage, 1959); Jorie Graham, *The End of Beauty* (New York: Ecco Press, 1997).

and place by mining the cultural past.[5] Just about every major critical account of modernism and its aftermath in one way or another registers the perception that modernism flourished and then contracted into a period less radically innovative, less polyglossic, and less interested in the incorporation of tradition.[6]

While I aim to remain as positive and historically-oriented as possible in the chapters that follow, critics frequently couch these perceptions in language of literary or cultural decline. Andreas Huyssen, for instance, has influentially delimited a postwar and contemporary artistic field that had become characterised by repetition across a number of domains, in the wake of a modernism that he associates with the uncovering of the new. An experimental poetics descended from the historical *avant-garde* continues to reiterate a vision of poetry as exploding language's pretense to referentiality, together with claims about this kind of poetry as a vehicle for concrete political change that strain

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[5] Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). For an account of the critical history of the confusion that ensued when critics felt compelled to choose one side of this binary at the complete expense of the other, see Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Definitional Excursions: The Meaning of Modern/Modernity/Modernism,' *Modernism/Modernity* 8.3 (2001): 493-513.

[6] For a general overview of contemporary writers' accounts of a modernist era coming to an end, see Chris Baldick's chapter 'Retrospect: Three Decades of Modern Realism' in his *Oxford English Literary History: Volume 10: 1910-1940: The Modern Movement* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 391-401. Maurice Beebe, addressing the question 'What was modernism?' as posed by the critic Harry Levin in 1960, wrote in 1974: 'The critics who have taken up the question vary considerably in their approaches and definitions, but most of them would accept Professor Levin's use of the past tense in his title. [...] Although a few major Modernists are still alive and productive, the main thrust of the Modernist movement in literature and the arts has ended.' Peter Bürger, one of the most important theorists of the twentieth-century *avant-garde*, has noted that the disruptive potential of *avant-garde* practice quickly became conventionalised in the putatively *avant-garde* work that came after the Second World War. 'Nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock,' Bürger claims, describing a postwar literary and artistic field in which audience expectations had been altered by the historical *avant-garde* to such a degree that the idea that a change in aesthetic form would prove shocking no longer seemed convincing. In their influential volume on European modernism, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane argue that the literary movements that have followed modernism essentially constitute diluted repetitions of modernist antecedents: 'Modernism was an art of an age of growing cultural relativism and improving communications; what has followed it, the art of the Postmodern, is in a sense simply a yet more multi-varied replay, often in highly parodic form, of that rise in relativism and cultural pluralism.' From a different critical perspective, textual scholars such as Lawrence Rainey, George Bornstein, and Jerome McGann have associated modernism with historically specific practices of textual production, marketing, and distribution. For McGann and Bornstein, modernist writing distinguishes itself through its awareness and utilization of the material features of texts—e.g. coloured ink, typography, page design—in the furtherance of its literary aims. As McGann has written, 'In modernist writing the aesthetic space begins to turn into writing space.' For Rainey, modernist texts strategically positioned themselves as specialized commodity forms, in order to take advantage of favourable market conditions and networks of distribution. Maurice Beebe, 'What Modernism Was,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 3.5 (1974): 1065; Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 81; Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane, 'Preface,' in Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane, eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1976), 14; Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 178. See also George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001); Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998).

credulity. 'Like a parasitic growth,' writes Huyssen, 'conformism has all but obliterated the original iconoclastic and subversive thrust of the historical avant-garde of the first three or four decades of this century. This conformism is manifest in the vast depoliticization of post-World War II art and its institutionalization as administered culture, as well as in academic interpretations.'[7] Commenting on contemporary fiction in a book with the pointed title *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010), the novelist and critic Gabriel Josipovici tells the story of a literary historical fall from a modernism of high metaphysical and epistemological ambition to a postwar literature of anecdote that functions for its readers only to 'pass the time': these works 'are thin, illustrative, […] recounting anecdotes which may or may not hold our attention but to which we certainly would not want to return, since they lack that sense of density of other worlds suggested but lying beyond words, which we experience when reading Proust or James or Robbe-Grillet.'[8]

Huyssen's account of the *avant-garde* side of the spectrum does not account for the concomitant presence in the American literary field of a more traditional strain of poetry, prominently associated with Lowell, that continues in the vein of the lyric, of 'feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude' in John Stuart Mill's classic definition.[9] But to call this poetry traditional does not imply that it relies upon tradition in the same manner as Anglo-American modernism, because the temporal landscape of this poetry tends to remain restricted to the present/circumscribed past of emotional experience and autobiographical memory. Hammer has observed that 'American poetry in the middle decades of the twentieth century' tends to 'centre on the lives of poets themselves,' and notes that explanations for the arising of this phenomenon do not seem immediately obvious.[10]

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[7] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 3.
[8] Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2010), 166.
[9] John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,' *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Vol. I: Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Abingdon: Routledge, 1981), 348.
[10] Langdon Hammer, 'Plath's Lives: Poetry, Professionalism, and the Culture of the School,' *Representations* 75 (2001): 61.

In the domain of prose, the most significant movement of experimental American fiction in the postwar period has been the flourishing of 'postmodernist' novels and short stories in the 1970s and 1980s, but this work now figures in the contemporary literary field largely as an artefact of literary historical interest. The New York *Times*, for instance, regularly reviewed the output of postmodernist *par excellence* John Barth until 1996, but has not given space to any of the seven works he has subsequently published, including the 2015 appearance of his *Collected Stories.* It would be impossible to imagine the publishing world receiving a writer like Barth's close contemporary Philip Roth with similar disinterest. As Mitchum Huehls has recently argued, even much recent American fiction with experimental ambition cleaves to a more or less conventional realism, which remains the dominant mode of contemporary American novels and short stories.[11]

Given its apparent descent from modernism, the state of the contemporary American literary field presents as a literary historical puzzle. What accounts for this state of the field? What explains the waning of the most important formal practices associated with Anglo-American modernism?

I claim that the development of the creative writing program, and the increasingly dominant presence of the university within the lives and careers of American writers, stands as the most convincing explanation. In 1975 fifteen creative writing programs awarded the Master of Fine Arts degree, the standard graduate creative writing qualification.[12] While creative writing did not become a category of interest to the National Centre for Education Statistics in the United States until 1988,

[11] Huehls has compellingly illustrated this dynamic in his study of what he calls the 'post theory theory novel.' These novels, which include Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Jeffrey Eugenides *The Marriage Plot* (2011), and Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), seem comparable to postmodernist antecedents in that they include abundant references to theory, but understand theory simply as another object in the world to be represented through conventional realism, in contrast to earlier novels that allow the theory to which they refer to complicate the representational practices they employ. Mitchum Huehls, 'The Post Theory Theory Novel,' *Contemporary Literature* 56.2 (2015): 280-310. For an examination of texts that do reflexively apply theoretical concepts to the fictional text itself, see Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012).

[12] This data comes from the professional association that represents creative writing programs and teachers, the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP), which maintains a database of both academic and non-academic creative writing programs, as well as job listings for teachers of creative writing. *Program Director's Handbook: Guidelines, Policies, and Information for Creative Writing Programs* (Fairfax: Association of Writers & Writing Programs, 2012), 104.

on the basis of calculations of average class size it is possible to estimate reliably that between 150 and 200 students would have received MFAs in 1975. In 2015, the most recent year for which reliable data exists, 191 programs awarded the MFA degree; fully 3310 students graduated with MFAs, and 3144 students graduated with bachelor's degrees in creative writing.[13]

I regard this literary historical puzzle as one that should be approached through analysis of positive stylistic features of literary texts, as well as archival evidence that illuminates the institutional experiences of twentieth-century American writers. My approach aims to achieve breadth along with depth, surveying writers from diverse backgrounds and time periods, but exploring their work and careers in detail and at length. The four author-based chapters that follow the present more synoptic chapter evaluate the work of Ezra Pound, Saul Bellow, Jorie Graham and David Foster Wallace, and pay particular attention to the relationship between their institutional environments and their literary output. I claim that institutional environments significantly influence the way these writers conceive of and practice representation and referentiality. My chapter on Ezra Pound highlights the importance of an idea of 'correspondence' to Pound's poetics, and shows how Pound's insistence that language hook on to an external referent like 'nature,' 'reality,' or 'the green world' emerges out of his opposition to what he considered to be a literary academy preoccupied with philological modes of thinking that invariably understood language as an areferential closed system. The next chapter on Saul Bellow reads Bellow's prose style against prose styles that have grown out of the institutional context of the writers' workshop. It argues that Bellow's style comes

[13] Different data sources diverge on the numbers of MFA programs in recent years. The number quoted for 2015 in the main text, 191, comes from my own research using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the core postsecondary database of the National Centre for Education Statistics in the United States. The AWP gives this number as 235, in their 2016 'Report on the Academic Job Market.' This difference may arise from the limiting assumptions I set on the data set I generated using IPEDS. I instructed the database to limit data to four-year institutions that confer degrees of baccalaureate and above, in an effort to differentiate graduate creative writing from the many more vocational creative writing courses that award associate degrees and their equivalents. In practice the division between four-year baccalaureate-and-above institutions and associate degree-awarding institutions is not always clear cut, and categorical ambiguity in this area may account for this numerical divergence. IPEDS can be accessed at https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/. See also Jason Tucker, 'AWP's 2015-2016 Report on the Academic Job Market,' December 2016, https://www.awpwriter.org/careers/career_advice_view/4188/awps_20152016_report_on_the_academic_job_market.

about significantly as a result of his unusually interdisciplinary institutional context, in comparison to styles that have developed in narrower professional environments of creative writing learning and teaching. My chapter on Jorie Graham argues that despite attempts to present itself as an inheritor of modernism, Graham's poetry remains fundamentally invested in an areferential conception of poetic language, a conception that I contend runs counter to the strains of modernism she wants to claim as ancestors. I suggest that this case study has wider implications for the fate of modernism within the contemporary creative writing regime. Finally, my chapter on David Foster Wallace shows how Wallace transformed satirical investigations of what he regarded as the intolerably heteronomous conditions of institutionalisation into fictional capital.

I proceed using the conceptual lens of cosmopolitanism because it uncovers a link between practices of representation and context that clarifies greatly the historical comparison between Anglo-American modernism and the postwar and contemporary creative writing regime. Where American modernist poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound left their birthplaces in Missouri and Idaho first for American universities in urban centres on the East Coast and then the great capitals of Europe, the rise of American creative writing has been most prominently associated with the Midwest. The career of Jorie Graham follows the path of Eliot and Pound in reverse, beginning in Italy and France before proceeding to the Iowa Writers' Workshop for an MFA, where she would later become director. In classic accounts of cosmopolitanism, the 'citizen of the world' finds him- or herself at home in different national and cultural circumstances, able to transcend his or her native cultural conditioning in order to engage meaningfully with individuals and contexts that are culturally other.[14] This moral/epistemological orientation finds a literary analogue in an Anglo-

[14] This conception of cosmopolitanism goes as far back as Diogenes of Sinope, but its most influential modern formation comes out of the political philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant claims that the developing application of reason will eventually result in the realisation of a 'universal community,' in which all individuals of the world will treat all other individuals as fellow citizens, and never as strangers. This ethical belief relies upon an epistemological premise: 'the political maxims adopted must not be influenced by the prospect of any benefit or happiness which might accrue to the state if it followed them […] they should be influenced only by the pure concept of rightful duty, i.e. by an obligation whose principle is given *a priori* by pure reason.' Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,' in *Political Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 123-124. My adoption of the framework of cosmopolitanism relies largely upon the formal applications in literary work of this epistemological aspect, which asserts

American modernism that juxtaposes discourses and voices from vastly different times and places together in single novels and poems; these practices rely upon the premise that it is possible for forms and texts from enormously different cultural contexts to speak to each other in literarily productive ways. The final three chapters of this thesis that consider contemporary writers argue that the literature that has developed out of the creative writing program has been considerably less polyglossic by comparison, and that this formal development has arisen significantly from the institutional structure that lies beneath it.

My deep focus on four authors distinguishes the present work from the existing literary scholarship on the creative writing program, which has been generalist and thematic; sustained author-based chapters facilitate the emergence of a level of nuance that tends to be obscured in a more thematic approach.[15] The effect of creative writing education upon postwar American literature had barely been remarked in literary scholarship until the 2009 publication of Mark McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*.[16] The book argues that 'the

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that individuals may rise above local interests and achieve a measure of disinterestedness. Literary studies oriented towards questions of cosmopolitanism have also tended to focus more on the ethical aspect of cosmopolitanism, the ways in which literature may or may not give imaginative access to other minds, and thus possibly function as a constructive force in the development of more compassionate societies. For influential work in this vein see the collection *For Love of Country,* ed. Martha Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

[15] David Winters' recent work on Gordon Lish's practice as an editor and teacher of creative writing stands as an exception to this trend. Using extensive archival and interview material, Winters sketches a detailed picture of Lish's private creative writing classes, along with the philosophical influences that lay behind them. Eric Bennett's book *Workshops of Empire* does pay close attention to Paul Engle and Wallace Stegner, foundational teachers of creative writing at Iowa and Stanford respectively who proved extraordinarily influential to the larger development of twentieth-century American creative writing. But Bennett's emphasis falls on their role in the development of master discourses of American humanism, liberalism, and internationalism in the cultural context of the Cold War, rather than the more focused relationship between institutional context and literary style. Richard Jean So discusses the influence of Engle, together with these discourses, on a group of Taiwanese writers whom Engle recruited to Iowa's International Writing Program in the 1960s. David Winters, 'Theory and the Creative Writing Classroom: Conceptual Revision in the School of Gordon Lish,' *Contemporary Literature* 57.1 (2016): 111-134; Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing During the Cold War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015); Richard Jean So, 'The Invention of the Global MFA: Taiwanese Writers at Iowa, 1964–1980,' *American Literary History* 29.3 (2017): 499-520. For a collection of articles dealing with Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop during his tenure as director, see *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, ed. Robert Dana (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999).

[16] D. G. Myers' *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) told the story of the history of the formation of the creative writing program, and its relationship to early twentieth-century teaching practices of philology and composition. Myers trades largely in institutional history, and does not deal in any detail with the consequences of these institutional developments for twentieth-century American literature at large.

rise of the creative writing program stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history,' and that '[t]he gradual conjoining of the activities of literary production and teaching over the course of the postwar period is [...] about as close to a genuine literary historical novelty as one could hope to see.'[17] McGurl's argument gained extraordinary traction in scholarly circles and beyond; Louis Menand reviewed the book in *The New Yorker*,[18] and it received the 2010 Truman Capote Prize in Literary Criticism. Highly unusually, the book received two notices in the *London Review of Books*, which appeared more than two years apart; the first, from the novelist and critic Elif Batuman, took a strongly negative view of McGurl's argument, while the second, from the Marxist literary theorist Fredric Jameson, took a perspective much closer to that of the rest of the literary critical community that acknowledged the originality and force of the mode of analysis McGurl had introduced.[19] McGurl's book has since spawned a follow-up edited collection of essays, published in 2016, designed to 'explore the consequences and implications, as well as the lacunae and liabilities, of McGurl's foundational intervention.'[20]

McGurl's book has proven valuable as the first sustained scholarly examination of the creative writing program's effect on contemporary literature, having effectively opened up a new field of enquiry.[21] It stands out against a great many other treatments of creative writing programs that have not been at all scholarly, and that rely for the most part upon opinions about the state and quality of contemporary literature ungrounded in anything more substantial than personal taste; frequently these opinions come from writers with personal experience of creative writing workshops in one form or another. These treatments tend to resemble jeremiads, and generally deplore the changes wrought by creative writing on the literary field; often these treatments have value as far as

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[17] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2009), ix, 21.
[18] Louis Menand, 'Show or Tell?' *The New Yorker*, 8 June 2009, 106-112.
[19] Elif Batuman, 'Get a Real Degree,' *London Review of Books*, 23 September 2010, 3-8; Fredric Jameson, 'Dirty Little Secret,' *London Review of Books*, 22 November 2012, 39-42.
[20] Loren Glass, 'From the Pound Era to the Program Era and Beyond,' *After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of Creative Writing in the University*, ed. Loren Glass (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 1.
[21] To take one measure of influence, as of 5 September 2017 McGurl's book had received 391 citations on Google Scholar.

they go, and for what they are—i.e. works of literary journalism, rather than attempts at producing analysis that stands up to the standards of academic scholarship. Classic examples of work in this vein include Donald Hall's 'Poetry and Ambition' (1988), which has since become notorious for its image of poetry workshops as assembly lines producing 'McPoems,' and John W. Aldridge's *Talents and Technicians* (1992), particularly critical of 'Brat Pack' writers such as Bret Easton Ellis.[22] Articles and columns continuous with this type of work frequently appear in the popular press, and again critiques appear with much more frequency than affirmations.[23] Clearly the question of whether the creative writing program should exist, or should exist in the forms it does, presses upon deep intuitions about literature and education—how literature should look stylistically, what role literature should play socially, and whether these aesthetic and political ends can be achieved pedagogically.

In spite of the interest such questions evidently generate, surprisingly little information that holds up to scholarly scrutiny exists about the creative writing program. McGurl's work has begun to address this lack, but significant gaps remain to be filled in. Likely the most critical gap comes out of McGurl's failure to address poetry at all. He speaks to this in his introduction, speculating that a defence of his generic concentration might lie in the character of the postwar literary epoch: 'How […] can I all but ignore the genre of poetry [..]? I could try to justify my focus by saying that the postwar period is, in some deep sense, a "novelistic" and not a "poetic" period, and I might even half believe it.' Yet McGurl chooses not to pursue this line of argument: 'Better […] to admit that a restriction to fiction is simply one of the innumerable limitations I have had to accept in order to

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[22] Donald Hall, 'Poetry and Ambition,' *Poetry and Ambition: Essays 1982-99* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 1-20; John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly Line Fiction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992).

[23] See for instance Ryan Boudinot's 'Things I Can Say About MFA Writing Programs Now That I No Longer Teach in One,' *The Stranger,* 27 February 2015, http://www.thestranger.com/books/features/2015/02/27/21792750/things-i-can-say-about-mfa-writing-programs-now-that-i-no-longer-teach-in-one; or a recent article in the 'Educational Life' section of the New York *Times*, Cecilia Capuzzi Simon's 'Why Writers Love to Hate the M.F.A.' *New York Times*, 9 April 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/education/edlife/12edl-12mfa.html. For a similar article from a UK perspective see Alison Flood's 'Creative writing professor Hanif Kureishi says such courses are "a waste of time,"' *The Guardian*, 4 March 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/04/creative-writing-courses-waste-of-time-hanif-kureishi.

lend coherence to the critical narrative I want to construct, which will not come to the resounding conclusion of a post-program era but will trail off into an uncertain future.'[24] In such moments McGurl's work veers closer to more speculative and impressionistic analyses of the creative writing program, floating rather nebulous hypotheses—what could it mean for the postwar period to be 'novelistic,' especially in '*some* deep sense'?—without bothering to follow them up with any kind of substantial evidence.

McGurl's avoidance of poetry has been significant for his own work, and for the criticism that has come in his wake, because while the creative writing program has undoubtedly created a large change in the structure of the field of American fiction, the change that it has created in the structure of American poetry has been considerably more significant. For the biggest winners in the field of American fiction, book publishing can remain a significant source of income; while many of these winners continue to teach in creative writing programs, book publishing continues to provide them with significant financial support. For example, the novelist David Foster Wallace, the subject of my final chapter, taught at creative writing programs for the large part of his fictional career. His 1996 *magnum opus Infinite Jest* also sold to Little, Brown for an advance of $80,000 in June 1992; upon its appearance it quickly became a bestseller, selling 44,000 copies in its first year of publication.[25]

Even for most of the biggest winners in the field of American poetry, by contrast, book sales tend not to produce sufficient income to survive. There are exceptions: A collection by the Canadian poet Rupi Kaur was, as of 24 April 2017, the fifth bestselling book on Amazon.com. According to calculators available online that estimate total sales on the basis of Amazon sales rank, this translates to 40,436 books sold per month, or 485,232 books sold per year. At a price of $8.99, this translates to annual gross revenue of nearly $4.5 million; assuming a royalty rate of roughly 10%, this would

[24] McGurl, *Program Era*, 28.
[25] See D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking 2012), 171, 225.

translate to a personal income of nearly half a million dollars.[26] Kaur has been labelled an 'Instapoet,' along with Lang Leav and Tyler Knott Gregson; her success seems driven by social media presence much more than the traditional dynamics of literary publication.[27] The much more usual path for a winner in the field of American poetry would be that of a poet such as Robert Hass, Poet Laureate of the United States from 1995 to 1997, winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The book for which he won his Pulitzer, *Time and Materials: Poems 1997-2005* (2007), presently has an Amazon sales rank of 254,100, which translates to sales of around eighteen books per month, or 216 per year. At a retail price of $11.75, *Time and Materials* produces a gross yearly revenue of approximately $2,500, which would yield yearly royalties of roughly $250.[28] Hass teaches as a full professor at the University of California at Berkeley, an institution required to disclose the salaries of its employees. In 2015 Hass was paid $252,632.[29]

Hass's does not represent an entirely typical case in that he teaches in an English department rather than a dedicated department of creative writing, and his major qualification is a PhD in English rather than a workshop MFA. Nevertheless, his example accurately represents a state of the field in which elite poets gain an enormous amount of financial compensation from prestigious teaching positions, rather than books sales. These positions act as a form of patronage that shelter poets from the marketplace. While the creative writing program undoubtedly performs this function for writers of fiction as well, it does not do so to nearly the same extent. My chapter on the American poet Jorie Graham explores in detail the institutional contours of one especially representative case of contemporary poetic success.

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[26] Bestseller information comes from 'Amazon Best Sellers,' accessed 24 April 2017, https://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/ref=sv_b_2. The sales rank calculator I used comes from TCK Publishing: 'Amazon Book Sales Calculator,' https://www.tckpublishing.com/amazon-book-sales-calculator/. TCK Publishing claims to calculate sales within a margin of error of 6%, although they do not specify how they calculate sales on the basis of sales rank in any sort of detail.

[27] See Huma Qureshi, 'How do I love thee? Let me Instagram it,' *The Guardian*, 24 November 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/23/instapoets-instagram-twitter-poetry-lang-leav-rupi-kaur-tyler-knott-gregson.

[28] As of 24 April 2017.

[29] *The Daily Californian*, a Berkeley student newspaper, has created a searchable database of academic compensation. http://projects.dailycal.org/paychecker/person/robert-hass/.

Thus accounts of creative writing that focus on fiction at the expense of poetry ignore the sector of the field in which the distinguishing features of the phenomenon are most exaggerated. An holistic, detailed picture of the creative writing field has yet to appear in literary scholarship. Aside from his exclusive concentration upon novels and short stories, McGurl's account is relatively light on data, and readers of his book come away without a good numerical picture of the growth and present constitution of creative writing education in the United States. Seth Abramson, the compiler of *Poets & Writers*' MFA program rankings, has recently produced a more data-reliant analysis of the American workshop field, as have the poets and critics Julianna Spahr and Stephanie Young, but the absence of more basic data-driven accounts of creative writing still remains somewhat surprising.[30] Part of this state of affairs may stem from programs' reluctance to divulge data to investigating researchers. Abramson, in his 'Further Reading' to the 2014 MFA Rankins, has noted that 'Graduate degree programs in creative writing respond to assessment-related inquiries at a lower rate than do programs in almost any other field of study in the United States.'[31] I found this to be true of my own non-assessment-related inquiries as well. Over the course of my research, I contacted fifty-two creative writing programs by phone and by email in an effort to find rosters of graduates, so that I could research the publication and employment records of individual students comprehensively.[32]

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[30] See Seth Abramson, '2014 MFA Index: Further Reading,' *Poets & Writers*, 31 August 2013, https://www.pw.org/content/2014_mfa_index_further_reading; Seth Abramson, 'From Modernism to Metamodernism: Quantifying and Theorizing the Stages of the Program Era,' in *After the Program Era*, 233-248; Julianna Spahr and Stephanie Young, 'The Program Era and the Mainly White Room,' *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 20 September 2015, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-program-era-and-the-mainly-white-room/, also reprinted in *After the Program Era*, 137-178.

[31] Abramson, '2014 MFA Index.'

[32] In the latter half of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 I contacted programs based at: University of Iowa, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, University of Wisconsin at Madison, Brown University, Syracuse University, University of Virginia, University of Texas at Austin, Washington University in Saint Louis, University of Minnesota, University of Oregon, Indiana University, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Vanderbilt University, University of California at Irvine, New York University, Johns Hopkins University, University of Alabama, University of Houston, University of Illinois, Arizona State University, Louisiana State University, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, University of Florida, Southern Illinois University, Universty of Montana, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, Purdue University, University of Wyoming, University of California at San Diego, University of Colorado, Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, University of Arkansas, University of Nevada, University of Notre Dame, University of Mississippi, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, McNeese State University, University of Arizona, The New School, Hollins University, Bowling Green State University, Colorado State University, Texas State University, Columbia University, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, University of South Carolina in Columbia, Boise State University, Boston University, Rutgers University, University of New Hampshire.

Many programs, citing data protection regulations, told me that they were unable to release this information, even with guarantees that student names and data would not appear in any published research. Many programs simply ignored requests by email, or repeatedly promised to follow up requests made by phone and never did, even after repeated callbacks.

Data about the publishing records of creative writing students and faculty has been similarly difficult to mine. It would be highly useful and informative, for instance, to have aggregate data regarding the numbers of MFA students who go on to publish, along with the commercial success of these publications, and thus evaluate the creative writing program from the perspective of economic returns. But there exist many structural impediments to the realization of this data. First, accessing sales figures for individual titles requires access to the Nielsen BookScan service, to which universities do not commonly subscribe. Questions have in any case been raised about the accuracy of BookScan data, particularly in the United States.[33] Aggregate data for the number of trade fiction titles does exist, but this data is difficult to segment. No way suggests itself for gauging the percentage of aggregate trade fiction sales that come from creative writing program products.

There also exists comparatively little description of what actually takes place in the creative writing classroom in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and lived practice. It would be unfair to censure McGurl for this lacuna too strongly, given his position as the inaugurator of this critical field, and the disciplinary modes of investigation within which he operates as a literary critic. More sociological and anthropologically oriented ethnographic observation that would offer scrupulous qualitative data about the actual proceedings of creative writing programs would prove invaluable to future investigations of creative writing education, and the lack of this type of qualitative data has at times proved frustrating to my own efforts at describing this field. The descriptions of creative writing practice that do exist are most often first-person accounts that appear in novels, memoirs,

[33] See John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 47.

and short stories.[34] Examples include Karl Shapiro's *Edsel* (1971), Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru* (1975), David Foster Wallace's 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' (1989), Gail Godwin's *The Good Husband* (1994), Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* (1995), Francine Prose's *Blue Angel* (2000), David Lodge's *Thinks …* (2001), Nam Le's 'Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice' (2008), Tom Grimes's *Mentor* (2010), Lan Samantha Chang's *All Is Forgotten, Nothing Is Lost* (2010), Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle, Vol. 5: Dancing in the Dark* (2015), Eric Bennet's *A Big Enough Lie* (2015), and Godwin's *Publishing* (2015). (A consideration of what some of these texts say about how the program prescribes certain practices of literary style appears at the beginning of Chapter 3 of this dissertation, largely devoted to the work of Saul Bellow.)

Godwin's memoir *Publishing* touches on her experience as a student at the Iowa Writers' workshop in the late 1960s. Her account goes some way towards illustrating the fluid identity of creative writing institutions: Godwin describes her experience of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which tends to be understood as a progenitor of conventional realist fiction,[35] instead as a struggle to resist the postmodernist experimentalism of such teachers as Kurt Vonnegut and Robert Coover. One passage remembers an in-class response to Coover's fictional approach:

> The aim of the modern writer, Coover told us, was to subvert the traditional text and challenge linearity. 'If you as Author are free to take a story anywhere, at any time, and in as many directions as you want, isn't that your obligation?'
>
> God, no, I thought. But I asked him to read my novel about the unhappy Majorcan vacation: as my teacher it was his obligation. He read it promptly and told me

[34] This species of fiction might be thought of as a subcategory of the campus or academic novel. Jeffrey J. Williams has defined the campus novel as dealing with experience of students, and the academic novel as dealing with the experience of faculty. He notes that while genres have increasingly proliferated as the twentieth century has worn on, the academic novel that primarily focuses on faculty has shown the most explosive growth. By Williams's count, only 20 academic novels appeared before 1925, while 238 appeared between 1950 and 2000. Williams notes that one possible explanation for this proliferation may lie in 'the rise of the university-based novelist.' Jeffrey J. Williams, 'The Rise of the Academic Novel,' *American Literary History* 24.3 (2012): esp. 567-568, 578.

[35] Eric Bennett, for instance, described his experience of the Iowa Writers' Workshop a few decades later with frustration. He found that the program encouraged a disappointingly conventional realism, and that anything considered 'postmodern' turned out to be anathema: 'Submitting a "postmodern" story was like belching in class.' Eric Bennett, 'How Iowa Flattened Literature,' *Chonicle of Higher Education*, 10 February 2014, http://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Iowa-Flattened-Literature/144531.

> it was publishable and urged me not to seek publication. 'It will attract the wrong readers and you'll be relegated to the domestic-social novelist slot.'[36]

Like many narratives of program experience, Godwin's makes light humour out of the ineffectiveness of the guidance the program offers. Godwin rejects Coover's philosophy of the novelist's 'obligation,' and she will go on to reject his advice about publishing her novel as well. Godwin makes good comedy by transplanting Coover's usage of 'obligation' into a different context. Where Coover intends 'obligation' as a grandiose Kantian categorical imperative that the modern writer must impose upon herself, Godwin transposes the word drily into the mundane world of institutional exigency. For Coover, reading Godwin's story is part of the job description. Something like this light comic mood recurs frequently in descriptions of the creative writing program in memoir and fiction, and makes rhetorical capital out of the disjunction between expectation and reality. The rhetorical impact of Godwin's anecdote depends upon the implicit expectation that writing programs, like any other university course, make a concrete, useful contribution to their students' skillset and body of knowledge; Godwin's narrative instead presents her teacher's guidance as irrelevant. Earlier, she asks Vonnegut if she should turn her short story into a novel; Vonnegut responds that the story is fine the way it is. '"Well, I decided to turn it into a novel," I informed him in our next conference. "Hey, that's great!" he said.'[37] No further narrative commentary comes forth, but Godwin creates dry comedy through her indifference to Vonnegut's advice, and Vonnegut's subsequent indifference to her indifference.

Prose's *Blue Angel* evokes a similar comic mood, although it describes an undergraduate writing workshop rather than a graduate program. It turns the fumbling attempts of beginning, often unserious writers to comic effect, describing, amongst other efforts, one student's story about sexual intercourse with a dead chicken.[38] Chang's novel tells a narrative of two poets that begins in a workshop that closely resembles Iowa (which Chang has directed since 2006). In an early scene,

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[36] Gail Godwin, *Publishing: A Writer's Memoir* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 27.
[37] *Ibid.* 23.
[38] Francine Prose, *Blue Angel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

Miranda, a more traditionally minded teacher, censures the theoretically motivated experimental efforts of a student: '"No one would choose to read this; it exists to interest only its author and"—she looked around—"the author's illustration of prevailing ideas. It is utterly derivative and utterly unmemorable."'[39] Chang's character makes the familiar gesture of exploding experimental poetry's pretensions to radicalism. While the point may be well taken, the characters the story seems to admire most highly express a form of humanism that sometimes crosses into the territory of sentimentality and naïveté. Miranda follows up her criticism of her would-be experimentalist by falling into a kind of rhapsodic trance and quoting Wallace Stevens's 'The Idea of Order at Key West,' while another poet the story seems to hold in enormous esteem is given to declarations on the order of: '"True poets and writers are alive today. I would like to know them."'[40]

Nam Le's short story 'Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice' also takes place at Iowa, where Le studied, though Le's narrator-protagonist writes more fiction than poetry. Le's story describes writer's block, the terror induced by imminent deadlines, and the politics of literary networks:

> 'It's hot,' a writing instructor told me at a bar. 'Ethnic literature's hot. And important too.'
>
> A couple of visiting literary agents took a similar view. 'There's a lot of polished writing around,' one of them said. 'You have to ask yourself, what makes me stand out?' She tag-teamed her colleague, who answered slowly as though intoning a mantra, 'Your *background* and *life-experience*.'[41]

Le's story, like many fictional texts born of the creative writing program, meditates reflexively on the nexus between autobiography and fiction, and suggestively indicates some of the institutional pressures that shape writing that emerges from the workshop. These works frequently compel interest as literary texts, and analysis addressed to questions of why these writers choose to represent the creative writing program using certain modes of presentation rather than others can prove

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[39] Lan Samantha Chang, *All Is Forgotten, Nothing Is Lost* (New York and London: Norton, 2010), 18.
[40] *Ibid.* 31.
[41] Nam Le, 'Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice,' *The Boat* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), 8-9.

profitable. I pursue this mode of analysis at different moments of this thesis, but it remains important to keep in mind the limitations of relying upon fictional accounts as entirely trustworthy sources of information about an institution. A need for reliably-sourced, ethnographic examination of creative writing practice continues to exist.

To begin to address the manifest, formal effects the creative writing program has wrought upon postwar and contemporary American literature, I would like to consider a sample of poetry, written in program contexts, that turns around a single image that recurs with unusual frequency in this period: the porch. Why should porch images arise so regularly, in poems that traverse the experimental as well as the more traditional ends of the spectrum?

The porch as an architectural phenomenon arose with the surging American middle classes of the late nineteenth-century.[42] Popularized by the landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing, the porch creates a space at once outside and not outside, and can express bourgeois mastery of nature together with the Transcendentalist desire for egoless participation in the environment. It embodies a liminal space between the domestic world of the home and the natural world, between the protected space of the interior and the unsheltered, uncircumscribed domain of the exterior. These poems also stage the dialectic of the protected and the ungoverned temporally by exploring the passage from sheltered childhood innocence to consciousness of the comparative vulnerability of adult existence. The porch provides a convenient staging ground for both depictions of formative childhood moments in protected domestic environments, together with romantic consciousness of the natural world. I want to argue that this liminal setting parallels the position of the writers' workshop within the literary field, in which writers become partially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the market. They stand at least nominally exposed to the competitive 'state of nature' of the literary

[42] A popular picture book, published in 1992, collects photographs and stories from writers from the American South in which porches prominently feature. Reynolds Price, *Out on the Porch: An Evocation in Words and Pictures* (New York: Algonquin Press, 1992).

field, and their professional fortunes depend upon the tastes and opinions of the elite literary public to some degree. At the same time they remain largely institutionally sheltered from the need to make a living by the sale of what they produce.

Consider for instance the 1979 poem 'Starlight' by Philip Levine, who graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1957 before going on to teaching positions at Stanford and Fresno State:

> My father stands in the warm evening
> on the porch of my first house.
> I am four years old and growing tired.
> I see his head among the stars,
> the glow of his cigarette, redder
> than the summer moon riding
> low over the old neighbourhood. We
> are alone, and he asks me if I am happy.
> 'Are you happy?' I cannot answer.[43]

The adjectives create a sense of protection and comfort—'warm,' 'glow'; the father's position on the porch, as if on guard, gives a reassuring sense of a protective parenthood. The 'old neighbourhood' carries a hint of nostalgia, while the specification of the 'first house' indicates the importance of domestic space to the speaker—he cares enough about the houses of his upbringing to number them chronologically in his mind. Romantic images from the natural world join the domestic description—the stars, the moon. The significance of the poem turns around the importance of the moment described in the emotional development of the speaker—the precise, largely visual delineation of a memory works in the service of portraying an autobiographically formative experience.

Donald Justice, a long-time teacher of creative writing at many universities, notably Iowa, presents the porch in a similar mood in a poem called 'Memory of a Porch.'

> What I remember
> Is how the wind-chime
> Commenced to stir
> As she spoke of her childhood,
>
> […]

[43] Philip Levine, 'Starlight,' *New Selected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 161.

> And in the deep silence
> Below all memory
> The sighing of ferns
> Half-asleep in their boxes.[44]

Justice produces something close to Levine's vein of gentle nostalgia. The reader does not know the identity of the female character who speaks of her childhood, but it would seem to be an older relative; again, the poem produces the sense of an emotionally significant childhood setting. The stirring of windchimes swell, soundtrack-like, to accompany a narrative of childhood; ferns sigh in the deep silence, seeming to gesture abstractly towards a metaphysical depth that never manifests with any kind of fullness. 'Commenced' feels a portentous word choice, especially given the attempt to evoke a childhood consciousness.

Another Iowa faculty member, Robert Lowell, also uses the porch to explore an image of childhood in 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereaux Winslow,' from *Life Studies* (1959), but mimics a child's perspective with more resoluteness.

> I sat on the stone porch, looking through
> screens as black-grained as drifting coal.
> *Tockytock, tockytock*
> clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock,
> slung with strangled, wooden game.
> Our farmer was cementing a root-house under the hill.
> One of my hands was cool on a pile
> of black earth, the other warm
> on a pile of lime. […][45]

The onomatopoeic third line completes in the fourth line with a childishly perfect rhyme, contrasted with slant rhymes of other lines (coal/hill/pile; game/warm/lime). Here the porch functions as a different kind of liminal space between the domestic and natural worlds. The clumping of the clock gives the scene something of an interior feel, but the speaker finds himself visually divided from the inside of the house. The farmer outside seems much more present to consciousness. Again the sense of a formative childhood experience repeats, though in this case the nature of the formative

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[44] Donald Justice, 'Memory of a Porch,' *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 72.
[45] Robert Lowell, 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Deveraux Winslow,' *Life Studies* (New York: Vintage, 1959), 61.

experience presents much more clearly; Uncle Deveraux Winslow is dying, and the poem describes the speaker's first awareness of death.

To take an example from a more recent Iowa graduate (1996), consider a few stanzas from Mary Szybist's 'To You Again' from the collection *Incarnadine*, the winner of the 2013 National Book Award for poetry:

> Still, how many afternoons have I spent
> peeling blue paint from
>
> our porch steps, peering above
> hedgerows, the few parked cars for the first
>
> glimpse of you. How many hours under
> the overgrown, pink Camillas, thinking
>
> the color was wrong for you, thinking
> you'd appear
>
> after my next
> blink.
>
> Soon you'll come down the stairs
> to tell me something. And I'll say,
>
> okay. Okay. I'll say it
> like that, say it just like
>
> that, I'll go on being
> your never-enough.[46]

In this poem, the porch acts as the physical site for the registration of inadequacy, which culminates in the speaker's declaration of resignation to occupying a painful position of inferiority. The liminality of the porch parallels the liminality of the speaker's situation *vis-à-vis* her relationship; the speaker and her partner seem neither fully together nor fully apart, not fully at home with each other yet also inhabiting the same domestic space. One way the poem registers the incompleteness of this relationship comes through its depiction of communication, which remains entirely hypothetical. The actual act of communication, which Szybist emphasizes with the repeated 'say it / like that, say

[46] Mary Szybist, 'To You Again,' *Incarnadine* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2013), 50-51.

it just like // that' never actually takes place; the encounter with her lover, just come down the stairs, can only be imagined. The other porch poems quoted above have their own difficulties with communication. Levine's speaker cannot answer his father; Justice's speaker describes a woman remembering her childhood, but recounts nothing of what she says—he remembers only the sound of windchimes. These poems trade in emotional tone, expressed through sound, touch, and image, more than they trade in properly discursive disclosure. These poems remain in the single register of the autobiographical, lyric consciousness; even when external voices enter the frame, they appear in paraphrase, refracted through the speaker's memory or imagination. They do not attempt to create dialogic or polyvocal verbal artefacts.

Poetry with certain of these characteristics—investment in the self, particularly with attention to formative childhood experience, risking nostalgia and sentimentality, conveyed through a likeable if restrained voice that tends to think in detailed concrete images—has come in for analysis, often disparaging, under various names. The Language poet Charles Bernstein describes poetry with a similar set of characteristics as 'official verse culture,' and, in an article published in *Harpers* in 1989, associates it especially with poetry published in *The New Yorker*. Bernstein conducts an analysis of water imagery in *New Yorker* poems similar to the analysis I have begun with the image of the porch, and concludes that official verse culture has produced a homogenous poetry of derivation and impotence. Wittily, Bernstein surveys the poetry across a span of sixteen issues and discovers that 'In all but three of these issues, 100 percent of the poems published included at least one water image.' Donald Hall counts amongst the gravest offenders whom Bernstein identifies; Bernsten describes Hall's water image as 'state-of-the-art': 'Like an oarless boat through midnight's watery/ghosthouse . . . I drift on/January's tide . . . /to repose's shore—where all waves halt.' (Hall also has a porch poem that fits squarely within this tradition: 'I look at you / from the porch of the farmhouse / where I watched you all summer / as a boy. [...] I will not rock on this porch /

when I am old.'[47]) Seamus Heaney, Bernstein claims, provides 'the *New Yorker* epiphany par excellence: "the absolute river/between us and it all."'[48]

Bernstein, it should be noted, makes his critique of official verse culture a part of a much broader, Frankfurt School-type critique of a social world that has come under 'the hegemony of techno-rationalised discourse,' a hegemony of which the writers' workshop forms a part: 'While many intellectuals would be happy to sympathise with Blake's view that scientific rationality is not the only knowledge-producing method, this is usually, and the metaphor is apt, lip service. Scientists, not literary or other artists, are brought in to give authority to public policy commissions; formally investigative poets are excluded from teaching jobs in "creative" writing programs.'[49] The inverted commas around 'creative' signals Bernstein's view that these programs could not possibly be less genuinely creative, complicit as they are in the reproduction of discourses that make political domination possible. Bernstein published the words quoted above in 1986; four years later, he became a teacher of creative writing, as the David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the State University of New York at Buffalo.[50]

Donald Hall, despite his demonstrated facility with both water and porch poems, has made a similar argument with respect to the creative writing program in the influential essay 'Poetry and Ambition,' remembered especially for its deployment of the term 'McPoem.' Hall has in mind poems like the above for a target, poems that are '*readable,* charming, funny, touching, sometimes even intelligent. But they are usually brief, they resemble each other, they are anecdotal, they do not extend themselves, they make no great claims, they connect small things to other small things.'[51]

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[47] Donald Hall, 'Mount Kearsarge,' *White Apples and the Taste of Stone: Selected Poems, 1946-2006* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 62.
[48] Charles Bernstein, 'Wet Verse at *The New Yorker*,' *Harper's Magazine*, November 1989, 30-31.
[49] Charles Bernstein, 'Living Tissue/Dead Ideas,' in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1986), 371-372.
[50] For an excellent account of the tensions between Language poetry's iconoclasm and its absorption into the creative writing academy, see Andrew Epstein, 'Verse vs. Verse,' *Lingua Franca*, September 2000, 45-54.
[51] Hall, 'Poetry and Ambition,' 2; Hall's emphasis. For a recent work of criticism that uses the concept of the 'McPoem' as a point of departure to consider the influence of the workshop upon contemporary poetry, see Julie LaRue Porter, 'Beyond McPoetry: Contemporary American Poetry in the Institutionalized Creative Writing Program Era,' Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2012.

These 'McPoems' have been produced by a system of creative writing programs that, like corporations, 'exist to create or discover consumers' desires and fulfill them.'[52] This type of poetry lacks engagement and excitement, seemingly surrendered to the world as it is, a space of quiet, isolation, introspection. The American poet Tony Hoagland has similarly described poetry with these characteristics as 'the American poetry of image' that 'covered the Midwestern plains like wheat' in the 1970s; this link between style and geography evokes a poetry that feels a long way from the noise and energy of America's coastal cities.[53] Hoagland does not make the connection explicitly, but the Iowa Writers' Workshop's increasing dominance of the American poetry field undoubtedly lies substantially behind his Midwestern wheat metaphor.

Thus just as Berstein and Hall brand such individualistic, essentially quietist poetry as the bourgeois product of official verse culture, other more experimental poets who intend their verse to carry political inflections have seized upon the image of the porch as a shorthand useful to the project of critique of middle-class values. Rae Armantrout, often thought of as a foundational figure of West Coast Language poetry, also Professor (now Emerita) of Poetry and Poetics at the University of California, San Diego, plays up the bourgeois overtones of the porch in her 2001 poem 'Traveling through the Yard.' The poem responds to longtime Lewis & Clark professor of creative writing William Stafford's much-anthologised 'Traveling through the Dark,' which describes a speaker finding a dead, pregnant doe in the middle of the highway, and then pushing it over the nearby canyon edge in the interests of the safety of other motorists.[54]

> It was lying near my back porch
> in the gaudy light of morning—
> a dove corpse, oddly featherless,
> alive with flies.
> I stopped,
> dustpan in hand, and heard
> them purr over their feast.
> To leave that there would make some stink!

[52] Hall, 'Poetry and Ambition,' 7.
[53] Tony Hoagland, 'Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment,' *Poetry,* March 2006, 508.
[54] William Stafford, 'Traveling through the Dark,' *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1998), 77.

> So thinking hard for all of us,
> I scooped it up, heaved it
> across the marriage counselor's fence.[55]

The abstract 'dark' of Stafford's poem, with mysterious metaphysical connotations of the unknown, becomes the quotidian 'yard' of Armantrout's poem, signaled again by the presence of the porch. Stafford's poem unfolds by a canyon; for Armantrout the back porch signifies a similarly exterior setting, but a considerably more domestic one than Stafford's, in which the speaker can 'hear the wilderness listen.'[56] Like Armantrout's, Stafford's speaker also thinks hard 'for all of us'—'all of us' presumably intending to encompass the dead doe, the living fawn within her, and unknown future motorists to whom the deer might prove hazardous—before ultimately deciding to shift the animal. The close of the poem dramatises the making of an ostensibly difficult choice—the sacrifice of the fawn, who would likely not be viable outside the womb in any case, and the desecration of the doe's body, balanced against the safety of the drivers who will come this way in the future. Stafford's speaker, in a kind of romantic, pantheistic communion with the 'listening wilderness' and 'all of us,' performs the action for the greater good. Armantrout sends up Stafford's romanticism skillfully. Instead of the conventionally appealing fawn, Armantrout's carcass contains repulsive flies. 'Thinking hard for all of us' does not refer to an altruistic consequentialist calculation for the greatest good, but rather the opposite: Armantrout's speaker considers the consequences for all concerned, realises that leaving the dove where it lies would prove unpleasant for *her*, and makes self-interested comfort the overriding principle of her decision, ultimately making the dove carcass somebody else's problem. Armantrout gives the neighbour the bourgeois occupation *par excellence* of marriage counselor, a profession at once associated with American therapy culture and the maintenance of the American nuclear family. In doing so, she wrenches her reader from Stafford's natural landscape of unconditioned romanticism to the repugnant realities and petty community dynamics of a much more domesticated social world.

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[55] Rae Armantrout, 'Traveling Through the Yard,' *Veil: New and Selected Poems* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 30.
[56] Stafford, 77.

Armantrout uses an image of the porch to signify in a similar way in the title poem of *Partly: New and Selected Poems, 2001-2015*:

> In this ad
> for Newfoundland,
> an old woman
> steps onto the porch
> of the lone house
> on a remote cove
> and shakes a white sheet
> at a partly cloudy sky
>
> as if[57]

The romantic, pastoral description of nature and solitude—the porch of the lone house, the remote cove, the old woman doing her washing by hand—sits uneasily in its frame as an advertisement. 'As if' hangs uncompleted as the second stanza, casting everything above it into question. As if what? As if this image really signified the idyll of pastoral romanticism it seems to promise? As if this idyll could be packaged as a commodity and sold to consumers?

Armantrout works recognisably in the tradition of the singular lyric consciousness, though much of the distinctiveness of her poetry comes from its subtle undoings of the conventional aspects of this tradition. Her colleague Ron Silliman, another prominent West Coast Language writer, places a much higher premium on polyvocality in his long-poem 'Ketjak,' which also contains recurrent deployments of porch imagery.[58] 'Ketjak' uses a technique Silliman calls the 'new sentence,'[59] and consists of paragraphs of perpetually repeating sentences that become longer with the continuous addition of new sentences as the poem progresses towards completion. The poem places a premium on the syntactical juxtaposition of discrete images, actions, and questions whose contiguous relationships shift from paragraph to paragraph. The images have variant associations; some evoke the urban world of financialization—'Revolving door,' 'Fountains of the financial

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[57] Rae Armantrout, 'Partly,' *Partly: New and Selected Poems, 2001-2015* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2016), 18.
[58] Silliman resisted the academy more strenuously than other Language poets, even publicly censuring the poet Bob Perelman in a 1997 debate for Perelman's close association with the university. He has nevertheless since taught at such as universities as San Francisco State, Berkeley, and Brown. See Epstein, 'Verse vs. Verse,' esp. 50-51.
[59] See Silliman's collection of essays *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987).

district spout,' 'Rapid transit'—while some evoke the natural world—'A day of rain in the middle of June,' 'We drove through fields of artichokes.' The poem also contains recurrent deployments of porch images, though the signification of each image varies according to the shifting contexts. The first to appear is the sentence: 'The formal beauty of the back porch,'[60] a phrase with a difficult meaning to specify, especially given its lack of a verb. 'Formal beauty' seems a strangely intellectual category through which to appreciate the back porch, usually much more prone to association with emotion and individual memory. A second deployment of a porch image comes via a longer, narrative sentence:

> We climbed three flights of stairs to arrive at the door, then two floors up and through to the back porch, old boards that held a couch and rocker, for to view the city from that great height gave the sky place or weight, fog wedged amid rooftops but still the clear view, the Big Dipper.[61]

The injection of narrative sentences that closer approximate the sentences of prose fiction begin to trouble the sense of generic stability that comes out of reading this poem as a poem. No straightforward narrative ever emerges, but Silliman increasingly creates the sense that one might. In this second case the porch contains a couch and a rocker, a rather sentimental image of pastoral domesticity, but more importantly the porch allegorises perspective. The porch supports the poem's observation of the urban landscape, the 'clear view.'

The porch also allegorises perspective in perhaps the most highly acclaimed collection of American poetry since the Second World War, John Ashbery's 1975 *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Consider the following passage from the title poem:

> The sample
> One sees is not to be taken as
> Merely that, but as everything as it
> May be imagined outside time—not as a gesture
> But as all, in the refined, assimilable state.
> But what is this universe the porch of

[60] Ron Silliman, 'Ketjak,' *The Age of Huts (compleat)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 5. Since each phrase recurs at intervals throughout the poem, I cite the page on which a given phrase first appears.
[61] *Ibid.* 9.

> As it veers in and out, back and forth,
> Refusing to surround us and still the only
> Thing we can see.[62]

The porch stands out here as the only concrete object in a passage replete with abstract description. Thinking primarily in visual terms, Ashbery deploys the porch as a metaphor for something like being as such, capitalizing on the sense of liminality the porch evokes to consider the universe not as something holistically complete in itself, but as something that might exist as an interface between other, different realms. Ashbery also capitalizes on the idea of the porch as a platform, as a contained space an observer looks out from, and thus description of space and setting blends into an abstract characterisation of what it is to perceive. The dialectic of completeness and incompleteness Ashbery invokes applies also to awareness, which can be imagined holistically as 'everything,' but in experience refuses to surround 'us,' presenting us with a mere 'sample' of something greater and more complete that can be accessed only through intuition and speculation. A porch, like the human perceptual apparatus, looks out in just one direction; the other leads into interior space.

'Veers in an out' sounds like description of a car chase, and gives the exciting (if bizarre) sense of the human consciousness figured as a porch swerving dramatically through space, with Ashbery's mobilization of the usually static entity rendering this image especially striking. It also establishes the poem as unfolding emphatically in the present tense. Ashbery's use of the porch as allegorisation of the limits of perspective turns out to be an especially apposite image for consideration of the creative writing program, since it can be made to suggest that 'what' the field of American poetry as a whole 'can see' has changed since it has taken shelter within the workshop. The shelter of the workshop has placed a new set of constraints upon American poets, and the set of formal possibilities available to their gaze presents differently than it did to Anglo-American modernists occupying different institutional vantage points.

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[62] John Ashbery, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,' *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 198.

Compare the instants of formative childhood experience that appear in many of the foregoing porch poems to T. S. Eliot's evocation of the significance of his early years in *Four Quartets* (1940-1942), which Eliot glosses in a 1960 speech given to mark his reception of the Emerson-Thoreau Medal for Achievement in Literature. Eliot notes the significance of the Mississippi in the landscape of his boyhood; 'the most powerful feature of Nature in that environment.' Introducing a reading of 'The Dry Salvages,' Eliot tells his audience that 'this poem begins where I began, with the Mississippi.'[63] 'I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god,' 'The Dry Salvages' begins.

> the brown god is almost forgotten
> By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.
> Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
> Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
> By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.
> His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom.

'The river is within us,'[64] the poem's next stanza begins, completing an evocation of the river as a rhythmic presence in the speaker's poetic consciousness whose influence began to develop during crucial, pre-verbal moments of childhood perception.

This meditation on childhood experience emerges in the midst of a poem characterised by a play of voices that includes such figures as Heraclitus, Krishna, and St John of the Cross. In *Four Quartets* these voices tend to comment on subjects with a fair degree of thematic coherence; this unification makes the separation of the poem into different voices a more difficult operation than with a poem like *The Waste Land*, or many of Pound's *Cantos*, in which different voices and intertexts frequently present with easily identifiable, often strikingly individual characteristics. But in spite of these differences, I want to suggest that modernist poetry can be usefully characterised with reference to this incorporation of voices and intertexts. This incorporation expresses an orientation towards poetic voice that refuses to understand it as an unproblematic intentional expression of a

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[63] T. S. Eliot, 'The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet,' *Daedalus* 126.1 (1997): 352.
[64] T.S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages' II, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 194-195.

unified authorial consciousness, but also refuses to give up on the possibility of coherent voice entirely, instead emerging in the tensile space between these two positions. I want to suggest that the poetry of the creative writing program on balance articulates a different orientation with respect to voice, tending either towards the embrace of a conception of voice as representing a coherent and continuous confessional or autobiographical subject, or towards an often politically motivated rejection of the possibility of coherent poetic voice as such. In what follows, I want to develop these observations further by considering a sample of poems that take the creative writing program as a self-reflexive subject of narrative or lyric meditation, to illustrate further differences between modernist literary practice and the poetics that have emerged most prominently out of the creative writing program.

The poetry of the twentieth century has seen a great proliferation of self-referentiality, as the scholar of metalyric Eva Müller-Zettelmann has noted after making a survey of the extant criticism on poetic reflexivity: 'Although it has frequently been noted that the 20th century lyric, as part of a general tendency to meta-characteristics, has been able to demonstrate a sharp increase in auto-reflexive elements, this has so far not been accompanied by an appropriate scholarly reaction.'[65] Müller-Zettelmann notes that while abundant scholarly attention has fallen on self-reflexivity in twentieth-century fiction, persuasive explanations for the metalyric's rise have yet to emerge. I claim that the development of the creative writing program, and the emergence of professional contexts in which poets have had the opportunity to devote just about the entirety of their working lives to the production and teaching of poetry, stands as a persuasive candidate for this explanation. It follows

[65] Eva Müller-Zettelmann, '"A Frenzied Oscillation": Auto-Reflexivity in the Lyric,' in *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, ed. Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 127. Little new work has emerged since the 2005 publication of Müller-Zettelmann's edited collection. Vanessa Robinson's work on self-reflexive poetry builds on the foundation laid by Müller-Zettelmann to a certain extent, but concentrates much more on the relationship between self-reflexivity and the difficulties intrinsic to the representation of animal experience than on self-reflexivity as a formal poetic phenomenon that requires explanation as such. Vanessa Robinson, 'Poetry's Language of Animals: Towards a New Understanding of the Animal Other,' *Modern Language Review* 110.1 (2015): 28-46.

intuitively that these various kinds of self-reflexivity should have proliferated in a literary era in which poets find themselves paid to spend their lives communicating the technical, or at least practical, aspects of their profession to aspiring students, and in which the field of American poetry no longer tends to reflect a diversity of professional occupations. This represents a comparatively new state of affairs: consider in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Whitman the seller of real estate, Melville the customs agent, Crane the advertising copywriter, Williams the doctor, Stevens the insurance executive, and Eliot the banker.[66]

Poems can perform different kinds of self-referential operations. Take the final quatrain and couplet from Texas Tech University creative writing professor John Poch's 'The Ghost Town' (which again turn around the image of the porch):

> But say it's vacant and bunch grass gray. Then torch
> an image, scent, or song from your present life
> to reconstruct the step, the stairs, the porch,
> the house, town, two men fighting with a knife.
>
> Much like the architecture of a sonnet:
> a step, and suddenly you die upon it.[67]

First, the poem performs the reflexive operation of referring to compositional principles of poetry in general terms: The quatrain contains instructions, as if pedagogical, for the composition of a poem. '*[S]ay* it's vacant and bunch grass gray,' the imperative conditional directing the reader in an exercise of the imagination, before proceeding to a new, more puzzling set of directions—the torching of 'an image, scent, or song' from your present life. Why 'torch'? This seems to imply that the poetic reconstruction of past events requires the consumption of present existence, as if time spent writing amounts to a sacrifice of lived experience. In the couplet, the poem performs a second type of self-reflexive operation. It impressively calls attention to the poem's formal structure at the same moment that this structure becomes operative. The description of the 'architecture of the sonnet'

[66] On these first three, see Peter J. Riley, 'Moonlighting in Manhattan: American Poets at Work, 1855-1930,' PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2012. Riley argues that these poets' unstable existence within late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century urban economies contributed to the formal innovations of their literary practice.
[67] John Poch, 'The Ghost Town,' *The Paris Review* 178 (2006): 141.

refers to the Shakespearian closing couplet, which often functions as a kind of analytic conclusion to the sonnet's preceding stanzas. The rhyming couplet comes as a novel sound scheme after the preceding ABAB stanzas, and further emphasises the impression of argumentative closure; the first line creates the expectation of the closure that will come with the completion of the rhyme with the second. The expectation created by the sound tends to parallel an expectation in the sense or argument of the poem; the couplet's second line usually completes or importantly qualifies the thought introduced in the first. Poch amplifies this expectation by placing a colon at the end of the couplet's first line. The 'step' that Poch describes reflexively denotes this movement from the couplet's first line to the second as it happens; Poch further mimics the distinctness of the 'step' by placing a comma after it, giving it its own discrete emphasis in the cadence of the line.

A further type of self-referentiality that often appears in postwar and contemporary American poetry refers reflexively to the institutional context of the poem's composition, which most frequently turns out to be the creative writing program.[68] Daisy Fried's long poem 'Torment' describes a phase in her relationship with her workshop students at Princeton, along with the pregnancy she was experiencing at the time. The relationship between professor and student can manifest as a filial one, and Fried shows anxiety throughout the poem about the proper boundaries she should enforce. She worries that her relationship has become unacceptably casual, and remembers her own 'Favourite Teachers' from previous educational experience:

> Memory:
> Favourite teachers at our college house parties,
> slow-dancing with us, doing lines
> in our bathrooms. When are they going to grow up
> we said.[69]

[68] Examples of self-reflexive poems about creative writing not discussed below include Jon Anderson, 'Creative Writing 307,' *Poetry*, June 1970, 143-144; Billy Collins, 'Workshop,' *The Art of Drowning* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 51-53; Theodore Deppe, 'Carlos,' *Cape Clear: New and Selected Poems* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 2002), 3; Martin Espada, 'Rules for Captain Ahab's Provincetown Poetry Workshop,' *The Republic of Poetry* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 40; Juan Felipe Herrera, 'I Forget the Date,' *Half the World in Light: New and Selected Poems* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 281; David Wagoner, 'For a Student Sleeping in a Poetry Workshop,' *Good Morning and Good Night* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 4.

[69] Daisy Fried, 'Torment,' *Women's Poetry: Poems and Advice* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 9.

'Favourite Teachers' have merits, as well—'so kind, / so industrious, so interested and interesting'—but the poem's prevailing attitude regards the pedagogical relationship as uncomfortable and sordid.

> Favourite Teachers write poems about students!
> Reading them is like listening to whores
> talk about clients; however contemptuous they sound,
> everyone knows who's selling, who's buying.
> I'd like to be able to like them.[70]

Fried figures the teaching of creative writing as prostitution; she identifies contempt in the disposition of teachers towards students, but sees through this, noting that teachers depend on their students for their livelihood, just as prostitutes depend on their clients. Given that with 'Torment' itself Fried has written a 'poem about students,' this stanza presumably means to refer to the reader's experience of the poem as it unfolds, adding yet another layer of involution.

Fried situates this prostitute-like relationship of economic dependency within the wider economic uncertainties of the contemporary United States, and remains preoccupied by the general question of how people will support themselves. She explores this issue with reference to her students, final year undergraduates applying for jobs in the financial industry in New York, as well as with reference to herself, since her situation at Princeton will be coming to an end; thus she spends her 'lopsided day lifting my belly / back towards centre, interviewing for adjunct jobs.'[71] Her students have just returned from a series of interviews with various finance firms. The poem appears to take place in the years after the financial crisis, since one student refers to her mother's fortune—'half of it gone in the crash';[72] one student has just returned from an interview with Lehman Brothers, an investment bank which collapsed in October 2008, so this detail would place the action of the poem somewhere between that time and the beginning of the crisis in August 2007. The

[70] *Ibid.* 6.
[71] *Ibid.* 4.
[72] *Ibid.* 8.

students' concerns about their employment situations ultimately seem less than compelling and even repugnant given their personal financial situations:

> Brianna: 'Where's Soon-Ji anyway? Flying his plane back?
> God, what'll we do if nobody wants us?'
> Justin: 'Soon-Ji will fucking keep us I guess.
> All we have is Dad's money.
> Brianna: 'Mine's Mom's. Half of it gone in the crash.
> But Soon-Ji is great-grandfathered in. He'll be richer
> than we'll ever be if he never gets a job at all.'[73]

Her students seem interested in these jobs largely because they represent an identifiable position in the social hierarchy; no student in the poem ever displays interested in the financial services world in itself. Brianna mostly wants a 'Tribeca loft, / expense account, designer clothes so haute / they don't look it, my very own Tesla, summer home in the Hamptons I'm too busy to use.'[74] Fried does not go into detail about her own reasons for applying for adjunct jobs; the details of her personal and financial situation do not become clear. She has a husband, who calls at one point; 'If I answer; I'll cry.'[75] But she knows she does not want the adjunct job for which she has just interviewed: 'What will I do next year without the job / I don't want?'[76] This might be taken to mean 'How will I support myself?' In the context of the poem, though, the meaning of the question seems closer to: 'What will I do with myself without an institutional occupation to structure my identity and my daily life?' The continuities between her students' plight and her own allow Fried to sympathise with her students in spite of the gaucheness with which they express their anxieties. Fried hands Brianna what she calls a 'self-pity tissue,' and then notes: 'I'd like to be able to hate her.'[77]

In the poem 'The Workshop' from Nick Laird, a Northern Irish poet and novelist who also taught at Princeton, an attitude closer to the contempt towards students that Fried identifies emerges. It begins:

> Her turgid sonnets.

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[73] *Ibid.*
[74] *Ibid.* 3.
[75] *Ibid.* 6.
[76] *Ibid.* 7.
[77] *Ibid.* 5.

> His villanelle.
> I will have my revenge [...][78]

Other contemporary poems that feature the workshop compare them to situations of self-evident immediacy and intensity, and highlight the workshop's lack of these qualities by comparison. Iowa graduate, subsequent faculty member, and eventual U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera positions the workshop next to a post-attack scene of a young girl in the West Bank, digging for her parents in a pile of rubble:

> She digs for her rubble father, I say rubble
> because it is indistinguishable from ice, fire, dust,
> clay, flesh, tears, concrete, bread, lungs, pubis, god,
> say rubble, say water—
>
> the rubble girl digs for her rubble mother,
> occupation—disinheritance—once again,
> I had written this somewhere, in a workshop, I think,
> yes, it was an afternoon of dark poets with leaves, coffee
> and music in the liquor light room.[79]

Michigan MFA graduate and former Stanford Stegner Fellow Quan Barry takes a similar tack, confronted with an exhibition of photographs documenting Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia in her poem 'Loose Strife':

> In the first room with the blown up
> black-and-white of a human body gone abstract someone has
> to turn and face the wall not because of the human pain
> represented in the photo but because of her calmness,
>
> the tranquility with which she tells us that her father
> and her sister and her brother were killed. In graduate school
> a whole workshop devoted to an image of a woman with bleach
>
> thrown in the face and the question of whether or not
> the author could write, 'The full moon sat in the window
> like a calcified eye, the woman's face aglow with a knowingness.'
>
> I felt it come over me and I couldn't stop. I tried to pull myself
> together and I couldn't. They were children. An army of child

[78] Nick Laird, 'The Workshop,' *Go Giants* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 18.
[79] Juan Felipe Herrera, 'Enter the Void,' *Half the World in Light: New and Selected Poems* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 282.

soldiers.[80]

The poetic argument of the workshop scene works entirely through juxtaposition; Barry provides no narrative commentary that instructs the reader on how to interpret the relationship between this recollection of graduate school and the present experience of the photographs. The workshop scene begins with the disturbing image—even if not equally disturbing as the images of Khmer Rouge atrocities—of a woman who has had bleach thrown in her face. That she writes that the 'whole workshop' was spent on discussion of this image suggests that Barry finds this allocation of time gratuitous, and possibly also the discussion of technical questions of description vacuous and inappropriate beside the reality of the woman's suffering. Barry cannot stay with discussion of composition for long, because emotional intensity overwhelms her. She finds herself compelled to return to discussion of Khmer Rouge atrocities.

Barry's poem concludes with a further performance of reflexivity, an affirmation of the capacity of poetry to preserve and express the past: 'There are seventy-four forms / of poetry in this country and each one is still meant to be sung.'[81] Fried's poem also concludes with an intensification of her poem's reflexivity level, closing with a kind of declaration of resignation:

> I don't know how to end this poem. On 'Torment'
> I wrote: 'You may want to find a way to suggest
> ironic distance between the poet and speaker.'
> I couldn't figure out what else,
> to responsible children, there was to say.[82]

'Torment' is the title of Fried's poem—'this poem'—but it is also the title of a student poem on which she has been commenting. The ambiguity around the title creates the possibility of a kind of

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[80] Quan Barry, 'loose strife ["Listen closely as I sing this"],' *Loose Strife* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 5.

[81] *Ibid.* 6. Barry does not specify the significance of this precise number of forms; it may have to do with the poetic traditions that attend her particular ethnic heritage. Barry was born in Vietnam rather than Cambodia, and grew up in Boston, but writes of the time of the Khmer Rouge as a historical epoch in which she has a personal stake. In the preceding poem in the collection, she describes what seems to be her personal poetic journey: 'Fly halfway around the globe. Here is / the room next to the library where you realize how poor your tradition is, / the local people with poetic forms still in use that date back to the time of Christ.' While she shows a negative attitude towards these traditions here, she seems to affirm them in the subsequent poem. Quan Barry, 'loose strife ["Somebody says draw a map"],' *Loose Strife* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 3.

[82] Fried, 'Torment,' 9.

split self, according to which Fried sees herself as her own student. The advice Fried offers—suggestion of ironic distance between poet and speaker—fits perfectly with this model of selfhood, yet Fried also seems to have undermined this advice throughout the entire text of the poem, since the speaker—identified as 'Daisy'—seems to have a great deal in common with Fried's actual world experience.[83] Fried, who earlier suggested an identity between her own struggles applying for an adjunct 'job I don't want,' and her students' struggles applying for finance jobs in which they appear similarly uninterested, draws a final identity between herself and her students as 'responsible children,' playing on the expected noun-phrase 'responsible adults.' Burdened with the responsibilities of adulthood, of finding a job and a place in society, Fried nevertheless portrays herself and her students as children, as individuals who have yet to learn to function in the world with autonomy.

'I don't know how to end this poem' represents a trace of the finished poem's earlier incarnation as a poem-in-process. Moments of self-reference like this occur with regularity throughout the field of postwar American poetry. Carrie Fountain's poem 'Yes,' contains a similar instant of self-consciousness towards its end: 'I am turning up the heater / to see if that will make the baby sleep another fifteen minutes / so I can finish this poem.' Fountain prepares for this moment with a litany of experiences that she intends, in the future, to reject: 'I am done going to grad school, / nodding in your workshop.'

> I am done teaching the poetry class where no one talked and no one
> listened to me and outside the window the cottonwood wagged
> its sun-white leaves in breeze as if to say, *I give up, I give up*.[84]

Like the conclusion of Fried's poem, dismay, a sense of inadequacy with respect to creative writing and poetic education emerges in Fountain's work. Rachel Zucker's 'Saturday, Sunday, Monday,

[83] Though it appears not to be completely isomorphic—Fried was a Hodder Fellow at Princeton in 2003-2004, which would be too early for the poem's financial crisis context.
[84] Carrie Fountain, 'Yes,' *Instant Winner* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 67.

Tuesday' strikes a similar note, describing her attempt to lead 'Writer's Workshop I & II' through two poems by Wayne Koestenbaum and David Trinidad:

> *Wayne puts a plumber and lovers, his mother, porn mags, fashion into terza rima*
> *that lead us along, punch drunk, addicted to real life. And oh how David's crown*
> *of sonnets breaks our hearts!* The students stare blankly; one;
> *These are sonnets?*
> and someone's cell phone rings with the sound of a human voice pleading:
> *Pick up! Pick up! Pick up!*[85]

These poems tend to view the teaching of creative writing as a doomed enterprise, even an enterprise doomed from the start. In these poems Fountain and Fried identify student apathy as the significant adverse feature of program teaching, describing a pedagogical environment in which workshop participants show little interest in either attending to or discussing the material at hand. Like many of the porch poems, this poetry depicts an environment hostile to communication.

But the reflexive elements of the poems also suggest that they need not be read as a criticism of the creative writing institution in line with the jeremiads that appear with regularity in the popular press. Rather than criticising the institution of creative writing as such, many of these poems instead express a more general discouragement with respect to the difficulty of writing poems, and talking meaningfully about poems, that poets and commentators on poetry have frequently expressed independent of conversations about creative writing. Brooklyn College creative writing professor Ben Lerner's 'On the Hatred of Poetry' counts amongst the more well-known recent expressions of this type of difficulty. It describes a vision of poetry that must remain fundamentally unsatisfying, because in Lerner's view poetry promises insight and experience of total and transformative profundity, but in practice delivers such insight and experience with agonizing infrequency.[86] Donald Davie, commenting on a turn of phrase originally used by W. B. Yeats to describe Ezra Pound, evoked something close to this idea using the metaphor of getting 'all the wine into the bowl.' For Davie, Pound's work turns around a poetics that refuses the possibility of total

[85] Rachel Zucker, 'Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday,' *Museum of Accidents* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2009), 54-55.
[86] Ben Lerner, *On the Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

representation; 'If he is sure that there is more to his subject (more perhaps to any subject) than he got out of it, or ever could get out of it, if he believes that all the wine never *can* be got into the bowl or any bowl, then [...] the poet will deliberately seek an effect of improvisation, of haste and rough edges.'[87] These contemporary poets of the workshop seek to express a similar belief. Through injections of moments of self-consciousness, by acknowledging 'I don't know how to end this poem,' these poets disrupt the smoothness of the poem's coherence as a well-wrought urn; they concede that the poem could have easily emerged other than it is. Yet these poems differ significantly from the poems of modernists like Pound in that they do not preserve this sense of rough edges through their formal apparatus. They instead disrupt their poetic surfaces on the level of propositional content, by self-reflexively declaring that the surface has been disrupted.

A related, intensified variant of reflexivity takes this practice of disruption to a further level, transforming the entirety of the poem into a meditation on the representational and communicative possibilities of poetic language. Examples include Donald Justice's 'Poem' ('This poem is not addressed to you. / You may come into it briefly, / But no one will find you here, no one'),[88] John Ashbery's 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' ('This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level. / Look at it talking to you'),[89] Ashbery's 'A Wave,' ('And the new wondering, the poem, [...] demands to be met on its own terms now'),[90] Charles Bernstein's 'Thank You for Saying Thank You' ('This is a totally / accessible poem'),[91] Olena Kalytiak Davis's 'The Lyric "I" Drives to Pick Up Her Children from School: A Poem in the Postconfessional Mode,' (which appeared in a 2014 collection with the title *The Poem She Didn't Write, and Other Poems*),[92] and Douglas Kearney's 'The Poet Writes the Poem that Will Certainly Make Him Famous.'[93]

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[87] Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*, in *Studies in Ezra Pound* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), 78.
[88] Donald Justice, 'Poem,' *New and Selected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 106.
[89] John Ashbery, 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons,' *Shadow Train* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 3.
[90] John Ashbery, 'A Wave,' *A Wave: Poems* (New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books, 1984), 79.
[91] Charles Bernstein, 'Thank You for Saying Thank You,' *Girly Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 7.
[92] Olena Kalytiak Davis, 'The Lyric "I" Drives to Pick Up Her Children from School: A Poem in the Postconfessional Mode,' *The Poem She Didn't Write, and Other Poems* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2014), 202.
[93] Douglas Kearney, 'The Poet Writes the Poem that Will Certainly Make Him Famous,' *Fear, Some: Poems* (Pasadena: Red Hen Press, 2006), 71-74.

As Eva Müller-Zettelmann has argued, a metalyric can be recognised through its self-conscious reference to 'lyric inspiration, to the poetic creative process, to the social task of literary creation, or to the intended reader's reception. The list of possible meta-themes could be extended further, but their semantic common denominator is their reference to some aspect of the fictionality of the lyric work of art.'[94] Fictionality may not be the best word to employ here, since it can carry connotations of the narrative construction of imaginative worlds.[95] Zettelmann, by contrast, seems to want to emphasise reflexive poetry's consciousness of an intrinsic areferentiality or artificiality of literary language, continuous with poststructuralist efforts to undermine literature's pretensions to the representation of a seamless and internally consistent reality.[96]

Yet this metapoetic procedure for pointing to the artificiality of poetic discourse would seem to contain a contradiction, because it assumes that the best way to disrupt assumptions of a clear, unproblematic channel of communication between writer and reader would be to declare that the poet has disrupted it ('the poem, […] demands to be met on its own terms now'; 'This poem is not addressed to you'). But if poetic discourse cannot be relied upon in the first place as a clear, unproblematic channel of communication, then poetic declarations of self-referentiality cannot

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[94] Müller-Zettelmann, 132. As Müller-Zettelmann discusses at length, the amount of critical commentary on metapoetry looks miniscule in comparison to the amount of scholarship that metapoetry's close cousin, metafiction, has generated; much of the scholarship on reflexivity in American poetry, like the collection in which Müller-Zettelmann's article appears, comes out of the German academy—see also *Poetics in the Poem: Critical Essays on American Self-Reflexive Poetry*, ed. Dorothy Z. Baker (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). Müller-Zuckermann suggests that the reason for the critical neglect of metapoetry, in comparison with metafiction, comes out of the obvious constructedness of the lyric form: metapoetry 'has been absorbed unobtrusively into the poetic style because of the increased degree of manifest artificiality that characterises the lyric genre and the associated rejection of purely mimetic principles.' Müller-Zuckermann, 128.

[95] For a discussion of fictionality in a similar theoretical frame, though in the context of prose, see Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999). Cohn follows Käte Hamburger in claiming that actual-world referents within a fictional text become 'contaminated from within' through what Hamburger calls 'the process of fictionalisation.' *Ibid.* 13.

[96] These denials amount more to a kind of popular mythologizing of poststructuralist views on literary language than nuanced appraisals of arguments presented by influential postwar continental philosophers and literary theorists. The most notorious example would likely be Jacques Derrida's 1967 declaration '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*,' translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as 'there is nothing outside the text,' which led to widespread interpretations of Derrida as advocating an ontology that denied the existence of any sort of extralinguistic reality. As Peter D. McDonald has shown, *hors-texte* can designate extratextual space, as Spivak suggests, but it also has a more specific bibliographic meaning: in French, *hors-texte* refers to a kind of colour plate. In McDonald's view, Derrida's phrase 'announced neither a triumphant nor a culpable break with history. The play on words inventively underscored Derrida's sustained commitment to putting in question received assumptions about what is outside and what is thought to be inside writing.' Peter D. McDonald, 'Ideas of the Book and Histories of Literature: After Theory?' *PMLA* 121.1 (2006): 222-223. Quotations from Derrida, and Derrida trans. Spivak, *ibid.*

themselves be relied upon; the structure of the contradiction recalls the Cretan Epimenides' statement that all Cretans are liars. This type of metapoetry seems to want to engage with questions of the limits of representation, but the way it actually uses language expresses a vision of literary language as a straightforward expression of authorial consciousness, in much the same way as a good deal of program fiction. Mitchum Huehls has recently identified a similar attitude towards representation in a sample of contemporary American novels, including Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), and Jeffrey Eugenides *The Marriage Plot* (2011). In Huehls's compelling argument, these novels display interest in questions of literary representation and referentiality, but stage these questions using the conventional conditions of realism. Huehls describes them as 'contemporary works of fiction, written in the wake of theory's decline, that use well-known theoretical concepts—for example, the death of the author, the materiality of the signifier, the textuality of the world, the recursivity of reference—without reflexively applying those concepts to the fictional text itself.'[97] The poetics of a modernist like Pound, by contrast, confront questions of the limits of representation and the reliability of literary language on the level of style and actual usage. Instead of using poetry to point reflexively inward, Pound addressed such questions by attempting to put texts from an astonishing range of poetic and cultural traditions into immediate conversation with each other, and allowing the 'rough edges' that emerged from juxtapositions to persist unsmoothed into the published work. Part of this thesis makes the case that twentieth-century American poetry and prose have often confronted similar problems of representation in similar ways. The second chapter of this dissertation identifies a modernist precedent for this similarity in the development of Pound's poetics, and shows how Pound's thinking about representation and referentiality in *The Cantos* emerged out of sustained engagements with questions of realism through extensive reading of Henry James and James Joyce (in the late 1910s and early 1920s respectively).

[97] Huehls, 'Post Theory Theory Novel,' 282.

Pound believed that this literary style bore a direct relation to the structure of his professional existence. Unlike many of his modernist colleagues, Pound made literary work the centre of his working life, and he believed that other writers should do the same, famously attempting to provide T. S. Eliot with a pension that would free him from banking and enable him to write full-time. (Eliot preferred to keep his job.)[98] The problem of how writers and artists—especially American writers and artists—could sustain themselves financially preoccupied Pound, and he advocated vociferously in the 1910s for the establishment of institutional forms of patronage that would enable writers and artists to devote themselves to their work free of the obligation to earn a living. As I explore in the following chapter, many of these ideas bear a strong degree of similarity to the form the creative writing program would begin to take some decades later. But Pound expected that institutional patronage would give American writers the chance to assimilate a variety of different voices into their literary practice, particularly voices drawn from foreign literatures. Pound believed that strong institutional support for American letters would launch a new *risorgimento*; he polemically compared the monoglot American poets of his time to various historical benchmarks: 'The best Latin poets knew Greek. The troubadours knew several jargons. Dante wrote in Italian, Latin and Provençal, and knew presumably other tongues, including a possible smattering of Hebrew.'[99] This expectation turned out to be dramatically off the mark. As Werner Sollors has written, since the Second World War multilingual literature has become 'the most glaring blind spot in American letters.'[100] Sollors notes that this has not always been the case, considering as a datum the 1919 *Cambridge History of American Literature*:

> The authors of the old *Cambridge History* generally remembered how polyglot many English-language authors had been—Cotton Mather knew half a dozen languages and published in Latin and Spanish, and the editors of literary histories assumed that their readers were fluent in French, German, and Latin. In the same period H. L. Mencken, in *The American Language* (1919), wrote extensively about the non-English elements of

[98] See A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound, Poet: Vol. II: The Epic Years, 1921-1939* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), 35-39.
[99] Ezra Pound, 'The Renaissance,' *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 214.
[100] Werner Sollors, 'Introduction: After the Culture Wars; or, From "English Only" to "English Plus,"' *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature,* ed. Marc Shell and Werner Sollors (New York and London: NYU Press, 2000), 4.

> the 'American language' and about the ways in which English was affected and changed by other languages in America.[101]

The education system has had a part to play here. Sollors perceives an irony in that 'at the peak of postwar efforts to "Americanize" the nation in an English and American mold American multilingualism was still being taken very seriously as a subject of study,' whereas contemporary education, in spite of a strong and pervasive multicultural ethos, 'has tended to ignore language as a factor in American literary and cultural diversity.'[102] This observation holds equally true across the educational domain of creative writing. Few creative writing programs exclusively focused on translation exist; Iowa has one, as do the University of Arkansas and Queens College at the City University of New York. Columbia's MFA program offers MFAs a secondary concentration in literary translation. In addition to its translation workshop Iowa has an MFA in Spanish creative writing, as does the University of Houston. But these numbers look miniscule in comparison to the 191 full-time English-language graduate creative writing programs. Multilingualism barely registers in the domain of English-language American creative writing, even though much of this creative writing claims inheritance from an Anglo-American modernist tradition which counted the assimilation of a wide variety of literary traditions amongst its most evident distinguishing characteristics.

Although I do not understand Anglo-American modernism as having been exhausted by the work of the 'usual suspects,' the label Vincent Sherry has applied to Pound, Eliot, Joyce et. al.,[103] I aim to practice a mode of literary historical thinking that appropriately registers the influence of these writers on the conception of Anglo-American modernism that has become institutionalised in the literary academy as well as the creative writing program. While recent critics of modernism have

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[101] *Ibid.* 2.
[102] *Ibid.*
[103] Vincent Sherry, 'Introduction: A History of "Modernism,"' in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, 19.

usefully identified many alternative forms of modernist literary practice,[104] this dissertation pays a great deal of attention to Eliot and Pound in the belief that any literary historical account of Anglo-American modernism that does not accommodate these writers must be found wanting.

I attempt to remain sensitive throughout this thesis to the hazards of binary thinking and oversimplification. Thinking modernism as simultaneously traditional and experimental self-evidently demands a capacity to hold two oppositional propositions at once, and similar demands surface at other moments in my work. My next chapter, on the life and work of Ezra Pound, aims to set out, if not necessarily render totally coherent, a plethora of similar contradictions. Though he railed against university education with more vitriol than other major twentieth-century literary figure, Pound nevertheless remained powerfully attracted to the academy, at one time attempting to start a kind of MFA program *avant-la-lettre*, and repeatedly campaigning the University of Pennsylvania to consider the criticism and literary journalism he had produced as a thesis that would merit the conferral of a doctoral degree. To consider another aporia, Pound's poetics rely upon an essentialist, metaphysical conception of meaning, such that he understood great poetry to be a tripartite unity of the poet's original emotion, the 'perfect rhythm,' and the 'perfect word.'[105] Yet Pound joined this valourisation of perfection with a highly cavalier attitude towards poetic error, whether errors arise in the transcription of intertexts for his poems, the translation of intertexts written in foreign languages, or in the typesetting and publication process. I argue that this attitude reflects a conception of literature as an ongoing process that consists of the recombination and reimaging of a whole literary heritage, rather than the intentional expression of a unified authorial consciousness. I claim that for all of its contemporaneity with anti-intentionalist postwar literary

[104] See Sherry's introduction, *ibid.*, and Steven Connor's epilogue to the same edited volume. According to Connor, what has become known as the New Modernist Studies has generated such a proliferation of modernisms that the term has begun to lose some of its semantic force. He mentions various forms of modernism urged by scholars of various critical persuasions, for instance 'digital modernism,' 'ethnic modernism,' 'queer modernism,' and subsequently claims, 'The new modernism is becoming so de-differentiated, and so supersaturated with so many things, that there is increasingly little it can be said to exclude.' Steven Connor, 'Epilogue: Modernism after Postmodernism,' in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 822-823, 831.
[105] Ezra Pound, 'Introduction to Cavalcanti *Poems*,' *Translations* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 23.

theory, the literature of the creative writing program cleaves much, much closer to the unified authorial consciousness model than does Pound's work.

The third chapter of this dissertation considers the work of Saul Bellow from a stylistic perspective in comparison to the styles of fiction engendered by the creative writing program. It begins with a survey of the pedagogical advice of notable program teachers, alongside representative fictional outputs from writers' workshops, in order to construct a picture of the basic representational practice of a dominant strain of program fiction. I argue that this strain has a tendency to understand literary language as an unproblematic chain of representation, from world to writer's consciousness to the page. These understandings amount to a simple model of authorial intentionality, according to which the meaning of literary language emerges more or less transparently and accessibly. The program prescriptions 'write what you know' and 'find your voice,' identified by McGurl (along with 'show don't tell') as the guiding principles of postwar American creative writing, point to personal experience and a style that corresponds to unique authorial subjectivity.

I argue that Bellow's style stands as a revealing exception to this paradigm, and that this style can be significantly connected to the particularities of Bellow's institutional existence. Bellow passed a substantial portion of his professional writing life at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, an interdisciplinary organ of graduate education; he much preferred teaching a general humanistic curriculum to creative writing, which he taught sporadically closer to the beginning of his career. Bound up with this affinity for the interdisciplinary humanities was Bellow's deep investment in the acquisition of literary and intellectual tradition as the key to developing a genuine critical apparatus capable of questioning ossified boundaries and stale modes of thinking. This institutional background manifests stylistically through a persistent interrogation of the continuities between perception, cognition, and literary representation.

Bellow's critics have universally understood him as an anti-modernist whose values instead hearken back to romanticism; they claim his interest in storytelling and emotion amounts to a rejection of a modernism characterized by difficulty and cold monumentality. Bellow also indisputably rejects what he perceives to be the anti-Semitism intrinsic to Anglo-American modernism. Yet contradictions again arise here. As I argue in the chapter, the attitudes towards Jewishness of modernists like Eliot and Pound significantly turned around an image of Jews as itinerant dilettantes, indisposed towards levels of commitment to any given subject or discipline that would result in genuine mastery. But this critique of Jewishness on the part of Eliot and Pound, understandably repugnant to Bellow's Judaism, actually in certain respects resembles Bellow's critique of modernity, which he understands as an epoch that encourages its inhabitants to content themselves with fragmented, incomplete knowledge, rather than pursuing more holistic modes of apprehending the world.

My fourth chapter, on the contemporary American poet Jorie Graham, considers Graham as a case study of institutional success. Graham earned an MFA from Iowa prior to climbing a ladder of intermediate faculty positions to the directorship of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and finally to Seamus Heaney's former chair at Harvard as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. Graham's career trajectory proves extraordinarily representative of the fate of cosmopolitanism in the era of creative writing. Raised multilingually in culturally privileged environments in Italy and France, Graham left Paris in the late-1960s to pursue her professional career as a writer in the American Midwest, performing in reverse the professional journeys of T. S. Eliot (born and raised in St Louis) and Ezra Pound (born and raised in Idaho).

But Graham has not completely repudiated this cosmopolitan heritage; she depends upon it to satisfy expectations of the poet as a defier of convention, despite her level of embeddedness within the academy. Part of her strategy for presenting herself as an iconoclast consists in a claim to inheriting a poetics from Anglo-American modernism, especially Eliot. She accomplishes this by

explicitly invoking modernist progenitors in interviews, as well as through allusions to modernist poetry in her work. But I claim that Graham's poetics embraces only the innovative face of modernist poetry, rejecting the face that insists that poetry be grounded in literary tradition and contribute to the cultivation of a new order. Graham's poetry instead proceeds negatively, intending to work only as a means for the destruction of ossified habits of perception and thought. Ultimately, I claim, this results in a poetics of nihilism that gives up almost entirely upon the possibility of representation.

Graham's career shows how the criteria for poetic success has changed in the program era. While there is much to admire about her poetry, I want to suggest that her rise can be attributed much more to the extent to which her image satisfies an ideal of the poet as an embodiment of Bohemian glamour, together with her teaching ability. Graham's students speak of her teaching in the highest terms, often noting that the inspiration she engenders crosses from the domain of their poetry into their lives more generally, to the point that she can appear in their descriptions as a kind of guru-figure—a further illustration of the significance that autobiographical experience holds in program contexts. This chapter illustrates a postwar and contemporary literary field that rewards a different set of virtues than that of Anglo-American modernism.

My final chapter, on the novelist David Foster Wallace, begins by again taking up questions of personal experience and literary technique in the program era. Wallace explicitly addresses such questions through a persistent institutional analogy between the creative writing program and therapy, one that he explores with a particularly sharp focus in the early short story 'Here and There,' which I read at length at the opening of the chapter. 'Here and There' satirises the creative writing program by conceiving of it as a course in 'fiction therapy.' It tells the story of a 'fiction therapy' student/patient, a poet with the enormous ambition of creating an entirely technical, areferential poetry of pure form, who speaks in a recognisably modernist register of cultural transformation. But Wallace ultimately depicts these modernist ambitions as the ridiculous delusions

of a neurotic, whose poetic aspirations stem from the all too banal causes of self-loathing and repressed fear of his own significance. I claim that Wallace understands the contemporary conditions of the American literary field as having rendered this type of modernist ambition impossible.

I show that Wallace believed the creative writing program to be uppermost among these conditions, and show how Wallace developed a strikingly consistent critique of the program's influence upon contemporary American letters until his death in 2008. Again, this chapter raises questions regarding the relationship between personal experience and literary output; I demonstrate that Wallace's critique of the program turns upon his perception of the effect of institutional culture upon the ability of individuals to articulate themselves freely and autonomously, a perception that I trace through detailed archival research to Wallace's investment in the thought of the philosopher Stanley Cavell. Ultimately, I argue that although Wallace made remarkable fictional capital out of the creative writing program's shortcomings, his relationship with the program amounts to an extraordinarily unhealthy case of self-frustration: Wallace subjected the program to excoriating criticism throughout his career, but nevertheless showed himself continuously content to remain within the institution for the entirety of his working life.

Before proceeding to these in-depth discussions of the literary effects of the growth of twentieth-century American creative writing, I would like to give more of a background to this analysis by describing the shape of the field in more depth. To a certain extent this dissertation works on a pragmatic basis by discussing those authors who have achieved particular success within the field of creative writing, often securing good academic jobs, winning prizes, and gaining prominent platforms in influential journals and magazines. But these writers make up only the slightest fraction of the total number of participants in the postwar American creative writing field. As I note above, more sociologically and anthropologically oriented work would be invaluable for the construction of a detailed picture of the field that would stand up to scholarly scrutiny. For the present, I want to

offer a basic statistical picture of the field, and offer some remarks on its general structure and purpose, before proceeding to more detailed readings.

The statistical situation of MFA programs in the postwar period has been one of growth. The Association of Writers and Writing Programs, the professional organization that represents creative writing programs collectively, has set out the number of creative writing programs in the United States since 1975 as follows:

Year	**AA**	**BA/BS Minor**	**BA/BFA Major**	**MA**	**MFA**	**PhD**	**Total**
2016	46	571	733	164	244	50	1808
2015	44	567	715	156	235	49	1766
2014	43	565	693	152	229	47	1729
2013	37	378	592	153	214	51	1425
2012	13	362	163	113	191	38	880
2010	12	347	157	115	184	36	851
2009	11	318	147	145	150	37	808
2004	7	320	86	154	109	39	715
2002	8	283	70	151	99	41	652
1996	6	298	12	134	74	28	552
1992	6	274	9	137	55	27	508
1984	4	155	10	99	31	20	319
1975	0	24	3	32	15	5	79

These numbers[106] evidently account for a wide variety of forms of creative writing: associate's degrees, undergraduate minors, undergraduate majors, MAs, MFAs, and PhDs. Again, this highlights questions of categorization and of the proper object of analysis that arise for studies of creative writing at every turn. My focus will be on graduate programs in creative writing, but even here questions of category come up. The difference between the MA degree and the MFA is not always completely clear-cut. In general MA programs often have a more pronounced critical component than MFAs; they are in principle liberal arts degrees, while the MFA is technically a professional qualification. Often MAs take two years to complete, while MFAs tend to take three.

The AWP claims that these figures in fact underreport the true amount of creative writing teaching that occurs in institutions of higher education:

> The vast majority of the 2,400 departments of English in North America offer classes in creative writing; the departments and programs accounted for above are only those that have shaped creative writing electives into creative writing programs with, at least, minor tracks of study in creative writing and literature. Among undergraduate students, classes in creative writing are among the most popular elective classes.[107]

The AWP has made a case for the value of creative writing programs on this frankly neoliberal basis of consumer demand. In 2005, AWP director David Fenza, writing in a letter to the editor of *Poetry* in response to a satirical chronicle by the poet Kay Ryan of her experience at that year's AWP conference, claimed:

> Creative writing is taught at most of the 2,100 departments of English in North America; and, in these classes, books of contemporary poetry and the classics are introduced to many students along with elements of the craft of writing. While enrollments throughout the humanities continue to decline, creative writing is one of the few areas that enjoys rapid growth.[108]

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[106] These numbers come from the AWP's '2015-2016 Report on the Academic Job Market 2015-2016,' *Association of Writers & Writing Programs*, https://www.awpwriter.org/careers/career_advice_view/4188/awps_20152016_report_on_the_academic_job_market. The AWP takes these numbers from its 'Official Guide to Writing Programs 2016,' a searchable database of workshops that cover a number of different educational categories and degree classifications.

[107] *Program Director's Handbook: Guidelines, Policies, and Information for Creative Writing Programs* (Fairfax: Association of Writers & Writing Programs, 2012), 104.

[108] David Fenza, 'Letter to the Editor,' *Poetry*, October 2005, 64-65.

Interestingly, Fenza situates his discipline within the humanities, rather than within the field of professional disciplines. His numerical claims bear out further research. Precise data for the numbers of creative writing graduates can be difficult to come by, especially before 1988, but I have made rough estimates for the total numbers of graduates over certain periods by multiplying average graduating class sizes by the number of programs in a given year. The number of graduate degrees in creative writing awarded in 1975 was almost certainly less than 500; by 2013, that number was over 3,000, with nearly as many undergraduate degrees awarded as well. By comparison, 1,595 individuals graduated with doctoral degrees in English literature in 1975, and 9,178 graduated with master's degrees. In 2011-2012 those numbers were comparable: 1,427 graduated with doctorates, and 9,939 graduated with master's degrees. To provide a slightly different form of context, 28,729 law degrees were awarded in 1975, with 46,478 awarded in 2013. As far as I am aware data for journalism school enrolments in the 1970s does not exist; in the present day, its student distribution differs significantly from creative writing programs with respect to the split between undergraduate and graduate students. In 2013, there were 475 undergraduate journalism programs, and 224 that offered graduate degrees. That year, programs granted 51,929 bachelor's degrees in journalism, along with 5,495 master's degrees, and 311 PhDs.[109]

One view of the social function of the creative writing program understands it as a professional qualification that will provide the student with a return in his or her subsequent career, either in the form of an academic job, or increased access to publishing opportunities. Harbach, for instance, writes as if writers constantly make decisions on the basis of their resumés and future job prospects. '[S]cores of colleges now have associated literary journals, which tend overwhelmingly to focus on the short story; by publishing in as many of these as possible, a young writer begins building the reputation that will eventually secure her a job as a teacher-writer.'[110] Harbach speaks with a

[109] Lee B. Becker et. al., *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrolments* (Athens: James M. Cox Jr Centre for International Mass Communication Training and Research, 2014), 8.
[110] Harbach, 10.

certain assurance that seems to suggest that if a student simply follows these tested procedures, a position teaching creative writing will inevitably follow. In fact, tenure-track creative writing positions are in extremely short supply, even in comparison to fields such as English literature, where commentators have been lamenting labour circumstances for many years.

According to the AWP job market report for 2015-2016, the number of jobs advertised on the AWP online job board in recent years at the time of publication went as follows:[111]

Position Category	**2009-10**	**2010-11**	**2011-12**	**2012-13**	**2013-14**	**2014-15**	**2015-16**
Academic Jobs	593	963	890	441	727	1169	890
Tenure-Track Jobs	195	315	282	143	233	337	311
Tenure-Track CW Jobs	78	108	130	107	112	171	119
Nonacademic Jobs	412	794	662	849	1160	1274	1306

Abramson, the most data-minded analyst of the creative writing program now writing, commented on the creative writing job market in his 'Further Reading' to the 2014 rankings. (A graduate of Harvard Law School, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and the doctoral program in English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Abramson brings an unusually varied and comprehensive institutional background to his criticism.) In this report, Abramson surveys the new jobs listed in creative writing for the previous five years; the number of new jobs that came up each year ranged between sixty-eight and one hundred forty-six. (His numbers come from the Academic Jobs Wiki, so do not match the numbers from the AWP job board exactly, though the figures tend to be quite close.) Abramson takes the worldwide production of MFA graduates into account—at the time of writing '234 full- and low-residency MFA programs, and 33 doctoral programs in creative writing,' graduating 'more than 2,000 poets and 2,000 fiction writers every year, along with between 500-

[111] '2015-2016 Report.'

1,000 nonfiction writers.' These data, in Abramson's view, 'suggest that each year full-time teaching positions at the university level are available for, on average, well less than 1 percent of graduate creative writing program alumni.'[112] From 1990 until today, the number of market-eligible MFAs has increased by a factor of six; the number of job opportunities has only doubled.

The financial circumstances of students vary significantly from program to program. In 2016 thirty-six programs offered full funding to all admitted MFA students, with stipends ranging from $12,800 (Boston University) to $30,000 (Johns Hopkins). These programs make up roughly twenty percent of MFA programs, but given the expense of each student they tend to have small class sizes—students from these fully funded programs make up only seven percent of all MFA graduates. The large majority of students have to pay for their degrees, and, as Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young have argued, this usually means dismaying levels of loans and debt. Spahr and Young contend that the growth of the creative writing program results from a confluence of three factors: ease of access to student loans, student demand for venues of self-exploration, and increased pressure on university departments to succeed in economic terms. Spahr and Young discuss stories they have heard, of 'staggering amounts of debt [...] students who graduated with $55,000, $70,000, or $120,000 owed to the federal government or Sallie Mae.'[113]

What reasonable expectation do creative writing students have of publishing, and how do the creative writing and publishing worlds interact? No data that bears on this question really exists, so I attempted to take some initial steps by looking at a large sample of the careers of creative writing students. After reaching out to more than fifty creative writing programs, I managed to find complete historical class rosters for three: Virginia Tech, Indiana University at Bloomington, and Notre Dame. I wanted complete class cohorts so I could get a sense of how students fared in proportion to the other students in their class from the perspective of publication, as well as from the perspective of the academic job market. To give a sense of the reputational prominence each

[112] Abramson, 'Further Reading.'
[113] Spahr and Young, 'Program Era and the Mainly White Room.'

program enjoys in the field, Virginia Tech was ranked by *Poets & Writers* as the 50th best MFA program in the US in 2010 and 23rd in 2012, Indiana 12th in 2010 as well as 2012, and Notre Dame 23rd in 2010 and 36th in 2012.

For each student on these rosters I attempted to discern if the student had published a collection of poems or short stories, or a novel, and if the student had a job in the creative writing academy. I did not collect numerical data about publication in journals, because so many programs have indigenous journals at this stage that not achieving a publication in at least one in the three years of the MFA would be unusual. This area of creative writing publication is also difficult to investigate because many of these obscure journals have no online archive, and are difficult to access in print.

Apart from journal and magazine publishing, for what counts as a 'publication' I set a deliberately low standard, even including self-published efforts. I researched student publications simply through online searches, reasoning that it would be in the interests of students and publishers to make any publications as discoverable as they could, and at least discoverable to the efforts of an investigator willing to be persistent. It remains possible that students whose work I researched produced books I never managed to discover. I followed the same approach for investigation of the students' job outcomes; in general students with university positions had some type of faculty webpage. Students with positions as, for instance, composition instructors in a community college—one of the more frequent career outcomes in the sample I examined—often did not have a dedicated faculty page; LinkedIn profiles proved enormously useful in this regard. But the same caveat applies here—some students may have had career success that I have missed.

Before setting out my results, I should state my initial hypothesis about the relationship between the creative writing program and book publishing. Given the explosion of small, independent publishers in the late-twentieth century, barriers to publishing have become minimal across categories and genres. In the early 2000s, the Book Industry Study Group attempted to survey the state of the field and found that 62,815 different publishers accounted for more than 85,000

holders of ISBNs. In 2004 three quarters of these publishers had revenues of less than $50,000 from publishing, and most had only a few titles on their lists.[114] The comparative ease of getting titles into print has meant that it has become easier for authors to publish in a time when the publishing industry has faced extraordinary economic pressure and a declining demand from readers.[115] The sociologist John B. Thompson reports a publisher's words: '"It's become easier to publish and harder to sell—that's the paradox. Any old sod can publish a book now, but actually getting it out to the public has become much trickier."' Thompson goes on to note that 50,000 new fiction titles appeared in the United States in 2007, double the number for 2003.[116] (Growth appears to have since leveled: in Bowker's estimation, 2012 and 2013 both saw the appearance of roughly 50,000 new fiction titles as well.) According to Beth Luey, 'book industry analysts [...] estimate that as late as 2005, seven of every ten front-list hardbound books failed financially.'[117] The conditions of the publishing industry, then, equate to a situation in which by far the most frequent outcome is a published book that languishes in obscurity, while attention and commercial success concentrates amongst a miniscule sample of winners.

My hypothesis was that the creative writing program seemed likely to feed into this institutional structure. It produces thousands of graduates every year, each with a novel, collection of stories, or book of poems of a putatively publishable quality. MFA students also seem likely candidates to start small, independent presses as passion projects, which could lead in turn to publication of the MFA theses of their colleagues and friends in larger numbers. The MFA thus seemed a probable contributor to a state of affairs in which small presses account for a preponderance of substantially ignored books.

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[114] *Under the Radar: A Breakthrough, In-Depth Study of the Book Industry's Underreported Segments and Channels* (New York: BISG, 2005), 15, 26-27.
[115] See *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004); *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).
[116] John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 239.
[117] Beth Luey, 'The Organization of the Book Publishing Industry,' in *A History of the Book in America, Vol. 5: The Enduring Book*, ed. David Paul Nord et. al. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2009), 42.

In a qualified sense my hypothesis was correct. Most books published by graduates of these MFA programs indeed come from small presses. What surprised me was the substantial proportion of MFA students who have published nothing at all. This differed between students of poetry and students of fiction. Poetry students made up 47% of my sample, while fiction students made up 53% (this is more balanced than the national split between poetry and fiction enrolments in creative writing, which ranges between 35%:65% and 30%:70% depending on the data). Of the 191 poetry students whose careers I examined, 38% produced a published collection of poems. Of the 215 fiction students whose careers I examined, 20% produced a published novel or collection of short stories. Given the relatively marginal nature of the further investment in finding a publisher, or even of self-publishing, a novel or collection of stories after having written the novel or stories themselves over three years, it is notable that so many choose not to do so.

The success of candidates on the creative writing job market was more difficult to assess. It can be difficult to tell from a faculty page the precise nature of an instructor's position—sometimes adjunct roles are clearly labeled as such, for instance, while sometimes not—and in cases in which graduates found work in other industries, it is impossible to know whether they initially attempted to find a creative writing position. By 'employment in creative writing' I mean the writer has spent at least one year in a teaching position at a four-year university that grants bachelor's degrees. As mentioned above, students frequently take jobs teaching composition at community colleges; this type of labour seems to me different enough from the practices of the creative writing academy that it should be analyzed under a separate rubric. The 'at least one year' caveat also should be mentioned; I found that students often spent one or two years teaching as adjuncts, and then headed for other industries. Common destinations include elementary and high school teaching, social work, technical writing, and marketing and advertising. A significant number of students also go on to study for PhDs after completing MFAs, often in creative writing, but often also in different humanities disciplines (e.g. English literature, comparative literature, women's studies).

I found that 30% of students I investigated had held jobs in creative writing at one point in their careers; these numbers were consistent across the three different institutions (Virginia Tech 32%; Notre Dame 29%; Indiana 31%). The vast majority of these jobs will have been temporary, although I have no way of verifying the difference between permanent and temporary jobs in all cases, and have no hard numbers on the question.

In sum, this data gives a picture of an institution whose graduates face an extremely unlikely prospect of acquiring permanent employment on the direct basis of their qualification. A larger number acquire temporary employment, but this still represents a minority of MFA candidates. These numbers are likely to vary on the basis of the prominence of the program; the universities I surveyed all ranked within or near the top quartile of workshops in the years I examined, and it would make sense if candidates from less reputable programs found creative writing employment in smaller proportions. In addition, MFA candidates seem surprisingly uninterested in publishing, given that most MFA graduates have completed a collection of poetry or stories, or a novel, and that barriers to entry for book publishing are relatively low. Thus these data give light support to the contentions of critics who have described the creative writing program as representing an increased investment in the self. While a certain number of creative writing students almost assuredly enter the program with the goal of becoming published authors and teachers of creative writing, I would claim that if professional advancement were the chief end of a majority of program students, the proportion of MFA graduates who would publish a novel or collection of poems upon graduation would be much larger. The run of students instead appear to look at the creative writing degree as an educational experience worthwhile in itself, rather than as a professional credential. Self-exploration through literary composition can certainly come across a vacuous and narcissistic endeavour; the sociologist Christopher Lasch, for instance, has decried a trend of putatively self-absorbed literary fiction in which 'the inner journey leads nowhere, neither to a fuller understanding of history as

refracted through a single life nor even to a fuller understanding of the self.'[118] I do not want to enter into the question of the personal effects of the production of autobiographical literature, but I think a fair assessment of the topic should at least leave room for the possibility that students manage to perform more salutary forms of self-investigation than simple narcissistic exhibitionism.

Ultimately this question leads to innumerable critical avenues not to the purpose of this dissertation which tend to come down to questions of taste, whereas I aim at more positive historical interpretation of the modes of literature engendered by the creative writing program. The following chapter, on the institutional career and poetics of Ezra Pound, begins to establish the modernist context for this interpretive work.

[118] Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: Norton, 1984), 155.

Chapter Two

'The scholars have not known anything about poetry': Ezra Pound, Emersonian Correspondence, and the Twentieth-Century Academy

In the summer of 1912, Ezra Pound submitted the following poem, 'To Whistler, American,' to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry*, then a brand new periodical. Pound, in the midst of launching the Imagist movement at this moment of his career, had written the poem after viewing at the Tate Gallery an exhibition of paintings by the late expatriate American artist James McNeill Whistler:

> You also, our first great,
> Had tried all ways;
> Tested and pried and worked in many fashions,
> And this much gives me heart to play the game.
>
> Here is a part that's slight, and part gone wrong,
> And much of little moment, and some few
> Perfect as Dürer!
> 'In the Studio' and these two portraits, if I had my choice!
> And then these sketches in the mood of Greece?
>
> You had your searches, your uncertainties,
> And this is good to know—for us, I mean,
> Who bear the brunt of our America
> And try to wrench her impulse into art.
>
> You were not always sure, not always set
> To hiding night or tuning 'symphonies';
> Had not one style from birth, but tried and pried
> And stretched and tampered with the media.
> You and Abe Lincoln from that mass of dolts
> Show us there's a chance at least of winning through.[1]

'To Whistler' was Pound's first contribution to *Poetry*, a Chicago-based magazine that Pound hoped would teach the American poet 'that poetry *is* an art, an art with a technique, with media, an art that must be in constant flux if it is to live. Can you teach him,' he asked Monroe rhetorically, 'that it is not a pentametric echo of the sociological dogma printed in last year's magazines? Maybe.'[2] 'To

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[1] Ezra Pound, 'To Whistler, American,' *Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 251.
[2] Ezra Pound, Letter to Harriet Monroe, 18 August 1912, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1971 [1950]), 9.

Whistler: American' thus takes on special significance as the poem Pound chose to mark his debut in the magazine that he hoped would inaugurate an 'American Risorgimento.'

There is a tension in Pound's commentary in the letter to Monroe between stability and change: between poetry as '*an* art' with '*a* technique,' a singular specific art with a singular specific technique, and the condition of 'constant flux' that Pound requires if poetry is 'to live.' This same tension is palpable in 'To Whistler,' which praises the artist for his impulse to experiment while itself remaining reasonably restrained in its language and form. That said, its formal transgressiveness goes well beyond a great deal of the poetry published in 1912. The first poem that appears in this inaugural issue of *Poetry*, for instance, Arthur Davidson Ficke's 'Poetry,' could have come out of the early nineteenth century:

> It [i.e. poetry] is a refuge from the stormy days,
> Breathing the peace of a remoter world
> Where beauty, like the musing dusk of even,
> Enfolds the spirit in its silver haze.[3]

The preoccupation with beauty and the association of the beautiful with the remote, the prevalence of adjectives, the archaic diction ('even'), and the amorphous imagery shows this poem to participate atavistically in a poetic mode that 'To Whistler' manages to transcend. Nevertheless, 'To Whistler' does not itself 'try all ways' in its description of the artist, ironically reusing two of its major verbs—'try' and 'pry'—in its attempt to characterize Whistler's experimental method. And while the impulse to 'stretch and tamper' with its medium—to avoid producing yet another 'pentametric echo'—seems present, it is mostly perfunctory.

Yet the opening is promising. The first line manages to compress four heavy stresses into five syllables, the force of the prosody emphasizing Pound's extremely strong claim for Whistler as the avatar of contemporary artistic greatness. Each word does a huge amount of work: 'You'—Whistler—'also'—like Pound, presumably, and his like-minded colleagues—the molossus 'our first

[3] Arthur Davidson Ficke, 'Poetry,' *Poetry* 1.1 (1912): 1.

great'—'our' refers back to 'also,' creating the sense of a privileged group for whom Whistler's greatness is uniquely relevant, while the remaining two words convey that Whistler is not only great, but an original greatness. Breaking the line at the fifth syllable creates a parallel between the concluding molossus of the first line and the terminal three syllables of the second. It would be possible to scan the second line as two iambs, but its juxtaposition against the ending triple stress of the first line makes a scansion of this line as an unstressed syllable followed by three stresses preferable. Again, the heaviness of the metrical emphasis reinforces the strength of the claim, and the parallel rhythmic construction creates an argumentative linkage: 'our first great' has achieved what he has because of his readiness to 'try all ways.'

The opening two lines amount to a masterful display of argumentative compression, but taken together they constitute a single line of five stresses, which begins to suggest that 'pentametric echoes' might continue to resonate in Pound's poetics in spite of his strident letter to Monroe. This suggestion finds confirmation in the regular iambic pentameter of the third and fourth lines. A heavy iambic cadence continues to sound throughout the remainder of the poem, even in the occasional line that contains more or less than five stressed syllables.

In a sense, then, the poem fails to live up to the aesthetics of experiment it exalts in Whistler, and to the project of transcending 'pentametric echoes' Pound sets American poetry in his letter to Monroe; in the same letter Pound himself disparagingly describes 'To Whistler' as 'drastic' and 'informal.' As Rebecca Beasley has noted, Pound distinguished throughout his career between 'art that had a claim to permanence' and poetry whose relevance is merely evanescent. Beasley argues that 'To Whistler' belongs to this second category, and that it would thus be a mistake to read the poem as 'an attempt at modern verse.' [4] But if 'To Whistler' has no claim to permanence, what evanescent relevance did Pound attribute to the poem? Why did he believe it to be the correct text to mark 'the threshold of what I hope is an endeavor to carry into our American poetry the same sort

[4] Rebecca Beasley, 'Ezra Pound's Whistler,' *American Literature* 74.3 (2002): 506.

of life and intensity which [Whistler] infused into modern painting'?[5] I wish to argue that Pound placed it at this threshold because Whistler paradigmatically embodies the qualities of experimentalism, of trying and prying, stretching and tampering, that will provide the American poet with a model for how to become 'modern.'

Identifying Pound with a poetics of experimentalism is not a new critical gesture. 'Much of his work is experimental,' W. B. Yeats commented in 1914;[6] Vincent Sherry has more recently referred to Pound as an 'experimental ultramodernist' committed to 'radical innovation';[7] Lawrence Rainey has named him 'the savage god of modern experimentalism.'[8] But I wish to urge a definition of experimentalism that differs from Sherry's usage, which takes 'experimental' to evoke the 'radically innovative' practice typically associated with the historical avant-garde that recognizes iconoclasm and subversion as ends in themselves.[9] The kind of experimentalism that I detect in 'To Whistler: American,' by contrast, has much more to do with the scientific meaning of the word, according to which the point of an experiment is not mere iconoclasm, but rather the confirmation or disconfirmation of a hypothesis. In a notable essay, the novelist John Barth distinguished between 'programmatic experimentalism,' the experimentalism characteristic of the historical avant-garde and associated postwar postmodernisms, and the sense of the term in which '*all* art is experimental,' created with the hypothesis that the artist's technique will be adequate to its subject—a hypothesis that the finished artwork may ultimately reveal to have been mistaken.[10] In this more scientific sense of experimentalism, then, the initial gesture of radical innovation is only the first, 'hypothetical' part

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[5] Pound, Letter to Monroe, 18 August 1912, *Letters* (1950), 10.
[6] W. B. Yeats, *Uncollected Prose, Vol. 2*, ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1976), 412-414.
[7] Vincent Sherry, *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 3.
[8] Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 78-79.
[9] In most literary scholarship 'experimental' is usually left undefined, but implicitly considered synonymous with 'transgressive of convention,' 'extreme,' or 'outrageous.' Rachel Potter's work on modernist experiment, obscenity and censorship, for instance, offers no definition of a literary experiment but uses 'experimental' as an amplifying term for 'extreme,' 'sexually explicit,' and 'outrageous.' Rachel Potter, *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship and Experiment, 1900-1940* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 72, 73, 78.
[10] John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion,' in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), 64.

of the procedure; the second part consists of judging the success of the hypothesis: some hypotheses will be judged 'slight,' to have 'gone wrong,' or to be 'of little moment.' But there remains the possibility that 'some few' will reveal themselves 'Perfect as Dürer.'

I will go on to argue that for Pound, the relevant criterion that renders an artwork objectively 'perfect' is correspondence—a relationship of exact representation between the artwork and a second term that lies outside the artwork, and that appears in different guises at different moments of Pound's oeuvre: 'nature,' 'reality,' 'the green world.' G. S. Fraser has argued that Pound's *weltanschauung* amounts in effect to eighteenth-century deism: 'Nature, or Nature's God, it hardly matters which one calls it, for it is just enough of a God to keep Nature running smoothly.'[11] The purpose of an experimental poetics thus becomes ascertainment of the kind of poetry that best expresses this second term. Pound's understanding of correspondence holds a great deal in common with the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in *Nature* (1836) sets out a conception of representation that works on the three levels of word, nature, and spirit. Emerson pithily sums up this conception in three propositions that begin his fourth chapter, 'Language':

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.[12]

Led by Richard Poirier, recent American literary scholarship has been less inclined to stress this element of the early Emerson in preference to opposing aspects of his thought, which emphasize perception and literary representation as an unfolding creative process rather than an adequation of the mind or the text to an independent external reality.[13] This scholarly emphasis is unsurprising given that the dominant currents of philosophy of language in the twentieth century, beginning with

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[11] G. S. Fraser, *Vision and Rhetoric: Studies in Modern Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 91.
[12] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. I*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, M.A.: Belknap Press, 1971), 17.
[13] Poirier understands Emerson's governing spirit as the supposition 'that there was in fact really nothing outside to depend on and nothing inside either.' Paul Grimstad has more recently argued that Emerson inaugurates an American tradition of conceiving of experience as 'a process continued in composition' rather than 'the squaring of inner and outer matters.' Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 14; Paul Grimstad, *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 2.

Ferdinand de Saussure's argument for on the arbitrariness of the sign in the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916) and moving through Ludwig Wittgenstein's identification of the meaning of a word with its use in a language in the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1953), have been uniformly hostile to the type of transcendental referentiality that Pound and the early Emerson both posit. I argue that the present disposition to repress these literary historical attitudes is manifestly revealing of certain contradictions that inhere in the contemporary practice of literature, more specifically in the contemporary practice of literature as it has been enshrined in the postwar American university.[14]

In an unpublished essay on 'The American University System,' Pound argued that a debased system of higher education had produced a 'realist literature' that was '"impressionistic" in the pejorative sense,' i.e. a literature 'that shows little or no correlation or even an attempt or tendency towards wishing to correlate.'[15] Pound, unusually, uses the verb 'to correlate' without an object, trusting that opposing 'correlation' to 'impressionism' will sufficiently convey his meaning. I understand him to intend 'correlate' as an effective synonym for 'correspond': the putatively 'realist' literature, by orienting itself towards subjective internal impressions rather than the objective world, ends up as a literature that is not realist at all. Pound effectively indicts the American university for producing a literature more interested in expressing the self than expressing reality. While this is not his usual critique of the American literary academy, as will become clear, throughout this thesis I contend that it is an effective one. Pound's poetry, I argue in this chapter, develops through his effort to produce a literature that is of the world rather than the ego, a literature that differs from the most dominant strains of poetry and fiction generated by the postwar creative writing program in precisely this respect.

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[14] With particular reference to the dominance of poststructuralism in the literary academy, the critic Paul Morrison has similarly argued that the contemporary dismissal of 'such reputedly modernist "virtues" as coherence, teleology, totalization, and the like' has produced an intellectual regime no longer equipped to think similarity. Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Paul de Man* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1995), 4.

[15] Ezra Pound, 'The American University System,' Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Ezra Pound Papers, YCAL MSS 43, Series IV: Manuscripts, 1903-75, Box 67, Folder 2915, 9.

What are the objects of correlation that Pound implies but never names in his essay on the American university system? The most obvious is the Emersonian correspondence between word and referent, but other examples abound throughout his oeuvre. Early in his career Pound affirms a belief in 'absolute rhythm,' such that the cadence of a poem corresponds absolutely to the emotion that the poet both experiences and provokes in the reader.[16] The question of correspondence between source texts and Pound's translations would surface repeatedly throughout Pound's reception; a comparably significant question is the correspondence between the historical intertexts Pound investigated prolifically for *The Cantos* and their manifestation in the poetry. His notorious polemics on the subject of economics, finally, depend substantially upon what Pound understands to be the lack of correspondence between currency and natural resources. Money, Pound claims, has become an abstract system disconnected from actual, material wealth.[17]

I do not claim that the picture of correspondence that emergences from Pound's poetic writings amounts to anything like a coherent and consistent philosophical position. On the contrary, Pound's own poetry frequently seems to display no 'tendency towards wishing to correlate.' As Christine Froula has shown, Pound's translations often seem almost ostentatiously unconcerned about fidelity to the letter of their source texts, and his transcriptions of historical material into *The Cantos* contain a multitude of error.[18] Froula's overarching claim is that this quality of Pound's poetry bespeaks his inability to resist the areferential nature of literary language, and that his poetry amounts to a shifting play of signifiers rather than a literary artefact that meaningfully corresponds to an extra-textual reality. Literary language, on this account, is not something to which criteria of error and correctness can be meaningfully applied. But this goes too far. While Pound may not articulate a coherent and consistent doctrine of correspondence, I will argue that development of his poetry

[16] Ezra Pound, 'Prolegomena,' *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 9.
[17] For an argument that connects this aspect of Pound's economic thought to his poetics and politics see Peter Nicholls, *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics and Writing: A Study of* The Cantos (London: Macmillan, 1984).
[18] Christine Froula, *To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Pound's Cantos* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1984). I discuss the issues raised by Froula's argument at length in the second half of this chapter.

nevertheless must be understood with reference to the extra-poetic dimension of 'nature,' 'reality,' 'the green world.'

I begin by considering correspondence with respect to Pound's understanding of referential language and the ethics of the 'right name.' I then show how the notion of experimentalism works in Pound's poetic practice by turning to the gestation period of the early *Cantos*. The development of *The Cantos* crucially reflects Pound's developing understanding of 'the real' and the possibilities for its literary representation, a question he approached through a critical engagement with 'realist' prose fiction. Pound's investment in correspondence, I next claim, is key to understanding his relationship to the academy. As the custodian of the scientific method, the university is the institution authorized to bestow judgments of correctness and error; as an institution, the university is also subject to the encroachment of system, routine, and professionalism, all of which in Pound's view are antithetical to the practice of accurate judgment. I read Pound's often powerful attraction to the university, then, as an attraction to an institution that promises to bestow upon its students an apparatus for the discernment of truth; I read his often even more powerful repulsion from the university as a repulsion from the institution that—likely inevitably—failed to live up to this promise. I finally argue that Pound's belief in an art that should be judged according to its fidelity to a truth that resides in the external world has been almost universally rejected as undemocratic and totalizing since the waning of high modernism. I conclude that this rejection represents an insurmountable rupture between high modernism and the literary historical regime that replaced it in the American university—that of the creative writing program.

Pound's poem 'Ortus,' which appeared in *Poetry* in April 1913 before its collection in *Lustra* (1916), begins to suggest how literary experimentalism intersects with Pound's beliefs about the possibilities of poetic language:

> How have I laboured?
> How have I not laboured

To bring her soul to birth,
To give these elements a name and a centre!

She is beautiful as the sunlight, and as fluid.
She has no name, and no place.
How have I laboured to bring her soul into separation;
To give her a name and her being!

Surely you are bound and entwined,
You are mingled with the elements unborn;
I have loved a stream and a shadow.

I beseech you enter your life.
I beseech you learn to say 'I'
When I question you:
For you are no part, but a whole;
No portion, but a being.[19]

One critic reads this poem as a sinister exercise of poetic megalomania because 'all the actions emanate from Pound,' and Pound is unwilling 'to admit that this "whole" has a "being" apart from the naming subjectivity.'[20] In fact precisely the opposite is the case: Pound's speaker has not 'laboured' to fabricate the poem's object *ex nihilo*. Bringing 'her soul to birth' instead metaphorically designates the search for language that will adequately correspond to entities that *already exist*, independent of the poet's consciousness. 'To give *these elements* a name and a centre': The speaker uses the demonstrative adjective 'these' as if to gesture towards elements already given in experience. 'These elements' present as an undifferentiated flux that holds a certain attraction for the speaker, who calls fluid sunlight beautiful and finds himself in love with 'a stream and a shadow.' Nevertheless, the speaker shows no uncertainty with respect to his poetic task: to perform the act of 'separation' that is the act of naming, the affixing of a sign that differentiates the object named from every other object. So important is language to Pound's view of the world that he equates having a name with having a 'being.' It is only with a name, only by participating in the referential world, that it is possible to 'enter one's life.'

[19] Ezra Pound, 'Ortus,' *Collected Shorter Poems*, 93-94.
[20] Scott Hamilton, *Ezra Pound and the Symbolist Inheritance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 65.

Thus the speaker's 'labour' is not fundamentally creative. It compares to the compositional activity of the medieval poet and warlord Bertrans de Born that Pound describes in 'Near Perigord,' written two years later:

> he bends at a table
> Scribbling, swearing between his teeth, by his left hand
> Lie little strips of parchment covered over
> Scratched and erased with *al* and *ochaisos*.
> Testing his list of rhymes [...][21]

'Testing' is the crucial verb of this stanza. Pound portrays Bertrans as manipulating and evaluating materials of which he is already possessed, putting different rhymes together and analysing their appropriateness to the content his poem. In a sense, 'Near Perigord' in its entirety represents a test in its trialing of three different perspectival approaches to a single subject, the life and poetry of Bertrans. The first section takes a historical approach, speculating on the question of whether Betrans' inspiration derived from love or war, while the second takes the different tack of considering Bertrans imaginatively: 'End fact. Try fiction,' the section tersely begins, using the conditional framing that Pound will later deploy at greater length in 'Three Cantos' (discussed below). 'Let us say we see' is the speaker's introduction to one scenario—the imagined Bertrans at his desk, in the midst of feverish composition—before taking the reader through a number of other hypothetical situations—Bertrans singing in the 'vaulted hall' of a castle, Bertrans sitting melancholically under a tree, Bertrans discussed by gossips (albeit such distinguished gossips as Arnaut Daniel and Richard the Lionheart) after his death. The third section consists of Bertrans' attempt to inhabit dramatically the voice of Lady Maens, his muse.

What is the epistemic background against which Bertrans' rhymes, as well as the different approaches of 'Near Perigord' as a whole, should be tested? To answer this question it is helpful to look to Emerson, Pound's crucial forerunner as a formulator of correspondence. Emerson, while not an influence Pound was glad to acknowledge—he surfaces in Canto XXVIII as 'the Sage of Concord

[21] Ezra Pound, 'Near Perigord,' *Selected Poems and Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 73.

/ "Too broad ever to make up his mind"'—nevertheless ineluctably shaped the tradition of American letters that Pound would inherit, however uneasily.[22] In his 1844 essay 'The Poet,' Emerson thinks of the poet's task in terms strongly analogous to 'Ortus.' The poet, for Emerson, is the individual blessed with the talent of manipulating forms and symbols, but such manipulation is not wholly originary or creative: 'All the facts of the animal economy,' Emerson writes, 'sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact.'[23] Emerson thus locates the production of poetry at the interface between mind and external reality, where the world passes into 'the soul of man.'[24] This aesthetic program entails a valuation of poetry that depends upon the extent to which a poem expresses the correspondence between the world and the soul, external reality and mind. Emerson's word for the poet's expression of this correspondence is 'science,' which amounts to the poet's use of 'forms according to the life, and not according to the form.'[25] Technical facility with prosody and form counts for little with Emerson unless it functions to express some authentically natural state of affairs. 'It is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,' he states, defining a 'metre-making argument' as 'thought so passionate and alive, it has an architecture of its own.'[26] Thus good prosody has little value in itself; it should be judged only according to how well it expresses the thought or perception that lies behind it (which thought or perception in turn should be judged according to how exactly it corresponds with nature).

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[22] Ezra Pound, 'Canto XXVIII,' *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 134. Subsequent citations to *The Cantos* will appear parenthetically in the text in the format (canto, page number). Cary Wolfe has argued that Pound's conception of individualism is most fundamentally an inheritance from Emerson, while Gail McDonald has more recently proposed that the 'multiple parallels' between Emerson and Pound 'affirm the intellectual connections among romanticism, pragmatism, and modernism.' Cary Wolfe, *The Limits of American Literary Ideology in Pound and Emerson* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993). Gail McDonald, 'American Scholars: Emerson, Pound, and the Possession of Knowledge,' in *Ezra Pound and Education*, ed. Steven Yao and Michael Coyle (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 2012), 5.

[23] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Poet,' in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. III*, ed. Joseph Slater et. al. (Cambridge, M.A.: Belknap Press, 1983), 12-13.

[24] *Ibid.* 12.

[25] *Ibid*. 13.

[26] *Ibid.* 6.

Pound makes a comparable argument about prosody in the 1911 introduction to his translations of the medieval poet Guido Cavalcanti: 'I believe in an ultimate and absolute rhythm as I believe in an absolute symbol or metaphor,' Pound declares. 'The perception of the intellect is given in the word, that of the emotions in the cadence. It is only, then, in the perfect rhythm joined to the perfect word that the two-fold vision can be recorded.'[27] 'Absolute' functions here in much the same way as Emerson's 'natural,' indicating a pre-existent, transcendental reality that the poet through his writing must reveal. Like Emerson, Pound in this 1911 text thinks of this as a scientific task, extravagantly describing his theory of verse as a 'spiritual chemistry' that both 'modern mysticism and modern science' are 'set to confirm.'[28]

Emerson, in the most explicit parallel with 'Ortus,' calls the poet 'the Namer, or Language-maker,' but as in 'Ortus' Emerson does not understand the poet to exercise this power with unconstrained individualism. The poet gives 'every [thing] its own name and not another's,' again suggesting that the true name of every object exists already in an order of reality awaiting discovery, and again thinking of poetry as a science rather than a craft. This conception of the poet's task builds upon the account of language Emerson developed in *Nature*. For Emerson, 'Words are signs of natural facts,' while natural facts are the symbols of 'spiritual facts.' He looks to the natural world or 'material appearance' for his etymologies, arguing that '*Right* originally means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*'; 'a lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite.'[29] Because of the analogy between nature and spirit, language that is closest to nature is closest to spirit, and therefore the most valuable. Thus languages are most accurate and most beautiful in their infancy, when 'all is poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols.' Over time language becomes corrupt as usage becomes

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[27] Ezra Pound, 'Introduction to Cavalcanti *Poems*,' *Translations* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 23. Pound rearticulated this position in 'Prolegomena' one year later: 'I believe in an "absolute rhythm," a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed.' Pound, 'Prolegomena,' 9. Daniel Albright considers Pound's position on 'absolute rhythm' at length in *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 147-150.

[28] Ezra Pound, *Translations* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 23.

[29] Emerson, *Nature*, 18.

habitual and 'old words are perverted to stand for things which they are not'; 'a paper currency is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults.' The task of the poet, for Emerson, is to expose this process of corruption and restore words to their initial proximity to nature and, by extension, spirit. Pound will sound a variation on this idea of the poet's responsibility to maintain the precision of linguistic correspondence in much of his poetry and prose; much of his social criticism responds to the question of what happens when a society ceases to believe in the importance of maintaining correspondence between word and referent. In his 1916 memoir of the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Pound attributes the degradation of Renaissance Italy to 'the periodic sentence' and 'the flowing paragraph,' which in his view had also caused the fall of the Roman Empire. 'For when words cease to cling close to things, kingdoms fall, empires wane and diminish.'[30]

The influence that Pound preferred to acknowledge in this domain was Confucius.[31] To 'call things by their right names' ranked amongst the highest moral imperatives for Pound, as is well illustrated by his translation of the Confucian *Tao Hio*:

> wanting good government in their own states, [the men of old] first established order in their own families: wanting order in the home, they first disciplined themselves; desiring self-discipline, they rectified their own hearts; and wanting to rectify their hearts, they sought precise verbal definitions of their inarticulate thoughts (the tones given off by the heart); wishing to attain precise verbal definitions, they set to extend their knowledge to the utmost. The completion of knowledge is rooted in sorting things into organic categories.[32]

Hugh Kenner glosses the attitude expressed here as the relation of 'conduct […] to motives, motives to perceptions, formulations to observations, theory to practice, poetry to things seen and sensations undergone.'[33] Versions of this emphasis on linguistic precision surface throughout Pound's poetry, especially in the *Cantos*: ''name 'em, don't bullshit ME' is the forceful injunction of Canto LXXIV (450); Canto LXXVII valourizes 'the total sincerity, the precise definition' (488). Canto XCVIII

[30] Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (London: John Lane, 1916), 136.
[31] To cite one example, when T. S. Eliot expressed confusion in an essay as to 'what Mr. Pound believes,' Pound responded: 'I believe in the *Ta Hio*.' Ezra Pound, 'Date Line,' *Literary Essays*, 85-86.
[32] Ezra Pound, *Confucius: The Unwobbling Pivot, The Great Digest, The Analects* (New York: New Directions, 1947), 29-30.
[33] Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 88.

ventriloquizes Ford Madox Ford: 'get a dictionary / and learn the meaning of the words' (709). Through the correct experimental poetic practice, Pound believed, a process of discovery of natural meaning would unfold whose effects would transcend the artistic sphere to reach the whole of social and ethical life.

To see how Pound's experimentalism works in practice, consider the development of Pound's conception of the poetic speaker across different versions of the early *Cantos*. The first versions of *The Cantos* appeared in print for the first time in *Poetry* magazine in June of 1917 under the title 'Three Cantos,' though only traces of these early versions would remain in *A Draft of XVI Cantos,* published in 1924-1925. The first of the 'Three Cantos' opens with a colloquial expression of despair at the impossibility of the task of writing a contemporary epic: 'Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello!*' 'Three Cantos' thus begins with a colloquial expostulation that a reader could plausibly attribute to a controlling authorial figure, particularly an authorial figure like Ezra Pound who frequently expressed himself in language of colourful frustration (or 'legendary cantankerousness,' as Pound wrote in a 1922 letter[34]). The poem continues:

> But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks,
> Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing's an art-form,
> Your *Sordello*, and that the modern world
> Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in.
> Say that I dump my catch, shiny and silvery,
> As fresh sardines flapping and slipping on the marginal cobbles?
> (I stand before the booth, the speech; but the truth
> Is inside this discourse—this booth is full of the marrow of wisdom.)
> Give up th' intaglio method.[35]

The two uses of the first-person singular pronoun in the second line strengthen the impression of a controlling authorial presence; the introduction of a narrating 'I' offers readers a figure to whom they can begin to attribute characteristics of diction and personality. By the time of publication of *XVI Cantos*, Pound's thinking on the crucial question of how to begin his epic sequence had changed

[34] Ezra Pound, Letter to Felix Schelling, 8 July 1922, *Letters* (1950), 178.
[35] Ezra Pound, 'Three Cantos I,' *Poetry* 10.3 (1917): 113.

utterly: he chose to open *A Draft* instead with his translation of Andreas Divus's Latin translation of *The Odyssey*, which Pound dates to 1538, and refracts in his English through the rhythms of the Anglo-Saxon 'Seafarer': 'And then went down to the ship, / Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea' (I, 3). Conspicuous by its absence in these lines is a grammatical subject. Pound leaves the reader uncertain about the narrator or performer of these actions until the first-person plural 'We' enters at the beginning of line 3. As Daniel Albright has observed, the subjectless opening of Canto I relates to Pound's practice throughout *The Cantos* of inverting verb and noun ('Came Madame Lucrezia'; 'Came Eurus as comforter'). Both function to emphasize the performance of the action, and to minimize the significance of the subject performing (or narrating) it.[36]

The opening section of 'Three Cantos,' by contrast, reads much more like the traditional epic invocation in the voice of a speaker that can be unproblematically identified with the voice of the author: the muse here evoked is Robert Browning, specifically the young Browning who produced *Sordello*. Instead of straightforwardly assimilating Browning to his poetic cause, the speaker of 'Three Cantos I' appeals to Browning in the unusual form of a kind of imperative conditional: *say* I want to, *say* I take your whole bag of tricks; *say* that I dump my catch. Pound's speaker effectively orders the reader to performatively enact each of these states of affairs in quick succession. While these three conditions all deal with the volition and disposition of the speaker, the other major conditional proposition of the passage deals with a state of affairs that may or may not be true of the world at large:

> say the thing's an art-form,
> Your *Sordello*, and that the modern world
> Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in.[37]

This would seem to be the fundamental matter of the passage: whether or not the speaker 'wants to,' whether or not the speaker opts for the 'bag of tricks' and the 'quirks and tweeks' and so forth,

[36] Albright, 20.
[37] Pound would later choose 'the modern world / Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in' as the epigraph to his *Selected Cantos* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

depends upon the question of whether *Sordello* is a specific, unique, and irreproducible poetic artifact, or the inauguration of an 'art-form,' a 'rag-bag' that could accommodate the thought of the world of 1915-1917 as well as it could accommodate the thought of 1836-1840. Should the speaker choose to accept Browning's epic as a model, a certain consequence will ensue: the giving up of 'th' intaglio method,' the carefully chiseled patterning of related images characteristic of Pound's earlier imagist work. 'Three Cantos,' and Pound's subsequent substantial repudiation of the poems, thus stand as an experimental performance, a test of a hypothesis articulated in the conditionals of 'Three Cantos I''s first section against the experimental conditions of the 'modern world.' And while the passage's frustrated first line—'there can be but one *Sordello!*'—would seem to indicate that the poet had already made up his mind that an attempted repetition of *Sordello* would end in futility, 'Three Cantos' nevertheless continues to display many features of the Browning-type epic. The most important such feature is the epic invocation itself, with the authoritative 'I' speculating about the composition and arrangement of the material to come.

At the time of composition of 'Three Cantos,' Pound had begun a post-Imagist effort to apply 'th' intaglio method' to longer forms in poems such as 'Near Perigord' and 'Provincia Deserta,' and had started to develop his advocacy of precise correspondence beyond his 1912 Imagist doctrine of 'Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.'[38] This development reflects the influence of what Ronald Bush has shown to be Pound's major literary preoccupation during the composition of the 'Three Cantos'—the 'realist' prose fiction of authors of the likes of Turgenev, Flaubert, Gourmont, Joyce, and especially Henry James.[39] In 1917 Pound published an essay in the magazine *The Future* praising the work of the eighteenth-century poet George Crabbe as an embodiment of Jamesian realism, or, 'The afflatus which has driven great artists to blurt out the facts of life with directness or with cold irony, or with passion, and with always precision.'[40] By this

[38] Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect,' *Literary Essays*, 3.
[39] Ronald L. Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), 147.
[40] Ezra Pound, 'The Rev G Crabbe, LLB,' *Literary Essays*, 276.

point Pound's conception of realism has expanded capaciously from simple correlation between poem, sensation, and world; the qualities of 'cold irony' and 'passion'—which would seem to be in tension with each other—now complicate the picture. 'If Englishmen had known how to select the best out of Crabbe they would have less need of consulting French stylists,' Pound continues in a comment that illuminates his understanding of the realist 'afflatus,'[41] for at this time 'cold irony' and 'passion' were qualities he associated paradigmatically with the poetry of the French writer Jules Laforgue.

In his essay 'Irony, Laforgue, and Some Satire,' which also appeared in 1917, Pound sketches a view of irony as a crucial component of realism because irony functions to clear away the obfuscating dead matter of habitual language and cliché. 'Cold irony' is thus the enabling condition of 'passion'. Pound asserts that Laforgue

> is an incomparable artist. He is, nine-tenths of him, critic—dealing for the most part with literary poses and *clichés*, taking them as his subject matter; and—and this is the important thing when we think of him as a poet—he makes them a vehicle for his own very personal emotions, of his own unperturbed sincerity.[42]

Pound thus develops his thinking considerably about the approach that a faithful representation of the real in literature demands. While he becomes much more receptive to an idea of language as a mediating and potentially distortive influence for which the writer must account in his practice, he never weakens his emphasis on the need for literature to express truths of the same order as the truths of science. Laforgue, he writes, 'has dipped his wings in the dye of scientific terminology.'[43]

But apart from James, Pound found his most important sophisticating influence with respect to his conception of realism in the proofs of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), which Pound read in manuscript for *The Little Review* in the course of its 1918-1921 serialization of the novel. Hugh Witemeyer has made the compelling case that prior to his exposure to the abrupt and discontinuous narrative perspective of Joyce's prose, Pound worked according to a poetic model of the mask or persona

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[41] *Ibid.* 278.
[42] Ezra Pound, 'Irony, Laforgue, and Some Satire,' *Literary Essays*, 282.
[43] *Ibid.* 283.

taken from Browning that necessarily produced an impression of a coherent, singular subjectivity underneath the poetry.[44] From Joyce, Witemeyer argues, Pound learned the value of interrupting the linearity of his presentation, a technique that would enable him to construct a realism faithful to the fragmented, fluctuating character of experience in the twentieth century.[45]

Critics have influentially understood Joyce's precursor in this respect to be James, a novelist whose style they consider to have had a comparably strong impact upon Pound's mature poetry. According to Hugh Kenner, *The Cantos* would be 'unthinkable' but for the 'sensibility' he found in James; in Bush's view, James's work offered Pound a model of a style 'whose involutions and participial constructions permitted the energies of perception to be absorbed into drama.'[46] In some respects this genealogy cannot be denied: James's presence in Pound's attempt to work through the problem of realism is starkly clear in Pound's 'Indiscretions' (1923), a short autobiographical text that contains long sections of pastiche of James's late style. Before producing the text Pound had read through the entire corpus of James's work between January 1916, when James died, and August 1918, when Pound's contribution to a James memorial issue of *The Little Review* appeared in print.[47] In his second paragraph, Pound speculates as to

> whether coming to the belief that human beings are more interesting than anything possible else—certainly more than any possible mood of colours and footlights-like glare-up of reflection turning house-façades into stage card-board; whether in one's anthropo-and gunaikological passion one were wise to leave London itself—with possibly a parenthetical Paris as an occasional watchtower and alternating exotic *mica salis*; and whether—the sentence being the mirror of man's mind, and we having long since passed the stage when 'man sees horse' or 'farmer sows rice,' can in simple ideographic record be said to display anything remotely resembling our subjectivity [...][48]

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[44] For a recent and thorough account of the relevance of Browning to Pound's poetry see Michaela Giesenkirchen, '"But Sordello, and My Sordello?": Pound and Browning's Epic,' *Modernism/modernity* 8.4 (2001): 623-642.
[45] Hugh Witemeyer, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: Forms and Renewal, 1908-1920* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 45, 84. For an interesting reading of the aesthetics that lay beneath Pound's editing of *Ulysses* for publication in *The Little Review*, see Paul Vanderham, 'Ezra Pound's Censorship of *Ulysses*,' *James Joyce Quarterly* 32.3/4 (1995): 583-595.
[46] *Ibid.*; Bush, 176.
[47] Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 14.
[48] Ezra Pound, 'Indiscretions, or *Une Revue de Deux Mondes*,' *Pavannes and Divigations* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 3-4.

The last clause describes a departure from the simple correlations of 'the ideographic record,' which bring to mind the *hokku*-like Imagist poems of *Lustra* that consist of only a single image.[49] Instead, Pound describes a much more complicating representational relationship, suggesting that a Jamesian constellation of impressions and images, with every image subtly modifying the reception of every other, would be the most accurate mirror of the modern subjectivity. Pound's prose performs such a constellation here, beginning with the intriguing ironic transformation of house façades into stage cardboard, progressing to muse on London and Paris by way of the metaphor of a watchtower, and continuing, after the end of the quoted passage, to introduce a bewildering array of perceptions and associations:

> and whether—to exhaust a few more semi-colons and dashes—one would—will, now that I am out of a too cramped room at the Albergo Bella Venezia and into a much too expensive one at this hostel which bears the hyphenated conjunction of a beer (Pilsen) and of the illustrious—but to the outer world somewhat indefinite savior of his country, Manin—whether the figures in the opposite windows of the Cavaletto—à la Matisse—with faces that *ought* to be painted à la Matisse, a streak of nose and two blobs of eye-shadows—adequate recognition, presumably, of their claim to individual existence […][50]

This passage is much closer to the poetic domain of *The Cantos* as they will appear in the 1920s than that of the earlier 'Three Cantos.' At the beginning of 'Three Cantos I' the speaker works through a poetic problem self-consciously and cogently; the narrative unfolds according to the linear logic of the conventional individual utterance. In the above passage, there is nominally an authorial 'I,' but the narrative logic of the passage is superpositional rather than sequential. It brings many different orders of experience together at once: the name of the hotel includes both beer and an Italian statesman; the individuals in the window provoke a Laforguian ironic reflection on the ethics of representation. The sense of 'reality' to which the artist must be accountable is markedly more complex in this prose than in the verse of the 'Three Cantos.'

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[49] Pound called these 'one image poems' in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 89.
[50] Pound, 'Indiscretions,' 4.

One characteristic that differentiates the prose of Pound's 'Indiscretions' from the poetry of *The Cantos* is the proliferation of semicolons and dashes in the former and their disappearance in the latter. In this respect Pound's literary practice, which almost never relies upon punctuation and syntax to connect and contrast the different constellations that appear in his work, is antithetical to James's, whose effect depends to an enormous extent upon an expert management of punctuation and syntax. Pound's discomfort in Jamesian literary territory is evident in 'Indiscretions,' which in spite of its pretension to grammatical sophistication effectively amounts to a straightforward sequence of images governed by the associations of the narrative consciousness. The ostensibly complicated syntax actually adds little to the presentation. The 'whether' construction is superfluous and confusing, since no alternatives to the various possibilities described ever emerge, and Pound begins clauses that never complete (e.g. 'one would—will' hangs unconcluded in the midst of the sentence). Pound perhaps intends these solecisms to be parodic criticism of James, but the syntactical control Pound displays here falls far enough short of the late James's that 'Indiscretions' possesses little satirical credibility. In his criticism, too, Pound shows himself ill at ease with syntactical complexity. He famously denounced Milton, 'chock a block with Latin,' for writing 'Him who disobeys me disobeys' when Milton (in Pound's view) meant 'who disobeys him disobeys me.'[51] In such critical moments Pound appears strangely insensitive to the shifts in emphasis, rhythm and sound that result from shifts in word order. Such an insistence on simplicity and clarity verges on the crudely reductive, and betrays an unresponsiveness to literatures that exploit as much of the grammatical and syntactical resources of a language as they can to achieve their effects.

The structural linguist Roman Jakobson's distinction between 'two aspects of language' renders the difference between James and Pound in especially stark terms. Surveying various studies of aphasia, Jakobson observes that one category of aphasics display what he terms 'similarity disorder' that leaves those who suffer from it unable to recall the names of specific nouns, but

[51] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 51.

perfectly able to construct grammatically correct propositions. 'Words with an inherent reference to context,' Jakobson notes, 'like pronouns and pronominal adverbs, and words serving merely to construct the context, such as connectives and auxiliaries, are particularly prone to survive' in the discourse of these particular aphasics.[52] As in James, the relational and connective elements of language dominate, in these cases to a pathological extent. These cases contrast with those exhibiting 'contiguity disorder,' in which nouns remain and connectives disappear: 'words endowed with purely grammatical functions, like conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, and articles, disappear first, giving rise to the so-called "telegraphic style," whereas in the case of similarity disorder they are the most resistant.'[53] Insufficient linkage and transition between the various images in Pound's verse was the major, cutting criticism that Yeats leveled at Pound's work in his introduction to the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. He finds Pound's poetry

> constantly interrupted, broken, twisted into nothing by its directed opposite, nervous obsession, nightmare, stammering confusion. [...] Even where there is no interruption, he is often content, if certain verses and lines have style, to leave unbridged transitions, unexplained ejaculations, that make his meaning unintelligible.[54]

Yeats's characterization highlights the affinity between Pound's work and the 'telegraphic style' that Jakobson describes, a way of using language that emphasizes nouns almost at the exclusive expense of grammatical context. While there is no doubt that Pound learned valuable lessons about narrative superposition from James's work, from this stylistic perspective Pound and James are nearly entirely at odds.

Given Pound's commitment to correspondence, his location towards the 'continguity disorder,' noun-dominated pole of Jakobson's spectrum makes a great deal of sense. A belief that literature may directly correspond with an objectively given external world would naturally place a great deal of emphasis upon the names of the objects that populate it. A Jamesian perspective

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[52] Roman Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,' in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* ('s-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1956), 64-65.
[53] *Ibid.* 72.
[54] W. B. Yeats, 'Introduction,' *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*, ed. W. B. Yeats (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), xxiv-xxvi.

inclined towards 'similarity disorder,' by contrast, would understand the world as a set of shifting relationships, with every object existing only in constellational relation to the other objects of its environment. It is difficult to see how such a perspective could coexist with Pound's nominalist views.

Thus where James uses punctuation and syntax to manage superposition, *The Cantos* typically uses poetic line. Consider Canto II, which initially appeared as Canto VIII. It begins in almost the same terms as 'Three Cantos I':

> Hang it all, Robert Browning,
> there can be but the one 'Sordello.'
> But Sordello, and my Sordello?
> Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.
> So-shu churned in the sea.
> Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash,
> Sleek head, daughter of Lir,
> eyes of Picasso (II, 6)

Again, this brings together several different orders of experience: Browning, his text, ('Sordello'), his character, (Sordello), the Chinese poet So-shu (Pound's corruption of Shiba Shojo, the Japanese name for the Chinese poet Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju[55]), the Celctic sea-god Lir, and the contemporary avant-garde painter Picasso sit next to each other in eight comparatively short lines, united by sound as well as spatial contiguity. The 's' and 'l' consonants in 'Sordello' sound again in 'So-shu,' 'seal sports,' 'spray-white circles,' 'sleek,' and 'Lir.'

The development in Pound's poetics since the 'Three Cantos' also registers in the rhythms and textures of Canto II. Pound had declared his intention in 1912 to 'compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome';[56] 'To break the pentameter, that was the first heave,' Pound noted retrospectively in Canto LXXXI, written in detention in Pisa after the Second World War (538). 'Three Cantos' goes some way towards 'breaking' the pentameter, but 'pentametric echoes' certainly remain. 'Hang it all, there can be only one *Sordello!*' contains five

[55] Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to* The Cantos *of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 5n4.
[56] Pound, 'Retrospect,' 3.

stresses. The next two lines scan as perfect iambic pentameter with an additional three syllables joined to the end, giving the impression that Pound has calculatingly and rather transparently attempted to obscure the extent of his dependence on the traditional verse form. Line 4 and 5 scan as iambic pentameter but for three trochaic inversions—of the first two feet of line 4, and the first foot of line 5 (line 5 also features a feminine ending). While Pound has certainly made an effort to 'break the pentameter' in the 'Three Cantos,' and occasionally succeeded, iambic rhythms remain palpable throughout most sections of the poem. (A notable exception is Pound's rendering of Divus's translation of *The Odyssey* that would eventually begin Canto I; it makes its first appearance at the end of 'Three Cantos III.') Canto II, by contrast, most commonly features a line of six to eight syllables, most often seven, and a strong spondaic rhythm, often accompanied by a strong first syllable, prevents any iambic cadences from surreptitiously entering the verse. Ford Madox Ford perceived this rhythmic feature of the poem in his comments on a draft of the canto in 1922, noting that Pound avoids 'too slick an effect' through a 'roughening up' of his surface.[57] This spondaic rhythm recurs time and again: 'Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff wash'; 'And the wave runs in the beach-groove'; 'Sea-break from stern forrards'; 'Black snout of a porpoise'; 'Fish-scales over groin muscles' (II, 6-9). The nouns that occur in these strong first syllables usually lack definite or indefinite articles; perceptions and impressions are simply given in experience, narratively and grammatically unmediated. This method of presentation recalls certain of the linguistic innovations of 'Homage to Sextus Propertius,' which—in its effort to achieve a poetics that could render the elegies of ancient Rome in a register that would speak to the contemporary world—confronted a similar formal challenge to *The Cantos*. Spondees proliferate in 'Propertius' as well: 'Flame burns, rain sinks into the cracks'; 'Stands genius a deathless adornment.'[58] Pound narrates in the present

[57] Ford Madox Ford, Letter to Ezra Pound, 21 March 1922, *Pound/Ford: The Story of a Literary Friendship*, ed. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 64.
[58] Ezra Pound, 'Homage to Sextus Propertius,' *Personae: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 206.

tense, but the absence of determiners and articles creates the sense of an eternally present space in which the poem timelessly unfolds.

The change from 'Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello!*' to 'Hang it all, Robert Browning / There can be but the one "Sordello"' can be explained partially with reference to Pound's effort to break the pentameter. The opening changes from one line of eleven syllables and five stresses to two lines of six syllables and four stresses and nine syllables and four stresses respectively, thereby removing any possibility of a pentametric gloss. But the second version, by introducing Browning, also raises the question of the relationship between the poet, his speaker, his characters, and the poem. This picks up a theme Pound articulates at much greater length and transparency in 'Three Cantos,' apostrophizing Browning in much the same manner he addressed Whistler in 1912:

> You had your business:
> To set out so much thought, so much emotion;
> To paint, more real than any dead Sordello,
> The half or third of your intensest life
> And call that third *Sordello;*
> And you'll say, 'No, not your life,
> He never showed himself.'
> Is't worth the evasion, what were the use
> Of setting figures up and breathing life upon them,
> Were't not *our* life, your life, my life, extended?[59]

Ronald Bush notes that Pound unambiguously intended the reference to *Sordello* to designate the poem rather than the character; Pound explicitly authorized the italic type for the version of the 'Three Cantos' published in *Lustra*.[60] The passage speculates in a narratively straightforward way about the relationship between the life of the author, the character/narrator, and the work. Even if it would be wrong to read the character Sordello as a straightforward Browning analogue, Browning's poem, Pound claims, is necessarily a meaningful psychological projection of Browning's experience,

[59] Pound, 'Three Cantos I,' 114-115.
[60] Bush, 79n9.

just as Pound's poem will be an extension of his own life. Further on, Pound wonders at length how his own epic will work without a Sordello figure as a focalizing device for his poetry:

> Whom shall I conjure up, who's my Sordello,
> My pre-Daun Chaucer, pre-Boccacio,
> As you have done pre-Dante?
> Whom shall I hang my shimmering garment on;
> Who wear my feathery mantle, *hagoromo*,
> Whom to set dazzle the serious future ages?[61]

This lengthy and repetitive self-interrogation is far from both the Jamesian flood of images of 'Indiscretions' and the compressed superposition of Canto II. In Canto II, this prolonged speculation condenses into a few lines:

> there can be but the one 'Sordello.'
> But Sordello, and my Sordello?

'But Sordello' in line 3 qualifies the '"Sordello"' that appears in inverted commas in line 2, drawing attention to the dependence of the work *Sordello* upon the single character 'Sordello'; 'and my Sordello?' asks a similar question to the above section of *Three Cantos*: What structurally analogous figure will appear in my poem? An oblique answer to this question appears in the subsequent two lines:

> Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.
> So-shu churned in the sea.

The first line is the opening phrase of a Provençal biography of Sordello, literally meaning 'Sordello is from Mantua.'[62] By providing this line untranslated Pound emphasizes the reality of Sordello as a singular, historical individual conditioned by a particular history; such a singular and particular perspective is precisely what Pound, in his narration of *The Cantos*, seeks to avoid. Pound signals this by immediately cutting to a vastly different cultural context—China by way of Japan—thus beginning a sequence of radical perspectival shifts that will persist until the end of the canto. The determiner 'my' in 'my Sordello' offers a glimpse of a narrative persona; the next glimpse of an

[61] Pound, 'Three Cantos I,' 117.
[62] Terell, 5n3.

authorial presence Pound offers does not arise until the second stanza, when the first-person singular pronoun appears for the first time: 'And I said: "It's a straight ship."' The reader soon learns that the narrative perspective, at first seeming to belong to the writer of *The Cantos*, now belongs to Acoetes, the sailor lauded by Ovid for his prescient recognition of the presence of Dionysius on his ship. This abrupt perspectival dislocation would become a signature of the early *Cantos*, and it shows the extent to which Pound's poetics had evolved as a result of a process of experimentation driven by a deep and sustained engagement with the question of the literary possibilities for the representation of the real. Comparing Pound's poetry of the 1910s to the early *Cantos* also shows that development from his early to his mature work constitutes an effort to make problematic the idea of a coherent, unitary authorial presence behind the verse.

Pound's experimentalism grew significantly out of his experience of the university literature program, the venue at the turn of the twentieth century for an intense debate about the relevance of the scientific method to questions of literary evaluation. I will contend that the university literature program constitutes a site of profound ambivalence for Pound, who felt at once drawn to the scientific method's promise to reveal truth, and repulsed by what he perceived as the hostility of the methodical and the systematic to authentic literary experience.

Pound began his postsecondary education at the University of Pennsylvania in 1901 at the age of sixteen; in 1903 he transferred to Hamilton College in New York State, where he completed his bachelor's degree in 1905. In later years Pound would present his university-going self as a scholar of comparative literature *avant la lettre*, writing to Louis Untermeyer in 1930: 'Entered U.P.Penn at 15 with intention of studying comparative values in literature (poetry) and began doing so unbeknown to the faculty.'[63] In his Italian radio broadcasts Pound offered a similar history: 'Started in U. Penn at 15 to FIND out what had been written, and what was the BEST of it, in as

[63] Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 37.

many languages as I could git under my occiput.'[64] Pound did not enjoy his time as an undergraduate, as his decision to leave Penn after two years goes some way towards indicating; he found Hamilton little better and considered transferring back to Penn for his final year. As his letter to Untermeyer shows, he considered the academy as an institution to be structurally at odds with his literary interests, which he would have to pursue subversively. His decision to enter graduate school appears to have been motivated largely by the necessity of doing something with his life and the perceived lack of any other viable option. Pound's father, Homer, recalled Ezra returning from his graduation and declaring: "Well, Dad, here I am! Educated!" Homer responded: "Fine, Son. And what do we do now? You have to do something, you know."'[65]

Pound returned to the University of Pennsylvania for graduate school in 1905, choosing to study the work of the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega with Hugo Rennert, a professor of Romance languages. He also took courses in French, English, and Spanish with William P. Shepard, a medievalist who agreed to give Pound private lessons in Provençal. K. K. Ruthven has argued that Shepard instilled in Pound a cosmopolitan conviction in the interchangeability of different Romance languages, and a suspicion of the arbitrariness of literary boundaries.[66] But Pound's hostility to the programmatic nature of the institution remained in spite of Shepard's benign influence, and became most visible when Pound managed to fail a course in the history of literary criticism taught by Josiah Penniman: 'In 1907 I achieved the distinction of being the only student flunked in J.P.'s course in the history of literary criticism. So far as I know I was the only student who was making any attempt to understand the subject of literary criticism and the only student with any interest in the subject […]'[67] Pound opted not to continue at Pennsylvania after the conclusion of the 1906-1907 academic year, instead taking up an academic position—the only one he would ever hold—as the lone faculty member in the Department of Romance Languages at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

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[64] *'Ezra Pound Speaking': Radio Speeches of World War II*, ed. L. W. Doob (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), 137.
[65] Quoted in J. J. Wilhelm, *The American Roots of Ezra Pound* (London: Garland Publishing, 1985), 141.
[66] K. K. Ruthven, *Ezra Pound as Literary Critic* (London: Routledge, 1990), 7.
[67] Quoted in Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* (Harmandsworth: Penguin, 1970), 34.

Wabash, a Presbyterian college located in a small Midwestern locale, proved stifling for a poet who aspired to a cosmopolitan literary sophistication. Former students had no trouble remembering Pound's distinctive pedagogical style: 'he sat in his chair with both feet on the lecture-table, holding his book high. He would command a student to translate. At the first error the beginner would make, Ezra (as we all called him) would drop the book to the floor and issue a blasphemous phrase in French.'[68] The rather affected quality of Pound's behaviour stands out in this description. Raised in Idaho and Philadelphia, Pound would surely not instinctively swear in French, but would seem to like the idea of appearing as someone who would. Pound's tenure at Wabash came to an abrupt end, after a notorious incident that according to A. David Moody involved a 'girl from a stranded burlesque show' passing the night in Pound's room. The college in fact rethought its decision to dismiss Pound, quickly offering him a chance to return, but Pound had decided that the academic life was not for him, and was more than happy to contribute his severance pay towards a move to Europe.[69]

Pound would justify and amplify his rejection of the academy in his critical writings for the rest of his life. His opposition to the university study of literature tended to take two major forms: the first showed suspicion of the academy as an institution uniquely susceptible to careerism and institutional politics, while the second articulates the argument that the philological methods of university literature departments separate students from the fundamentally valuable aspects of literary experience. To begin with the first form (Pound's response to philology will enter the discussion below), in his 1938 *Guide to Kulchur* Pound condemned the American university as run 'by hirelings and boors in great part.' In his preface, he announces his intention to

> COMMIT myself on as many points as possible, that means I shall make a number of statements which very few men can AFFORD to make, for the simple reason that such taking sides might jeapord their incomes (directly) or their prestige or 'position' in one or other of the professional 'world.' Given my freedom, I may be a fool to use it, but I wd. be a cad not to.[70]

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[68] James Rader, 'The Value of Testimony: Pound at Wabash,' *Paideuma* 13 (1984): 83.
[69] A. David Moody *Ezra Pound, Poet: Vol. I: The Young Genius*, *1885-1920* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 60-61.
[70] Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), 61, 7.

As Donald Davie has acutely argued, the effectiveness of the authorial self-presentation of much of Pound's criticism stems from such claims that Pound's opinions are not governed by pragmatic considerations of professionalism.[71] The bombast and stridency of Pound's rhetoric, in his poetry as well as his prose, gives a similar impression of an authorial voice that has no qualms about expressing itself, regardless of the offense it might cause.

But this is not to say that Pound was entirely immune to the pull of professionalism. Pound lists himself as 'Ezra Pound, M.A.' on the title page of his first critical book, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910); four years later he would present himself this way again in the pages of *The Egoist*, adding the subtitle: 'Sometime Fellow in the University of Pennsylvania.'[72] 'Sometime' seems a disingenuous adjective here, faintly implying that his association with the university had not decisively terminated and might indeed resume; according to the *OED* the now-rare usage denotes 'At one time or another, with the possibility of recurrence or repetition; now and then; occasionally.'[73] Pound could have selected 'Former Fellow' or 'Past Fellow' as unambiguous choices. This diction bespeaks an ambivalence on Pound's part that would become stronger as Pound's career wore on; in 1920 he asked Homer to approach the University of Pennsylvania and enquire about the possibility of submitting *The Spirit of Romance*, together with more recent translations of Guido Cavalcanti and proposed new work on Arnaut Daniel, as a doctoral thesis. Hugo Rennert, Pound claimed, had assured him in 1910 that this output would be sufficient to merit a PhD, but the university proved unwilling to award the degree.[74] In 1931 Pound appealed again to the university, asking if his edition of *Guido Cavalcanti Rime* (published 1932) might qualify him for a doctorate. The university's response leaned on bureaucratic technicality, telling Pound that he had not completed the requisite

[71] Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*, in *Studies in Ezra Pound* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), 121.
[72] 'Preliminary Announcement of a College of the Arts,' *The Egoist* 21.1 (1914): 413.
[73] 'sometime, adv. (and adj.),' *OED Online*, December 2015, OUP.
[74] Moody, 33.

coursework and informing him that he would be welcome to reenroll for graduate study. Pound was uninterested.[75]

Emily Mitchell Wallace has argued that the University of Pennsylvania's decision not to award Pound a doctorate represents a dishonourable refusal to acknowledge the manifest excellence of his scholarship. Wallace contrasts Penn's treatment of Pound with Harvard's treatment of T. S. Eliot: Whereas Harvard consecrated Eliot's critical success by inviting him to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton lectures, Penn condescendingly repudiated Pound's achievement by denying him a degree.[76] This is not a fair comparison. Inviting a poet to deliver a series of lectures is not tantamount to credentialing him, permanently, as a scholar; Eliot delivered lecture series as a usual way of earning extra income throughout his later poetic career. More than this, in many ways Eliot fits considerably more comfortably within an academic context than Pound.[77] Eliot completed several years of graduate school in philosophy at Harvard, and actually finished and submitted a doctoral thesis. Though he chose never to defend, the Harvard philosophy department accepted his thesis 'without the least hesitation' and affirmed that it was 'the work of an expert.'[78] Eliot's method and manner of criticism strikes a much more scholarly tone than Pound's; it was with good reason that Pound himself labeled Eliot 'The Dean of English criticism.'[79] But despite having earned a genuine claim to academic accomplishment, Eliot tended to understate his scholarly credentials, whereas Pound never hesitated to trumpet the value of his own scholarship. Prefacing the published version of his undergraduate philosophy thesis in the 1960s, Eliot writes: 'Forty-six years after my academic philosophizing came to an end, I find myself unable to think in the terminology of this essay. Indeed,

[75] Emily Mitchell Wallace tells the story of Pound's 1931 overture to the University of Pennsylvania in 'America,' in *Ezra Pound in Context*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), Ch. 20.
[76] *Ibid.* 205-207.
[77] Gail McDonald has accurately noted: 'Eliot dominated the academic world by seeming to be "one of us"; conversely, Pound's place in the academy has depended on his self-presentation as an outsider.' Gail McDonald, *Learning to be Modern: Pound, Eliot, and the American University* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 8.
[78] See J. H. Woods, Letter to T. S. Eliot, 23 June 1916, *Letters of T. S. Eliot, Vol. 1*, 156.
[79] Ezra Pound, 'Historical Survey,' *Little Review* 8.1 (1921): 40.

I do not pretend to understand it.'[80] And while Eliot was critical of the state of contemporary university education, as I will have occasion to discuss at the end of this chapter, his public statements on the subject were substantially more tempered than those of Pound, which even early in his career tended towards the stridency of the *Guide to Kulchur*: 'The scholars have not known anything about poetry,' he declares at the outset of *The Spirit of Romance*.[81] It is unsurprising that the literary scholars of the University of Pennsylvania should have been reluctant to consecrate as a qualified member of their discipline after he had subjected their beliefs, methods, and even their characters to a sustained, public, vitriolic critique.

Pound's belief that his work deserved a PhD, and Wallace's support for this belief, derives from a category error that mistakenly understands Pound's critical practice to be assimilable to the scholarly practice of university professors. This turns out not to be the case because Pound's rhetorical claims for the strength of his own criticism rest substantially upon the premise that by transcending the scientistic, philologically-oriented mode of criticism practiced in literature department he could access living and 'luminous' critical truths denied to the philologists, whose criticism could reveal only mere facts.[82] Imagery of light and dark, life and death is key to Pound's presentation of this dynamic. This is starkly clear in an early poem that according to A. David Moody, Pound appears to have begun shortly after leaving Penn in 1908. Titled 'ORBI CANTUM PRIMUM COSMOPOLITI E TOLERENTIAE CANO,' the poem begins:

> The First Great Song of All the World Cosmopolite Of Tolerance I Sing
> For I have stripped off the bands of custom
> and the swaddling clouts of shame
> And my heart is free as the West wind
>
> [...]

[80] T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905-1918*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014), 240.

[81] Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance: An Attempt to Define Somewhat the Charm of the Pre- Renaissance Literature of Latin Europe* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1910), 14.

[82] In 1911's 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,' Pound described his method of criticism as the method of 'Luminous Detail.' Ezra Pound, 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris, IV: A Beginning', *The New Age* 10.8 (1911): 179.

I AM THE VOICE OF 'HOI POLLOI' CRYING IN THE SUN.

This Whitmanian spirit of unbridled, organic energy, characterised by life and light, meets its opposite further in the poem:

> Broken, tumbled stone,
> barren, without life, desolate,
> dusky and it seemed to me without people,
> when there came the sound of dry voices
> & came upon a great concourse of people
> some digging in the stony earth
> & others chipping at the larger pieces of yellow rock,
> and some peering with dulled eyes
> at empty slabs as one that readeth in a failing light
> & ever rattling in their dry throats, & all speaking together
> so that none heard what his neighbour said.
> & looking intently for some while I was not able to perceive
> either that any one found anything nor said anything new unto his fellow.
> & when my wonder may have showed itself
> the Florentine, before my question,
> answered: 'These be the searchers for dogmas
> that go not onward to the light,
> nor think thereon,
> because of their will to make men from dead bones
> and hope from ashes.
> Who here seek some directions as to the way
> forbidding that others go forward until
> they have accurately determined it
> delaying their own & others salvation.'[83]

So 'barren,' so 'without life' are the inhabitants of the cavern that the speaker cannot at first tell that there is anyone there at all. Pound discarded this attempt at epic for its naïve, Whitmanian qualities, but a good deal of the satire of this passage is of a high order. The incantatory enumeration of the various images that represent the scholars' lifeless qualities prefigures the style of high denunciation of such poems as the Hell Cantos and Canto XLV. He depicts the scholars ignorantly and ironically

[83] A. David Moody has published the text of this early effort in 'Dante as the Young Pound's Virgil: Introduction to Some Early Drafts & Fragments,' *Agenda* 34.3–4 (1997): 65-88.

attempting to fashion objects out of their opposites: hope out of ashes, living men from dead bones. The final lines show the wider social consequences of such a pedantic mindset: in the name of 'accurate determination' the scholars impede not only their own salvation, but also that of everyone else. It is this wider social effect that Pound protests so violently in much of his criticism. He frames his critical and poetic project as the clearing of a path through the confusion sown by the 'searchers for dogmas' towards 'the light'; but by asking for the PhD, by appealing for the approval of the 'searchers for dogmas,' he undermines this frame significantly. The deliberate archaism (e.g. 'readeth') signals this ambivalence; in spite of the concluding progressive imagery of emergence from the cave, Pound continues to express himself using the linguistic habitus of dead men.

But Pound's attraction to the PhD is not altogether inexplicable. While Pound railed against the disastrous effects of prevalent philological modes, his own critical and poetic practice—what he called his 'New Method'—remained indebted to his significantly philologically-inflected education at Hamilton and Penn. While Pound censures philology for its hostility to the development of the individual—its valourization of 'dogma'—he nevertheless remains invested in the belief that a scientific approach to literary texts is a meaningful path towards the revelation of their most meaningful qualities, a belief that draws Pound closer to contemporary philological practice than much of his criticism would indicate. Given his investment in the scientific character of his own practice, it is unsurprising that he sought recognition from institutionally consecrated practitioners of scientific criticism.

As in 'ORBI CANTUM PRIMUM,' Pound generally frames his opposition to philology as resistance to a 'dogma' that stifles the luminous and living qualities that make poetry important. In his introduction to *The Spirit of Romance*, Pound sets out a desired trajectory for readers that leaves behind the 'slough of philology' and reaches a time when 'it will be possible for the lover of poetry to study poetry—even the poetry of recondite times and places—without burdening himself with the rags of morphology, epigraphy, privatleben and the kindred delights of the archaeological or

"scholarly" mind.'[84] Morphology denotes the study of linguistic units and epigraphy refers to the study of handwriting; Pound uses the German *privatleben* to mean those private aspects of an author's biography that in his view have no properly literary significance.[85] For Pound, the essential elements of the author's being reside in the poetry. When the reader or critic applies himself correctly, great poetry stimulates the essential elements of his own being. Philology distracts from and inhibits such essential communication. '[T]he whole aim,' Pound wrote in 1917, 'or at least the drive, of modern philology is to make a man stupid; to turn his mind from the fire of genius and smother him with things unessential.'[86] In this passage as in much of his writing on philology from this period, Pound would seem to have a classical conception of genius (one shared by Emerson) in mind more than a Romantic one. Genius, here, is not something given to a few privileged artistic creators, but rather the principle of individuality of which every human being is possessed, in Emerson's words 'the quality that differences him from every other,' that which renders him uniquely and irreducibly himself.[87] Philology appears as a force of conformity, an institution seeking to blunt the individuality of promising critics in order to assimilate them into a homogenous system.

Pound's perspective on philology is a reaction to a major topic of educational debate of the early twentieth century. Pound shares a certain amount of common ground with critics often labelled 'humanists' or 'generalists.' Surveying a variety of accounts of late nineteenth and early twentieth century English departments, the critic and institutional historian Gerald Graff notes a recurrent binary between generalists and philologists: 'the one all interesting but untrue generalizations, the other all true but sterile particularities, and evidently nothing in between.'[88] Graff's formulation encapsulates the terms of attack that each side would apply to the other.

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[84] Pound, *Spirit of Romance,* vi.
[85] Kimberly Kyle Howey notes that Pound wrote to his University of Pennsylvania teacher Felix Schelling complaining of having to study 'Roman life (das Privatleben).' Kimberly Kyle Howey, 'Ezra Pound and the Rhetoric of Science, 1901-1922' (PhD diss., University College London, 2009), 44-45.
[86] Ezra Pound, 'An Anachronism at Chinon,' *Little Review*, 4.2 (1917): 14–21.
[87] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Spiritual Laws,' in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. II*, ed. Joseph Slater et. al. (Cambridge, M.A.: Belknap Press, 1979), 84.
[88] Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 95.

Philologists censured generalists for their lack of accuracy and scientific rigour, while generalists censured philologists for the lifelessness that in their view resulted from strict adherence to the provable. The binary maps onto to a conceptual division between research and teaching, where research corresponds to philology's concern for the accumulation of factual knowledge and teaching corresponds to the humanistic belief in literature as the formative agent of the souls of young individuals. On an institutional level, tension developed between the graduate school as an area for the training of scholars to produce original philological research, and the college—the undergraduate institution of the university, usually consecrated to the liberal arts—as a school of more general preparation for the duties of citizenship. Inevitably, as certain critics—most influentially the Harvard scholar Irving Babbitt, in his *Literature and the American College* (1908)—pointed out, these theoretically distinct spheres intermixed in practice, and scholars trained in etymological research found themselves teaching substantially 'appreciative' undergraduate courses in literature.[89]

But Pound also has a good deal in common with the philological camp. As Graff notes, a tradition of grammatically and syntactically oriented critics rooted in German Idealist philosophy did not consider the study of grammar and syntax to be an end in itself, but rather supposed the 'spirit of the ancients' to be inextricable from the syntax and etymology of their language.[90] Thus the methods of philology were thought to accomplish implicitly the explicit ends of humanism—nourishment of the student's soul through exposure to the best that has been thought and said.[91] This conviction bears notable resemblance to Pound's belief in the potential for historical linguistic artefacts to

[89] Babbitt notes that the two opposing tendencies—the philological and the humanistic—often coexist in one individual, 'the masculine and the feminine aspects of the same naturalistic movement. They are often combined in the same person, or rather exist alongside one another in him, as a special form of that unreconciled conflict between intellect and feeling that one finds in Rousseau and his descendants.' Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defence of the Humanities* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1908), 128.
[90] See the discussion of Hegel in Graff, 29-30.
[91] *Ibid.* 29. The phrase is Matthew Arnold's, from his Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*. Graff identifies Arnold as the prime influence on the 'generalists' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century English department, often referring to them as 'Arnoldian humanists.'

enrich the experience of the present.[92] 'All ages are contemporaneous,' Pound wrote in *The Spirit of Romance*. 'The future stirs already in the minds of the few. This is especially true of literature, where the real time is independent of the apparent, and where many dead men are our grandchildren's contemporaries, while many of our contemporaries have been already gathered into Abraham's bosom, or some more fitting receptacle.'[93] Methods for the excavation of past languages and literatures could be of great use to a poet convinced of the atemporal and context-independent nature of literary truth.[94] Pound differs from the philologists in his location of this truth in the register of the 'luminous detail,' whereas he asserts that the philologists work in the register of irrelevant and 'multitudinous detail,' 'too cumbersome to be of much use to the normal man wishing to live mentally active.'[95] Pound thus joins the generalist emphasis on literature as the expression of what is most essentially and fundamentally human to philological methods for the excavation of literary and linguistic systems, in the belief that this conjunction will result in determinations of literary value that carry the authority of science.

Like Pound's doubled attitude towards the university as an institution that at once promises and obscures truth, the inclination towards correspondence that emerges in Pound's literary practice turns out to be acutely ambivalent. Pound, the exponent of literature as an instrument of science, also seems driven to produce a corpus that contains an enormous amount of error. The question of Pound and error arose most notoriously around his rendering of certain passages from the Roman

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[92] James Longenbach has argued that Pound's compulsive interest in the historical was specifically an interest in history as manifest and incarnate in the contemporary, rather than an interest in history as such. James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987).

[93] Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 7-8.

[94] Victor Li has argued that Pound uses philology as a weapon against the corruption of language, but pays strangely little attention to Pound's anti-philological rhetoric. Victor P. H. Li, 'Philology and Power: Ezra Pound and the Regulation of Language,' *boundary 2* 15.1/2 (1986-1987): 187-210. J. Mark Smith situates Pound within a modernist 'interleaving of philological and poetic tradition' whose interest in historical allusion was motivated by a desire to 'find and use.' J. Mark Smith, 'The Energy of Language(s): What Pound Made of Philology,' *ELH* 78 (2011): 770.

[95] Pound, 'I Gather the Limbs,' 179. Rebecca Beasley describes Pound's method of criticism as a grafting of 'an Arnoldian emphasis on breadth and evaluation, prevalent in models developed by American comparatists working within, or having their background in, English departments [...] onto the training in Romance philology he had received at Hamilton College and the University of Pennsylvania.' Rebecca Beasley, 'Pound's New Criticism,' *Textual Practice* 24.4 (2010): 657.

poet Propertius, completed in 1917 and first appearing partially in *Poetry* magazine in 1919 under the title 'Poems from the Propertius Series.' The poetry, which would become known in its entirety as the 'Homage to Sextus Propertius,' occasioned a vituperative response from William Gardner Hale, a distinguished Classics professor from the University of Chicago. 'Mr. Pound is incredibly ignorant of Latin,' Hale wrote. 'He has of course a perfect right to be, but not if he translates from it.'[96] Hale went on to detail a number of errors that he viewed as egregiously and unacceptably distortive of the Latin text. Pound responded that he had no wish to transpose Propertius's Latin precisely into English, as allusions to the modern figures of Wordsworth and Yeats should have made perfectly clear. Hale wrote, Pound claimed, 'as if, had one wanted to pretend to more Latin than one knew, it wdn't have been perfectly easy to correct one's divergencies from a Bohn crib. Price 5 shillings.'[97] In a classic comparison of Pound's text to Propertius's Latin, J. P. Sullivan has seconded Pound's response, claiming that Pound's deviations from the letter of the Latin function as a 'creative translation' that make the spirit of Propertius's poetry accessible to the twentieth century. A good proportion of the errors Hale identifies, according to Sullivan, amount to 'deliberate and serious attempts to produce certain poetic effects,' although 'it is perfectly true that Pound is careless, almost scornful, about minutiae.'[98]

Especially given that Pound had at least a basic reading knowledge of Latin, unlike other of the languages from which he translated, 'Propertius' stands among the more defensible of his efforts, and Pound's rejoinder that it would be 'perfectly easy' for him to modify his translation to accord with Propertius's literal sense seems compelling. But in other poetry, particularly in translations from languages in which he was not expert, Pound demonstrates a similar 'scorn' for the original texts from which he worked, and the consequences were not always confined to minutiae. In his translation of the Anglo-Saxon 'Seafarer,' for instance, Pound mistook *thurh* ('through') for *thruh*

[96] Wm. Gardner Hale, 'Pegasus Impounded,' *Poetry* 14.1 (1919): 52.
[97] Ezra Pound, Letter to Felix Schelling, 8 July 1922, *Letters* (1950), 178.
[98] J. P. Sullivan, *Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius: A Study in Creative Translation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 5.

('tomb') and *wacran* ('feebler') for a form of *wacu* ('watch'), causing him to misconstrue utterly lines 87-88;[99] the poem titled 'Separation on the River Kiang,' from *Cathay* (1915), contains an embarrassing redundancy because *kiang* (*jiang*) is Chinese for 'river.'[100]

Furthermore, simple carelessness cannot account for much of the continuing presence of error in Pound's oeuvre. As Christine Froula has shown, Pound often chose explicitly not to correct glaring errors of translation in his poetry when they were brought to his attention and it would have been 'perfectly easy' for him to do so. Froula notes that Pound, when asked in 1958 about a printer's accidental repetition of two lines at the end of Canto XIII, replied: 'Repeat in XIII sanctioned by time and the author, or rather first by the author, who never objects to the typesetter making improvements.'[101] The uncorrected lines read:

> And even I can remember
> A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,
> I mean for things they didn't know,
> But that time seems to be passing.'
> A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,
> But that time seems to be passing.'[102]

Pound may have a point: there is a certain musical grace to the echoing lines; they impart a mood of wistfulness to the utterance appropriate to the expression of a memory. But other errors he chooses to leave uncorrected lack a comparable poetic justification. Froula recounts John J. Espey's efforts to produce an edition of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, during the course of which Espey suggested a variety of changes to Pound, then resident in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington D.C. Pound accepted most of the changes, but refused to correct his own 'Bloughram' for Browning's 'Blougram' and '*vacous exercet aera morsus*' for Ovid's '*vacuos exercet in aera morsus*.' Pound explained his reasoning to Espey in a suggestive letter: 'I am unconvinced re/ CERTAIN sorts of accuracy. Vid. the spellings in

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[99] See Michael Alexander, *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 73.
[100] 'The River-Merchant's Wife' contains the same solecism. See K. K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's* Personae *(1926)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 71.
[101] Froula, 143.
[102] Quoted *ibid.*

the REAL text of Guido, my Marsano [...] I think both Yeats and Fordie also resisted the grammarians.'[103]

Dismissal of 'the grammarians' reflects Pound's long-standing disdain for philological critics whose concern with mere fact and correctness blinds them to the locus of 'true artistry,' as Pound put it in Canto LXXXI (541). The claim Pound makes to Espey suggests a way that Pound's professed allegiance to the 'precise definition' might coexist with his disdain for exactness in quotation and translation. In *The Spirit of Romance* Pound claimed that the various Romance languages constituted 'different ways of speaking Latin [...] corruptly';[104] Emerson's notion of an original, perfect language in which 'all is poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols' is but one step further from this claim. Pound's frequently articulated commitment to restoring language to its natural meaning depends on a belief very like Emerson's; such a belief has the effect of reducing all existent language to a corruption of an ur-discourse. Fidelity to the specific form a particular language happens to take at a particular point and time therefore constitutes a 'CERTAIN sort of accuracy' that does not convince; Pound judges *meaningful* accuracy with respect to the transcendental referents that in his view lie beneath corrupt and contingent contemporary language, the proper preserve of philologists and 'grammarians.' Pound's perspective on error thus recapitulates the distinction he makes in his criticism between the dead darkness of philology and the animate luminescence of his 'New Method' of criticism and poetic practice. This becomes clear in Pound's response to the controversy over 'Propertius' where the distinction is the key to his defense:

> The philologists have so succeeded in stripping the classics of interest that I have already had more than one reader who has asked me, 'Who was Propertius?' As for my service to classical scholarship, presumably nil, I shall be quite content if I induce a few Latinists really to look at the text of Propertius instead of swallowing an official 'position' and then finding what the text-books tell them to look for.[105]

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[103] Quoted *ibid.* 144.
[104] Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 2.
[105] Ezra Pound, 'Homage to Propertius,' *The New Age* 26.5 (1919): 83.

The service Pound provides is to show scholars of the classics a reality of Propertius more alive than the Propertius given to them by their scholarly apparatus of exactitude. Going beyond the 'literal version' or 'strict translation,' Pound's fidelity, in his own view, is to that 'unanalysable quality' that is Propertius's soul, which Pound expresses through a process somewhere between translation and corruption.[106]

According to Sullivan, Pound's 'creative translation' has succeeded in reforming the perception of Propertius by bringing to the fore a previously neglected aspect of the Roman poet's persona. Prior to Pound's poem, Sullivan writes, Propertius's reputation rested largely on his love poetry; Pound instead emphasized Propertius's refusal to conform to an idea of the poet as the singer of Rome's imperial greatness:

> And my ventricles do not palpitate to Caesarial *ore rotundos*,
> Nor to the tune of Phrygian fathers.[107]

Pound's Propertius resists the celebratory rhetoric of imperial Rome, and the poetic tradition given over to it. The prevalent polysyllables and unnecessarily complicated language—'ventricles' for 'heart,' 'palpitate' for 'beat,' the transformation of 'Caesar' into an adjective—result in powerful parody through the absurd rendering of the putative emotional simplicity of patriotism in gratuitously polysyllabic scientific discourse. The satirical control Pound shows in these lines supports his case for the intentionality of his divergence from the Latin text. More than this, given the iconoclastic message that Pound articulates through the voice of Propertius, the poem's academic reception appears particularly ironic. By criticizing Pound for his unwillingness to comply with the norms and practices of academic scholarship, the academy provides ammunition for Pound's self-presentation as a transgressive outsider besieged by forces of conformity. Consider Hale's most extreme comment: 'If Mr. Pound were a professor of Latin, there would be nothing left for him but suicide.'[108] Pound's obvious response to this objection is to insist that he is not a professor but a poet,

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[106] *Ibid.* 82.
[107] Pound, 'Homage,' 213.
[108] Hale, 55.

and as a poet is interested in registers of 'accuracy' that the norms and practices of classical scholarship necessarily obscure.

But in a meaningful sense Hale spoke truer than he knew, for Pound would initiate enquiries with the University of Pennsylvania regarding the possibility of a doctorate in Romance languages less than a year after the publication of Hale's letter. Considering his view of Romance languages as 'ways of speaking Latin corruptly,' becoming a professor of Latin was not an entirely foreign career aspiration for Pound at the end of the 1910s. Again, this desire for academic validation undermines the persuasive force of Pound's position considerably. Pound claimed that he appealed again to the university in order to see if the institution had made progress since he had left with his M.A., and after his rejection concluded that 'the "university" is dead.' A. David Moody justly asks: 'But that is what he had thought all along—why go on proving it?'[109]

To say even that Pound's actions in these cases 'proved' anything is to take too charitable a view of the situation. His cavalier disdain for the 'CERTAIN kind of accuracy' valued by philology proves only Pound's temperamental unsuitability for a career as a philological critic, and recognizing this unsuitability at the outset would have proved a much easier course of action than attempting wholesale reform of the beliefs and practices of an entire institution. Yeats in his 1936 anthology introduction comments on this quality of Pound's temperament as it manifests in his verse: 'one gets the impression [...] that he had not got all the wine into the bowl, that he is a brilliant improvisator translating at sight from an unknown Greek masterpiece.'[110] For Donald Davie, this quality of Pound's poetry makes a profound point about the limits of perception and representation. In response to Yeats's introduction, he writes:

> a poet might contrive this effect because he wants *not* to seem to have 'got all the wine into the bowl,' because 'deliberate nobility' is the last thing he is after. If he is sure that there is more to his subject (more perhaps to any subject) than he got out of it, or ever could get out of it, if he believes that all the wine never *can* be got into the bowl or any

[109] Moody, 33. Above Pound quotation *ibid.*
[110] Yeats, 'Introduction,' xxvi.

> bowl, then […] the poet will deliberately seek an effect of improvisation, of haste and rough edges.[111]

Davie's response gives Pound more credit than he frequently deserves, attributing the impression of carelessness his poetry can produce to an intentional plan. While this intentionality is often true of 'Propertius,' Froula has shown that Pound's errors across his corpus more usually stem from ignorance and negligence. Davie's comment makes the important point that there need not be a correlation between an effect of 'haste and rough edges' and genuine scorn for accuracy. To put it another way, Pound's critique of the university as a conformity producing institution would not be invalidated if he took a more rigorous approach to error in his translation, poetic, and critical practice.

Froula makes a comparable argument to Davie's for the value of 'rough edges' in Pound's work, claiming that error in Pound's text frequently preserves a faithful history of the text's composition, and testifies truthfully to the fundamentally uncontrollable nature of linguistic meaning. She notes that while mining the notebooks of the historian of East Asian art Ernest Fenollosa, Pound mistook the name 'Ran-ti' to refer to a king, when really it referred to a palace. Pound placed the name, which comes from a Japanese version of a Chinese poem, in Canto IV. Froula concludes: '"Ran-ti," then, while clearly an error, also has a historical authenticity, inscribing in the poem not only the Japanese medium through which Pound came to the Chinese poem, but also, in its very mistake, the limiting circumstance of this meeting between East and West.'[112] Two problems arise from such an analysis. The first is a boundary problem. Such an approach offers little in the way of tools for discrimination between errors that are worth correcting and errors that editors should leave untouched, since every error of this type presumably testifies to the historical authenticity of a moment of composition. The very notion of error becomes problematic according to this logic. This may be close to the position Pound advocates with his 'lack of conviction re/

[111] Davie, 78
[112] Froula, 149.

CERTAIN sorts of accuracy,' but it will not do for Froula, whose argument about *error* depends on the coherent preservation of this notion.

The second problem is one of audience. For which readers of *The Cantos* does the 'historical authenticity' of this cross-cultural encounter manifest? Even without factoring considerations of error into the question, for many readers the extreme allusiveness of *The Cantos* is unacceptably alienating; if Froula's conception of error holds the reader becomes responsible not only for knowing and interpreting Pound's reference, but in cases of error knowing Pound's *intended* reference, and interpreting the difference. In most cases this seems too exigent a requirement. To return to Froula's example of 'Ran-ti,' Froula objects that Pound's publishers, New Directions, corrected Pound's error to 'Hsiang' in a way that is faithful to Pound's original Chinese source but false to the history of textual transmission that Canto IV originally embodied. But apart from spending time in Pound's archive comparing drafts of Canto IV to Fenollosa's notebooks, or from reading a specialized text like Froula's, how is a reader meant to become aware of this particular textual history? Should readers of *The Cantos* be required to read textual histories of *The Cantos* alongside? To make this case would seem to make the opposite case to Pound himself, and claim, paradoxically, that it is crucial for readers to have a *correct* idea of the specific form of Pound's error. Pound, by contrast, justifies the prevalence of error in his work by arguing for its unimportance. The kinds of correspondence at issue in a discussion of error such as Froula's, Pound implies, have no significance when set next to the deeper correspondences that poetry can achieve. If, following Froula, the idea of a poetics that accommodates the careless and the negligent is to produce a poetry that reflects the impossibility of getting 'all the wine into the bowl,' the resistance of experience to representation, how successful would such a poetics be if the only readers equipped to perceive this are specialized literary scholars? Given Pound's career-long hostility to philologists and grammarians, this would be an extraordinarily ironic result. There is an understandable temptation to save the Pound who champions the exact correspondence from contradictory collision with the Pound who seems to

disbelieve in certain sorts of error entirely, but attempts to do so ultimately cannot convince. Both aspects of Pound's acutely ambivalent literary disposition must be allowed to emerge, the aspect obsessed with the eradication of error as well as the aspect driven compulsively to produce it. As Davie has argued, *The Cantos* at their most referentially scornful exploit even mutually inconsistent historical artefacts 'as if all were equally nourishing and proper.'[113] The abdication of critical responsibility that Davie identifies in Pound to adjudicate the significance of the referents of *The Cantos* utterly undermines the justification for the composition of 'a poem including history.' If abundant allusion to materials outside the poem is a literary strategy worth pursuing, then its efficacy must substantially depend upon the accuracy of the reference.

Pound's hostility to and frustration with the academy was not untypical of the modernists who were his close associates. Many of these writers express a comparably hostile perspective on the state of the contemporary university, especially as an environment for literary production. E. E. Cummings, for instance, writes in *The Enormous Room* (1922) of education as the 'handicap' of the 'Great American Public':

> Let no one sound his indignant yawp at this. I refer to the fact that, for an educated gent or lady, to create is first of all to destroy—that there is and can be no such thing as authentic art until the *bon trucs* (whereby we are taught to see and imitate on canvas and in stone and by words this so-called world) are entirely and thoroughly and perfectly annihilated by that vast and painful process of Unthinking which may result in a minute bit of purely personal feeling. Which minute bit is Art.[114]

Cummings' assertion recalls the view of realism that Pound attributes to Laforgue, according to which a clearing away of clichéd modes of perception and representation must precede the achievement of authenticity (what Pound refers to as 'unperturbed sincerity'). Cummings, like Pound, explicitly links the accumulation of such modes to education. T. S. Eliot in certain moods expresses a similar attitude. While studying as a graduate student at Merton College in 1914, Eliot

[113] Donald Davie, 'More on the Muddle of "Thrones," in *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 376.
[114] E. E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 224.

commented in a letter: 'Oxford is not intellectually stimulating—but that would be a good deal to ask of a university atmosphere.'[115] While Eliot harbours a certain respect for the disciplined structure of Oxonian life and learning, he deplores the university for its lack of originality and subtlety, and feels that the academy does not provide the correct conditions for literary creation. '[O]nly the most matter of fact people could write verse here,' he complains, and after returning to London notes that in Oxford he has the feeling that 'my body is walking about with a bit of my brain inside it, and nothing else.' 'Oxford is very pretty,' he concludes, 'but I don't like to be dead.'[116] Eliot in these moments may be out to construct a pose of impressive jadedness rather than formulate rigorous criticism, but his comments and actions throughout the remainder of his career would bear this attitude out. In spite of Eliot's evident aptitude for scholarly endeavour as a graduate student in philosophy, and—in his future capacity as the 'Dean of English Criticism'—a temperamental affinity for the decorous tone of the academic humanities, he firmly dismissed the contemporary university as a location conducive to the production of quality poetry, unhesitatingly rejecting I. A. Richards' offer of a place in the Cambridge English department after the publication of *The Sacred Wood* (1921).[117] Other of Pound's contemporaries held similarly cynical views. Wyndham Lewis speaks of the American university as the only slightly less horrifying occupational alternative to the horrifying commercialism of the American economy: 'Having less social standing than a plumber and far less money, being thrust into a communal life with what are often a herd of aggressive hacks clawing their way up to some small preferment (for most of the inmates of a university are not poets or scholars, but the same type of man who becomes a priest) is not a very attractive alternative to office

[115] T. S. Eliot, Letter to Eleanor Hinkley, 14 October 1914, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1: 1898-1922*, ed. Hugh Haughton et. al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), 66.
[116] T. S. Eliot, Letter to Conrad Aiken, 31 December 1914, *Letters of T. S. Eliot, Vol. 1*, 81.
[117] Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 99-100.

life. But it usually is taken.'[118] W. B. Yeats once congratulated a correspondent as 'the best fighter we have against that Death whose most manifest expression in this country is Trinity College.'[119]

But many of these writers did not want to give up on the university entirely. However cynical they might be about the university's present condition, they tended to hold the utopian belief that the institution, properly reconfigured in some future form, might serve as a beneficent civilizational influence. Eliot, particularly in his late work of cultural criticism *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), professes his faith that the university might yet stand for 'the preservation of learning, for the pursuit of truth, and in so far as men are capable of it, the attainment of wisdom.'[120] Yeats at moments understood the developments of literary institutions to be essential to the formation of a robust Irish national literature with a coherent and directed purpose. He writes approvingly, for instance, of Edmund Gosse's efforts to form the Academic Committee of the Royal Literary Society, which he calls 'a really important body.'[121] Lewis conceded the value of the university's preservation of a sphere separate from the vagaries of the market, even if, as he claimed, this preservation was corrupt and incomplete.[122]

Pound expressed a similar perspective, believing that some future version of the university might benefit the world of letters even while loudly deploring the present institutional state of affairs. Writing in a 1938 letter, Pound suggests that some sort of regular social institution would be crucial for writers 'who wish to live in their heads.' An isolated romantic existence, Pound suggests, does not produce great art. 'If young men funk that sort of thing [i.e. a social existence],' Pound continues, 'I don't see what resonance they [*sic*] can expect; it is string without sounding board.'[123]

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[118] Wyndham Lewis, *America and Cosmic Man* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1949), 210.
[119] W. B. Yeats, Letter to the Editor of *The All Ireland Review*, 22 September 1900, *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Vol. 2: 1896-1900*, ed. John S. Kelly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 571.
[120] T. S. Eliot, *Notes toward the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 123.
[121] W. B. Yeats, Letter to Augusta, Lady Gregory, 18 April 1910, *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Electronic Edition: The Unpublished Letters (1905-1939)*, ed. John S. Kelly (Charlottesville: InteLex, 2002), 1335.
[122] Lewis, 209.
[123] Ezra Pound, Letter to James Taylor Dunn, 12 April 1938, *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 401.

Absent a sounding board, the string vibrates to little effect; if poets are to produce a viable 'sound,' they require the appropriate social context.

Pound's idea of an appropriate social context owes a great deal to his poetics of experimentation. He understands social context as a kind of experimental milieu against which the poet can test his art and ideas, and in this way come to clear away those clichéd and habitual modes of perception and representation that obscure the correct practice of poetry. In a 1915 essay Pound described Paris as 'the laboratory of ideas [in which] poisons can be tested, and new modes of sanity be discovered. It is there that the antiseptic conditions of the laboratory exist.'[124] One year earlier Pound had similarly argued that the sheer prevalence of writers in the cosmopolitan capitals of Europe was a good in itself, because simply coming into contact with such variety of perspective, practice and opinion would function for the aspiring artist as an effective shield against the dangers of the hackneyed and the temptation of the imitative:

> No one wants the native American poet to be au courant with the literary affairs of Paris and London in order that he may make imitation of Paris and of London models, but precisely in order that he shall not waste his lifetime making unconscious, or semi-conscious, imitations of French and English models thirty or an hundred years old.
> [...]
> The value of a capital or a metropolis is that if a man in a capital cribs, quotes or imitates, someone else immediately lets the cat out of the bag and says what he is cribbing, quoting or imitating.'[125]

Pound would repeat this dismissal of the arrangement of literature on the basis of nation in the same essay with an appeal to science, arguing that it would make as much sense for a scientist to study 'American chemistry' as it does for a poet to study 'American literature.'[126] Pound's individualism compares to that of Emerson: the poet's approach must not be constrained by conventional modes of thinking inherited from national traditions.

Pound attempted to engineer this type of social context on more than one occasion. In 1914 he published a prospectus in *The Egoist* for an institution he called 'The College of the Arts,' a

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[124] Ezra Pound, 'Remy de Gourmont: I,' *Fortnightly Review* 98.588 (1915): 1164.
[125] Ezra Pound, 'The Renaissance,' *Literary Essays*, 214.
[126] *Ibid.* 218.

proposed academy in London for university students with an interest in developing ability in a specific artistic discipline. Interestingly prefiguring the modern 'study abroad' program, the prospectus suggests that the College might be of special interest to students at American universities, who could arrange to spend one year of their undergraduate degree in London and in doing so earn credits at their home institution. Had the war not interfered, it seems quite possible that the College would have proved a lucrative idea. Pound emphasizes the desirability of London as the key entrance to the network of international art, silently implying America's disconnection from this network: 'It has been noted that London is the capital of the world, and that "Art is a matter of capitals."'[127] In addition to museums, galleries, and libraries, the student would most importantly have access to a network of established artists, a crucial precondition for the development of an unimitative artistic sensibility. According to the editorial 'Remarks' that follow the prospectus, like the prospectus ostensibly anonymous but bearing the unmistakable tenor of Pound's prose, 'The college should come as a boon to various and numerous students who would otherwise be fugging about in continental pensions, meeting one single teacher who probably wishes them in the inferno, and dependent for the rest on fellow boarders and public amusements.'[128] Pound aims to create a clear path for aspiring student artists who would otherwise rely on chance in their efforts to find poetic mentorship. He implies that the default existence of such a student artist amounts to a kind of provincialism not guaranteed to offer any improvement upon the provincialism of the United States.

The idea of establishing an institution like the College of the Arts remained at the forefront of Pound's consciousness for a significant span of years. 'I want a "college of the Arts," *here*, & d—soon,' he had written to Margaret Cravens in 1910, 'a sort of incubator for *risorgimenti*.' Two years after advertising for the College he suggested to Felix Schelling that a fellowship be established that recognised 'creative ability' regardless of 'whether the man had any university degree

[127] 'Preliminary Announcement of a College of the Arts,' *The Egoist* 21.1 (1914): 413.
[128] *Ibid.* 414.

whatsoever,'[129] suggesting as candidates Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters. In an essay on Sandburg published in 1922 Pound again advocated the creation of a fellowship for poets, claiming that making a space for writers in the university would be the first step towards the rehabilitation of an institution decaying with the rot of philology.[130] In his Italian radio broadcasts during the Second World War Pound declared his lingering intention 'to put some sort of college or university into shape' in America that would teach something besides 'the god damn saw dust and substitutes for learnin' and literature' characteristically dispensed in its present institutions.[131] His vision for an institution that would offer something better than 'saw dust' again makes use of the language of science: 'you must gather such dynamic particles together,' he wrote to Cravens; 'you must set them where they will interact, and stimulate each other.'[132]

Pound believed that the inauguration of a creative presence in the university would invigorate the academy and counteract the influence of such 'saw dust' as scholastic criticism. In general he aims to explode systematic, philological practices that he understands as antithetical to an authentic poetic practice. Eliot took issue with Pound on this point, arguing at disparate points of his career that Pound had a mistaken perception of the dangers of philology relative to the dangers of what Pound in his unpublished essay on the university had labelled impressionism 'in the pejorative sense.' In *After Strange Gods* (1934), Eliot speculates on the subject of Pound's 'cosmopolitanism' in a passage largely devoted to the literary critic Irving Babbitt. Eliot describes his former Harvard teacher as 'in his thought and in his intercourse [...] thoroughly cosmopolitan.' Babbitt's 'peer in cosmopolitanism,' Eliot continues, is Ezra Pound.[133] Eliot indicts the Babbitt-Pound dyad for for 'individualistic' and 'libertarian' beliefs: Pound, he argues, prefers Guido Cavalcanti to Dante not because Cavalcanti was the better poet, but because Cavalcanti 'was very likely a heretic, if not a

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[129] Ezra Pound, Letter to Felix Schelling, 17 November 1916, *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound* (1951), 151.
[130] Ezra Pound, 'Ezra Pound on Sandburg,' *Double-Dealer* 3.17 (1922): 277–78.
[131] '*Ezra Pound Speaking,*' 9-10.
[132] Ezra Pound, Letter to Margaret Cravens, 27 November 1910, *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens: A Tragic Friendship*, ed. Omar Pound and Robert Spoo (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1988), 60.
[133] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 41.

sceptic.'[134] Pound and Babbitt, according to Eliot, value non-conformist and anti-systematic attitudes for their own sake; the risk inherent in such an attitude is to render the individual the measure of all things, and to devalue the authority of the tradition. Eliot sounded a similar note of caution in an earlier letter he wrote while studying at Oxford in 1915, in response to the appearance in *The Egoist* of the prospectus for the College of the Arts.

> if it could be mentioned that a university is not the same thing as a school of agriculture, but that America has schools of agriculture which are better and honester places than its universities; because they have a work to do which they can take seriously; and that the function of the university is not to turn out Culcher and Civic Pageants. At present, you see, I am more alarmed at the Americanization than at the Prussianisation of our universities. The Germans [...] have Archaeologie and we have How to Appreciate the Hundred Best Paintings, the Maiden Aunt and the Social Worker. . . .
>
> It might be pointed out again that literature has rights of its own which extend beyond Uplift and Recreation.[135]

Eliot figures universities—by which he seems to mean those aspects of the university given over to humanistic teaching and research—as lacking work they 'can take seriously' because they understand literature to function therapeutically as 'Uplift and Recreation'; unlike students of agriculture and Archaeologie, the literature student concerns himself only with the state of his own soul, and not with the contribution he can offer to a wider discipline or tradition.

Eliot found himself especially well placed to launch this critique because of his experience as a student at Harvard, the locus at the turn of the century of an intense debate over the authority that tradition was to carry in university education. The prevailing approach conceived of the role of the university as the induction of undergraduates into a tradition of accumulated wisdom, while the insurgent perspective—the 'progressive education movement,' associated with such thinkers as William James and John Dewey—attempted to reorient the role of the university towards recognition and enhancement of student individuality. Eliot's cousin Charles W. Eliot, a key

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[134] *Ibid.* 42.

[135] T. S. Eliot, Letter to Ezra Pound, 15 April 1915, in *Letters of T.S. Eliot: Vol. 1*, 104. Pound has circled the phrase 'How to Appreciate the Hundred Best Paintings' on the original copy of the letter. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Ezra Pound Papers, YCAL MSS 43, Series I: General Correspondence, Box 15, Folder 661.

advocate of educational reform and Harvard's president from 1869 to 1909, broadly articulated the progressive position in 1885:

> The proposition that a boy of eighteen can choose his own studies, with the natural helps, more satisfactorily than anybody else can choose them for him, seems at first sight absurd; but I believe it to be founded upon the nature of things [...] Every youth of eighteen is an infinitely complex organization, the duplicate of which neither does nor ever will exist. His inherited traits are different from those of every other human being; his environment has been different from that of every other child; his passions, emotions, hopes, and desires were never before associated in any other creature just as they are in him; and his will-force is aroused, stimulated, exerted, and exhausted in ways wholly his own.[136]

Even Irving Babbitt, whom Eliot censured along with Pound as a reckless individualist, believed this 'exaltation of the individual sense as compared with the general or common sense of mankind' to be 'inordinate.'[137] It is difficult to take issue with Babbitt here, since Charles W. Eliot's particularism seems to require a conception of each undergraduate as an utterly unique entity who demands of his university a correspondingly utterly unique educational approach. T. S. Eliot perceived that such an educational philosophy threatened literary studies with relativism and impressionism, whereas Pound tended to ignore this threat in preference to his habitual theme of the threats posed by rote method and system.

From a twenty-first century perspective it has become clear that Eliot's fear was the more prescient. As the literary critic and theorist of the university Bill Readings has argued, the history of American higher education in the twentieth century represents the movement from an institution that functioned as a repository of culture and tradition to an institution of global capitalism whose representative figure is no longer the professor, but the administrator. The university now conceives of students as consumers whose free choice in determining the course of their educations manifests as a creative expression of individuality. Readings argues that the encroachment of economic ends into the management of the university has been accompanied by a process he names 'dereferentialization,' such that nouns like 'culture' and 'university' no longer 'refer to a specific set

[136] Charles W. Eliot, 'Liberty in Education,' in *Educational Reform* (New York: The Century Co., 1898), 133-134.
[137] Babbitt, *Literature*, 49.

of things or ideas.'[138] Rather than preservation of national culture, the guiding ideal of the university has been replaced by the bureaucratic and amorphous goal of 'excellence,' which Readings understands as desirable precisely because of its amorphousness: 'What gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it be excellently taught or researched.'[139]

In the domain of literary practice, I regard one specific consequence of this institutional history to be the postwar explosion of a literary theory that believes epistemology to be by nature indeterminate and then celebrates the consequences of this belief as politically liberative;[140] I regard another consequence to be the postwar flourishing of the creative writing program, an institution, as Mark McGurl has remarked, whose legitimacy relies—in spite of its name—upon the absence of a programmatic curriculum at its centre. The cultural capital of creative writing depends upon a conception of literary practice as irreducible to a set of principles or classroom procedures. Throughout this thesis I argue that the justification for this irreducibility depends upon a conviction much like that of Charles W. Eliot: the particularity of each individual creative writing student means that the creative writing program reinvents itself utterly with the arrival of every initiate. In a trivial sense this is surely true. No two experiences of the creative writing program will be exactly alike in every particular. But such an emphasis upon novelty and individuality threatens to blind observers of postwar American literary practice to the similarities and commonalities that manifest in the supposedly unique productions of the creative writing program. This reproduces on the level of the literary field a distinction that Readings observes in the larger economy of American higher education. On the one hand, universities 'all claim that theirs is a unique educational institution. On the other hand, they all go on to describe this uniqueness in exactly the same way.'[141]

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[138] Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, M.A. and London: Harvard UP, 1995), 17.
[139] *Ibid.* 13.
[140] Derek Attridge and Jane Elliot, 'Introduction: Theory's Nine Lives,' in *Theory After 'Theory,'* Derek Attridge and Jane Elliot, eds. (London: Routledge, 2011), 4.
[141] Readings, 12.

Considering Pound as a writer located at the historical threshold of the 'dereferentialization' of the university and the concomitant flourishing of the creative writing program yields provocative points of comparison. The cosmopolitan Pound who rejected the study of national literatures as making as little sense as the study of national chemistries would not object to the waning of the university's function as the bearer of specific national culture, but he would most certainly object to prevailing, thoroughgoing academic scepticism towards the coherence or usefulness of a notion of culture *tout court*. Pound's practice of literary experimentalism depends on the belief that literary experiment can yield aesthetic and cultural truth, whereas major projects of the postwar academic humanities have been the reinforcement of scepticism with respect to the possibility of truth and the explosion of a concept of central, unitary culture. Pound's poetic and critical oeuvre, making the case that civilizations flourish in proportion to the referential potency of their language, stands as a revealing critique *avant la lettre* to a 'dereferentialized' institution.

Certain accounts of the university and the creative writing program understand the postwar emphasis on the individual, foreshadowed by Charles W. Eliot and the Harvard elective system, as desirable development that bespeaks political liberation. Some of these accounts have recruited Pound and Anglo-American high modernism to their cause,[142] emphasizing the iconoclastic elements of Pound's persona. In Frank Lentricchia's view, this liberal trajectory of individualism reaches Pound by way of Emerson and William James:

> the Emerson/James connection is […] the unlikely engine of high modernism in the person of Ezra Pound […] It is as if in his reading of Henry James he had at last discovered for himself the latent William Jamesian pragmatist politics and ethics of his two key imagist directives—'Direct treatment of the thing' and 'Go in fear of abstractions'—because the most important 'thing' is human, a unique individual, no thing at all.[143]

[142] See Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2009); Amy Hungerford, 'On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary,' *American Literary History* 20.1-2 (2008): 410-419.

[143] Frank Lentricchia, 'Philosophers of Modernism at Harvard, circa 1900,' *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 29-30.

Such an attempt to classify Pound as an affirmer of unique individuality on the order of a William James—another key influence in the progressive education movement—entails some critical contortions. 'Direct treatment of the thing,' for Lentricchia, somehow means 'direct treatment of the not-thing.' What such accounts must ignore is that Pound's belief in the sacredness of the unique individual draws also upon his belief in the importance of tradition and correspondence with the real. Full individuality, for Pound as for Emerson, is tantamount to an achievement of harmony with the natural order: 'Learn of the green world what can be thy place / In scaled invention or true artistry' (CLXXXI, 541), as Pound puts it in one of his most famous stanzas.[144] To reach the core of the most private self is at once to reach that aspect of the self that is universal, that aspect of the self that has enabled poets separated by vast stretches of time and distance to create literature that manages to resonate in a twentieth-century consciousness, that makes it possible to 'weigh Theocritus and Yeats with one balance.'[145] This is the animating conceit of Pound's 1908 poem 'Histrion':

> No man hath dared to write this thing as yet,
> And yet I know, how that the souls of all men great
> At times pass through us,
> And we are melted into them, and are not
> Save reflexions of their souls.
> Thus am I Dante for a space and am
> One François Villon, ballad-lord and thief
> Or am such holy ones I may not write.[146]

'I do not teach—I awake,' Pound wrote in a footnote to the poem.[147] The life of this poem lies in the poet's struggling effort to speak of an experience of transcendental union in terms that are not personal or confessional: 'No man hath dared to write this thing as yet'; 'I may not write'; 'I do not

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[144] It is interesting to compare Pound's reception in the twentieth century with Emerson's on this point: both have been claimed as avatars of liberal individualism at the cost of ignoring certain major aspects of their thought. Christopher Newfield has attempted to restore balance to the field by claiming that for Emerson, the final stage of individualism amounts to reunion with the absolute. For Newfield, this doctrine has become central to twentieth-century American liberalism, in which 'courage to be ourselves leads to lawfulness rather than dissent.' Cary Wolfe has noted Pound's relationship to Emerson on this point, arguing that for both writers individualism is the process of becoming 'transparent to—subject to—the enduring laws and rhythms of a larger natural and ethical totality.' Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 60; Wolfe, 5.

[145] Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 8.

[146] Ezra Pound, 'Histrion,' *Collected Early Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 71.

[147] *Ibid.* 299.

teach.' 'I' here seems the incorrect vocabulary for a poem that so patently strives to be of the world rather than the ego; this chapter has argued that this same striving characterizes the development of Pound's poetry into its first maturity in the early *Cantos.*

Pound's individualism coexists with the universalist conviction of 'Histrion'; this coexistence is analogous to the familiar modernist tension between a forward-looking emphasis upon innovation and the explosion of convention and a backward-looking emphasis upon history and tradition.[148] My claim throughout the remainder of this thesis will be that the literature of the creative writing program tends not to look forwards or backwards in this way, even as it frequently attempts to present itself as the inheritor of a modernist imperative to innovate. This presentation, as I have suggested in the introduction and will argue in what follows, rests upon a loose understanding of innovation that equates the uniqueness of the self of each creative writing student with the putative uniqueness of the literary products through which these selves find expression. Pound's poetics and the poems that have arisen from them, despite their manifest difficulties, stand as an entirely different sort of literary artifact from this 'autopoetic' literature, even if, as Eliot once claimed, his *Cantos* constitute a 'reticent autobiography.'[149] Against the backdrop of a postwar American literary field characterized by the thriving of such generic strains as confessional poetry, memoir, and the developing category of 'life writing,' Pound's corpus remains distinct for its attempt to preserve the world instead of the self as the domain of poetry, and its struggle to excise as much as possible (if never completely) the presence in the poem of the narrating, autobiographical 'I.'

[148] As one critic puts it, 'Archly experimental, the artistic temperament of the modernists promised to be progressive, forward-looking, liberal in a conventional sense, but this aesthetic intelligence colluded with social attitudes manifestly backward, reactionary, indeed atavistic.' Sherry, *Radical Modernism*, 3.
[149] T. S. Eliot, 'A Note on Ezra Pound,' *To-Day* 4.19 (1918): 7.

Chapter Three

The Spiritual Effects of Divided Labour: Saul Bellow, Style, and Literary Professionalism

The previous chapter described Ezra Pound's poetics as dependent upon a tension between a vision of literary language as perfectly correspondent to a reality outside the poem, and a contradictory vision of literary language as an inherently incomplete, 'erroneous' rewriting of other literary works whose 'rough edges' should be preserved. This chapter argues that the creative writing program has inherited neither of these visions. It begins by attempting to establish a characteristic style of 'program fiction' by way of background, and then argues that this style can be explained with reference to the program's institutional structure. It next shows that the work of Saul Bellow constitutes a revealing exception to the dominant creative writing paradigm, and illuminates this exception with reference to certain peculiarities of Bellow's institutional career, in particular Bellow's attitude towards literary professionalism. It goes on to show how this attitude towards professionalism flies in the face of Anglo-American literary modernism, but concludes by drawing attention to certain powerful ambiguities that complicate Bellow's modernist inheritance.

How might it be possible to talk coherently and intelligibly about 'program style,' a set of technical proclivities and characteristics that obtain across many and varied contexts and practices of creative writing? The most rigorous and influential attempt to account for the influence of the workshop, Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, structures an analysis of the program according to a 'familiar set of prescriptive slogans' that 'complexly encode' the values of the creative writing academy: 'write what you know,' 'show don't tell,' and 'find your voice.'[1] McGurl does not make known his reasons for emphasizing these three principles specifically, a possible pitfall given the wide availability of laconic

[1] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2009), 34.

mottos that aim to guide the practice of aspiring creative writers. Colson Whitehead collects many of these (with some facetiousness) in an article in the *New York Times Book Review* that bears the title 'How to Write'; his list contains 'write what you know,' though he modifies 'show don't tell' to 'show and tell,' and he offers eight other principles including 'revise, revise, revise,' 'kill your darlings,' 'don't go searching for a subject, let your subject find you,' and 'keep a dream diary.'[2]

'Write what you know,' the idea that writers should find their material in their own experience, does not offer much useful material for a study of program style. 'Write what you know' deals more with the selection of content than with style; by definition this content will vary according to the personal histories of a given sample of writing students. It might say something about the undoubted increase in autobiographical content that postwar and contemporary literature has manifested, but it says little about technical mechanisms of representation. The principle 'find your voice' next introduces a concept of 'voice' as a unity of style and personality. Again, according to a literal reading of this principle, voice will differ in proportion to the individual variation of a sample of writing students, and thus it too seems an unpromising direction for an inquiry into the stylistics of the creative writing program. But the third principle, 'show don't tell,' appears more likely to yield concrete results. This principle urges writers to dramatize rather than declaim, to avoid discursive didacticism and aim at a more objective presentation of fictive states of affairs.

Questions of 'program style' are made difficult by the scope of the inquiry, since thousands of writers have graduated from a body of university creative writing programs that had grown to almost 900 as of 2012. The sample size of literary texts produced by program-educated Americans since the Second World War numbers well into the tens of thousands. But with the proviso that there will be inevitable exceptions and counterexamples to this proposition, I wish to begin this chapter on Saul Bellow by arguing that to the extent it is possible to speak of the relationship between institutions and literary style in general terms, 'program style' has been guided by the

[2] Colson Whitehead, 'How To Write,' *New York Times*, 26 July 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/books/review/colson-whiteheads-rules-for-writing.html.

principle 'show don't tell,' in a specific sense that I will delimit shortly. I do not claim that every exemplum of university creative writing has been governed by this principle; my criterion for this assessment is whether or not it applies to the fiction and teaching of a preponderance of the 'program writers' whose work the literary field seems likely to regard as canonical for at least a short while, and who direct the creative writing programs that the literary field has recognized as influential and eminent.

The crucial modernist forerunner of the 'show don't tell' technique is Ernest Hemingway, whose conception of this method of description has become known as the 'Iceberg Theory' after an image from *Death in the Afternoon* (1932):

> If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.[3]

This formulation describes a process that the literary theorist Terence Cave, under the influence of models of literary practice informed by cognitive science, labels 'mind-reading,' which he defines as:

> the attribution of mind-states (particular intentional states) to another person by inference. […] [T]his capacity is essential for all forms of intentional communication, since in order to understand a speaker, you first have to assume that she is trying to communicate something relevant to you, and therefore that she is reciprocally seeking to infer your mind-set.[4]

Readers make inferences on the basis of the information or evidence that a writer allows them, and thus the Iceberg Theory concerns how the writer manipulates the quantity of information to produce particular effects. Hemingway's principle suggests that a writer should leave details out of his writing that will 'remain,' as it were, in his mind, so as to force the reader to perform this cognitive act of inference. Hemingway associates inference in the reader with the production of strong emotive effect. The implication in the 'Iceberg Theory' passage, as in much of the creative writing discourse that descends from this principle, is not simply that the reader will feel 'those things' that the writer

[3] Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932), 192.
[4] Terence Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 110.

does not state as strongly as she feels those things he states, but that she will feel them with much greater strength.

This stylistic premise can be imputed to much of the fiction of Raymond Carver, a writer much influenced by Hemingway and one of the most important figures in postwar creative writing. Carver's stories frequently end on strong notes of ambiguity that give the reader little concrete information about how the story has concluded. The story 'Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit' ends with the narrator returning home to the wife whose infidelities he has just recounted; the last line of the story consists of his wife asking him to wash his hands for dinner. The prominent placement of this moment as the story's final action gives the sense that something significant has transpired, but the absence of narrative commentary leaves the reader in the dark as to what the significance might be.[5] To take another example, while her son lies in critical condition in the hospital, the protagonist of 'The Bath' moves about her apartment. Carver describes her movements in precise detail:

> She got out of the car and went to the door. She turned on lights and put on water for tea. She opened a can and fed the dog. She sat down on the sofa with her tea.[6]

Carver scrupulously avoids setting forth his characters' mental states discursively; the dominant moods of his stories are sadness and melancholy, yet the adjectives 'sad' and 'melancholy' and their synonyms almost never appear directly in the text. The logic is that the reader must already know that the protagonist of 'The Bath' will be in a drastic emotional state due to her son's condition; drawing attention to that state explicitly would be narratively counterproductive.

An exemplary statement of the 'show don't tell' principle appears in Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), which became a widely-assigned text in American high school English classes and has thus proved more than usually influential in contemporary American thinking about the function of fiction. The work, structurally somewhere between a sequence of short stories and a novel, has to do with O'Brien's experience as a soldier in

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[5] Raymond Carver, 'Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit,' *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (London: Vintage, 2009), 17.
[6] Raymond Carver, 'The Bath,' *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, 47.

the war in Vietnam, and explicitly thematises questions of description and representation. It includes a chapter or story called 'Good Form,' in which the narrator reveals that the previous episode in the book was substantially invented. The narrator addresses the reader directly: 'Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is.' He goes on to make a distinction between 'happening-truth,' whose allegiance is to the factual reality of events, and 'story-truth,' which seems to have to do with expressing the subjective emotional-visceral dimensions of past experience:

> Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.
>
> Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the centre of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star shaped hole. I killed him.
>
> What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.[7]

O'Brien's distinction between 'happening-truth' and 'story-truth' maps onto Hemingway's distinction between those 'things' that the writer 'knows,' and the more concentrated, literary version of those things that makes the reader 'feel.' Both definitions depend on a certain referential correspondence; the value of the 'story-truth' is that it expresses the emotional core of actual world events in a way that a literal, discursive presentation of the 'happening-truth' cannot achieve.

'Show don't tell' surfaces in a similar form in Tom Grimes's memoir *Mentor* (2010), an account of Grimes's time at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in the early 1990s and of his relationship with Frank Conroy, director of the Workshop from 1987 to 2005. The major establishing event of the book's first section unfolds accompanied by an O'Brien-like commentary on representation and literary style. (Grimes professes great admiration for O'Brien; he would later hire him to an endowed chair in the department of creative writing at Texas State University, which Grimes directs.) Describing his experience moments after receiving the news of his acceptance to Iowa, Grimes admits that he cannot remember exactly what he did after hanging up the phone, citing the

[7] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 172.

fallibility of memory. He fills the void by imagining what Conroy would say in a workshop context:

> First off, don't be vague. Don't just have the character wander around the apartment, dazed. Give the reader concrete details. You have five senses at your disposal: touch, sight, scent, taste, and hearing. Use them. As in, 'I heard the front door close. The loud crackle of a brown paper grocery bag drifted up the stairwell.'[8]

Despite having forgotten the literal sequence of events, Grimes retains an emotional impression of them, one that he joins Conroy in believing can be best evoked through descriptive language that is precise, sensorial, and objective. Throughout his memoir Grimes proves that he has internalized this advice; his major narrative mode is moderately lyrical, synaesthetic, and resolutely concrete. Grimes recounts events that occurred two decades in the past, yet his imagery remains consistently exact. Describing a car park, Grimes recalls 'a single van with a toy-littered interior and an infant's car seat secured to the rear bench';[9] the van plays no part in the scene apart from serving as a kind of establishing shot. And as Conroy advises, Grimes frequently checks in with his different senses. Entering a bar, 'The cool air chilled my light sweat.'[10] Similes tend to compare one concrete object to another; in the course of a difficult conversation, Grimes paces the room, 'stretching the phone cord like a piece of taffy.'[11]

Conroy's advice, together with Grimes's stylistic embodiment of it, bears substantial similarity to a corpus of modern literary realist techniques identified in James Wood's 2010 review of David Shields' manifesto *Reality Hunger*. Wood's list of techniques offers a parenthetical example of each:

> the selection of small, telling details ('It was a large room, filled almost entirely by rows of antique computers; there was an odd smell of aftershave and bacon'); the careful mixing of dynamic and habitual detail ('At one of the computers, a man was unhurriedly eating a spring roll; traffic noise pierced the thick, sealed windows; an ambulance yelped by'); the preference for the concrete over the abstract ('She was twenty-nine, but still went home every evening to her mom's ground-floor apartment in Queens, which doubled by day as a yoga studio'); vivid brevity of character sketching ('Bob wore a bright-yellow T-shirt that read "Got Beer?," and had a small mole on his upper lip'); [...] lucid but allowably lyrical sentences ('From the window, he watched the

[8] Tom Grimes, *Mentor: A Memoir* (Portland: Tin House Books, 2010), 11-12.
[9] *Ibid.* 79.
[10] *Ibid.* 25.
[11] *Ibid.* 110.

> streetlights flicker on, in amber hesitations').[12]

In Wood's view, this literary mode has been substantially dominant since Balzac 'without essential alteration.'[13] The generality and scope of this claim make it difficult to evaluate, but his typology of modern realist techniques offers useful critical vocabulary. Significantly, his various characterizations overlap substantially; most deal with detail, concreteness, and lucidity.

I suggest that a prose style structured around precision, materiality, and lucidity has become intensified and conventionalized through the rise of the creative writing program. Diverse accounts of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the most famous and influential program in the United States, indicate a major defining feature of Iowa pedagogy to be a strenuous emphasis on anti-didactic presentations of concrete detail. Consider an essay, titled 'On Details,' contributed by the novelist and Iowa graduate Francine Prose to a volume entitled *The Eleventh Draft: Craft and the Writing Life from the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (1999), edited by Conroy. (Prose is also the author of *Blue Angel* [2000], a biting satire of an undergraduate creative writing program in New England.) Prose narrates an anecdote that comes from a workshop led by one of her friends that leads to the following conclusion: '"Trust me on this," my friend said. "God really is in the details."' Prose elaborates:

> If God is in the details, we all must on some deep level believe that the truth is in there, too, or maybe it is that God is truth: Details are what persuade us that someone is telling the truth […] good […] liars know that it's the single priceless detail that jumps out of the story and tells us to take it easy, we can quit our dreary adult jobs of playing judge and jury and again become as trusting children, hearing the gospel of grown-up knowledge without a single care or doubt.[14]

Again, there is an appeal to concision—it is the 'single' detail rather than abundant description that Prose finds compelling—and there is also an invocation of the relationship between the writer and reader. For Prose, the function of well-executed description is to create in the reader an impression of authorial sincerity, which allows the reader to abdicate the usual responsibilities of analytical and

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[12] James Wood, 'Keeping It Real,' *New Yorker*, 15 March 2010, 71.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Francine Prose, 'On Details,' in *The Eleventh Draft: Craft and the Writing Life from the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, ed. Frank Conroy (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 136.

critical thought, and pass into a childlike state of absorption.

I do not want to take up the potentially sidetracking question of whether or not it is desirable for readers of fiction to abandon their critical faculties in this way; instead I want first to set out a possible problem with fiction that operates on the 'show don't tell' model, and then consider the concept of selfhood that this model presupposes. The problem emerges in the passage in the reader's mind from a given textual detail to whatever emotional or mental state the author means the detail to evoke. The mental, second-order significance of literary details forms a crucial part of most articulations of the 'show don't tell' model; for instance, O'Brien's example posits 'happening-truth'—'twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief'—as the second-order significance of the much more immediate 'story-truth'—'His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.' But how accurately do these two versions of the 'truth' correspond to each other? The 'story-truth' depends upon the strong assumption that the reader will undertake an inferential operation that will pass from the image of a dead soldier to a formative experience of trauma. But has O'Brien provided a sufficiently expansive image to ensure that the reader will undertake this operation correctly? How does the reader know that this is an experience of trauma? An additional sentence could change the image's meaning entirely. For example: 1) 'His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him. I felt a bit sick, but mostly I felt proud that I had done my duty.' Or even: 2) 'His one was shut, the other was a star-shaped hole. I killed him. I felt an indescribable pleasure rising in the depths of my being.' Passage 1) could describe the response of a soldier who experiences his job as a calling, and who believes passionately in the justice and importance of his martial work. It does not seem implausible that some soldiers who took part in the Vietnam War responded to the fighting in the terms of a tradition that understands war as an opportunity for the demonstration of nobility. Passage 2) could describe the response of a psychopath who finds killing the most pleasurable activity in the world. This seems less likely, but given the bare text of O'Brien's 'story-truth' the reader cannot rule it out. To judge from

the 'happening-truth,' it seems that O'Brien really means something closer to 3): 'His one eye was shut, the other was a star-shaped hole. It was a moment that would haunt me for the rest of my life.' Why does O'Brien choose not to make this explicit? No degree of certainty is possible here, but one promising explanation is that O'Brien carries the belief, either consciously or unconsciously, that his audience—the writers' workshop—will almost assuredly share the conviction that war and killing are ineluctably dehumanizing and traumatic. The workshop it seems, has not offered much in the way of competing perspectives—not, anyway, with sufficient insistence to compel O'Brien to make plain the intended meaning of his image.

Compare the image of the dead soldier to O'Brien's evocation of the 'happening-truth'—'twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief'—which, he implies, is inferior to the 'story-truth.' Yet this sentence at least has the merit of narrating O'Brien's—or the narrator's, at any rate—experience with chronological precision, whereas the image of the dead soldier offers nothing to suggest that the narrator intends to convey something about how past trauma governs his present state of mind. That present state of mind is well-evoked by the rich parallelism of 'faceless responsibility' and 'faceless grief,' and O'Brien suggests that he offers the image of the dead soldier in the subsequent passage as compensation for this facelessness, but it is precisely the concrete certainty of the image of the dead soldier that sacrifices the complex and compelling tension of his account of the 'happening truth.' What does it mean to experience responsibility and grief without an object? By definition this question cannot be explored through a concrete image, since the core of the question is the absence of concreteness; for this reason the response of O'Brien's audience to the 'happening-truth' would be much more difficult to predict than its response to the grotesque picture of a soldier's corpse. 'Story-truth,' or 'show don't tell,' must to a substantial extent take the inferential process, as described by Cave, for granted. It assumes that the specific evidence delivered through a concrete image will lead the reader to perform an inferential operation that will result in the attribution of the correct intentional states to the narrator

or character. Description of concrete images is well-equipped to evoke visceral, sensorial reactions, but it is less suited to investigating the processes through which particular reactions are evoked, and the ways in which particular reactions inform discursive conclusions about intentional states of narrators or characters—for instance, the ways in which a visceral response to the image of a dead soldier entails conclusions about the trauma of combat. Francine Prose describes detail-oriented fiction as producing in the reader a state of absorption defined by the absence of analytical, critical thought, and this kind of writing has enjoyed extraordinary success in the contemporary American literary field. But by considering the work of Saul Bellow in this chapter I want to draw attention to a different kind of writing, one that takes as its subject the mechanisms of perception and inference, and the way perception and inference translate over time into belief, behaviour and personality. Bellow's pursuit of this literary mode, I will argue, has been decisively influenced by the uniqueness of his institutional path, which bears comparison with—but ultimately stands in opposition to—the path of the creative writing program. One consequence of this path has been Bellow's specific brand of individualism, which urges a conception of the liberal subject as the breaker of conceptual boundaries and ossified habits of thought in pursuit of knowledge. This conception doubles as Bellow's conception of the role of the novelist, and this sets him apart, as I shall show in what follows, from a creative writing program that tends to operate on a much narrower basis of professional training.

What is the relationship between the specific institutional nature of the creative writing program and the prevalence of 'show don't tell'? According to most accounts of what happens in creative writing programs, the actual pedagogy of the writers' workshop focuses to a great extent upon how intuitively or sensorily convincing a particular piece of prose might be. The writing teacher of a David Foster Wallace novella that features a creative writing program speaks about an image '"ringing true"';[15] a character in a workshop scene in Eric Bennett's novel *A Big Enough Lie*

[15] David Foster Wallace, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,' *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1989), 368.

(2015) comments, '"I don't know, maybe it's just me, but I didn't get it"';[16] Grimes notes that his classmates frequently speak of 'what "worked" and "didn't work,"' and sometimes saying 'they "wanted more," although what "more" was wanted remained ambiguous.'[17] All of these phrases appear in inverted commas in their original texts. Wallace and Grimes strike this skeptical note because this workshop feedback clearly does not stand open to rational interrogation; it is rooted in an aesthetic response to the text that is not entirely—or even mostly—discursively explicable, and the clichéd vagueness of this feedback suggests that the nuances of this aesthetic response are resistant to description. While such responses are no doubt frustrating and probably unhelpful for the writers whose work is under discussion, an appeal to ineffable, sensorial aspects of literary experience is by no means an unusual feature of literary readings.[18] But the writers' workshop seems to have raised this single dimension of the literary experience to become its major, almost exclusive, pedagogical concern. Creative writing programs consist largely of the 'workshopping' of their students' material; where programs require students to read outside of the work of their peers, most of the assigned texts appear to be prose fiction, in English, from contemporary Anglo-America. The postmodernist novelist Donald Barthelme is reputed to have advised his students to 'Read all of Western philosophy, for starters, then read some history, anthropology, history of science.'[19] Yet the reading list Barthelme actually distributed to students contains almost exclusively fiction (along with some poetry), and the only philosophy that appears inflects significantly towards literature and the arts (e.g. Barthes, Sontag).[20] Wallace, near the very end of his own tenure as an MFA student, commented in 1987: 'in terms of rigour, demand, intellectual and emotional requirements, a lot of

[16] Eric Bennett, *A Big Enough Lie* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2015), 198.
[17] Grimes, 29.
[18] Cave, to take a recent example, spends a good deal of time on the 'kinaesthetic' dimensions of literary 'mind-reading.' To take a more distant case, T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' posits the entirety of the content of the literary experience to consist of 'emotions' and 'feelings,' a feature of his thought that is difficult to divine from his reputation as the cerebral poet/critic of impersonality and detachment. Cave, *passim*; T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, *Vol. II: The Perfect Critic*, *1919-1926*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014), 105-114.
[19] Quoted in Tracy Daugherty, *Hiding Man: A Biography of Donald Barthelme* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2009), 383.
[20] List quoted in Kevin Moffett, 'Donald Barthelme's Syllabus,' *The Believer*, October 2003, accessed 31 May 2016, http://www.believermag.com/issues/200310/?read=barthelme_syllabus.

Creative Writing Programs are an unfunny joke. Few require of applicants any significant preparation in history, literature, criticism, composition, foreign languages, art or philosophy; fewer still make attempts to provide it in curricula or require it as a criterion for graduation.'[21] While it seems that creative writing programs have begun to demand more vigorous and varied academic output from their students (especially with the growth of the creative writing PhD), and while Wallace puts his case in rather extreme terms, his identification of the relative narrowness of typical program pedagogy seems broadly correct. From this type of perspective the creative writing program appears as a specialist culture devoted to the transmission of the 'show don't tell' aesthetic, and in this sense it appears to satisfy the definition of professionalism set out by T. S. Eliot in 1918 (discussed at length at the end of this chapter): 'Surely professionalism is hard work on style with singleness of purpose.'[22]

This chapter argues that Bellow's life and work amount to a case that resists the 'show don't tell' paradigm in a significant and revealing way, one fundamentally connected to his view of what it means to be a liberal subject in a twentieth-century American society in which specialization and professionalization had reached an historically unprecedented level of ascendency. I first want to show briefly how this manifests on the technical level of Bellow's prose before moving to a consideration of the relationship between Bellow's institutional life and his perspective (both discursively expressed in his non-fiction and textually embodied in his fiction) on literary style. This perspective emerges in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), the novel that immediately preceded Bellow's 1976 Nobel Prize in Literature, as clearly as in any of Bellow's works.

As with so many of Bellow's narrators and characters, the narrator-protagonist of *Humboldt's Gift* Charlie Citrine possesses the distinctive combination of a working-class background with a powerful

[21] David Foster Wallace, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,' in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2012), 61-62.
[22] T. S. Eliot, 'Professional, or . . .' in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot, Vol. I: Apprentice Years, 1905-1918*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014), 699.

attraction to the life of the mind. On the level of style, this produces a tension in Charlie's language between virtuoso vernacular performances and abstract philosophical rumination. When he recalls the details of his childhood, they appear on the page with remarkable specificity. Comparing his own upbringing to the comparatively privileged childhood of his sometime friend and sometime antagonist, the poet Von Humboldt Fleisher, Charlie notes: 'I played Piggie-move-up with Polish kids under the El tracks. Humboldt ate devil's-food coconut-marshmallow layer cake at Henrici's. I never saw the inside of Henrici's.'[23] Charlie offers these details as illustrations in passing, rather than an explicitly detailed reminiscence, yet the level of exactitude is remarkable. How does Charlie know that the layering of the devil's-food cake that bespeaks Humboldt's early privilege was, not just coconut or just marshmallow, but precisely coconut-marshmallow? Charlie does not say. Perhaps Humboldt told him, or perhaps Charlie's description is imaginative embroidery, but either way the description reflects an exceptional attentiveness to quotidian detail. Bellow 'shows' rather than 'tells' enthusiastically here, and on the basis of such moments it would be easy to typecast Bellow as a participant in the conventions of modern Western literary realism that Wood describes.

But enthusiasm for detail does not account for the entirety of the style of *Humboldt's Gift*. It rather forms a part of a more general enthusiasm, which often bleeds into excitability, that seems the most unusual and significant feature of Charlie's personality. As much as the minute details that bespeak the rich idiosyncrasy of his working-class childhood, Charlie directs this enthusiasm towards much more rarified, much less concrete objects. Similarly early in the novel, Charlie notes:

> What I wanted to do was good. I was dying to do something good. And this feeling for good went back to my early and peculiar sense of existence—sunk in the glassy depths of life and groping, thrillingly and desperately, for sense, a person keenly aware of painted veils, of Maya, of domes of many-colored glass staining the white radiance of eternity, quivering in the intense inane and so on. I was quite a nut about such things.[24]

Charlie alludes to Shelley's 'Adonais':

> The one remains, the many change and pass;
> Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;

[23] Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (London: Penguin, 1975), 5.
[24] *Ibid.* 3.

> Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
> Stains the white radiance of Eternity [..][25]

The poem platonically contrasts a fixed, absolute level of being with the world of fleeting appearances that is the realm of experience. Charlie declares his awareness of both levels of existence, and his sensitivity to their imbrications. The controlling mood of this passage, as in so much of Bellow's prose, is bathos. Description of Charlie's attraction to rarified, romantic abstractions—the good, 'glassy depths of life,' 'white radiance of eternity'—suddenly gives way to the vernacular 'quite a nut,' and concepts intended to encompass the entirety of being itself receive the matter-of-fact designation 'such things.' 'Quivering in the intense inane' functions well as a reflexive description of Charlie's mode of existence, since he verges always on the edge of recognition that his investment in transcendent registers of experience renders him ridiculous. Encountering at his sports club a man who made his fortune in the criminal underworld, Charlie wonders: 'could I tell him what was on my mind? Could I say that that morning I had been reading Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the pages on freedom and death? Could I say that I had been thinking about the history of human consciousness with special emphasis on the question of boredom? [...] Never.'[26] Abstract entities most frequently encountered in dense works of philosophy seem equally real, and of equal interest to Charlie as the concrete and self-evidently vibrant manifestations of rugged Chicago reality. He believes that Hegel's *Phenomenology* should have as much to say about his daily life in the sports club as it does about the art of ancient Greece. In one sense he is a kind of philosophical realist, not in the sense that he elaborates an argument about the metaphysical existence or non-existence of universals, but in the sense that he believes that questions of human universality deserve to be taken at least as seriously as the everyday lifeworld of concrete particulars. But he finds himself in a resolutely nominalist and materialist society that holds a deep skepticism towards abstract notions of, for instance, 'freedom' and 'the good.' This is Charlie's fundamental plight, and the

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[25] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Adonais,' *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 390-406, II. 460-464.
[26] *Ibid.* 69.

narrative driver of the novel.

At times this plight produces humour of a high order, most memorably in the scene that features his extended confrontation with Rinaldo Cantabile, a small-time gangster who has been terrorizing Charlie over the matter of an unpaid poker debt. After Cantabile smashes up his Mercedes, Charlie decides that the wisest course of action will be to give Cantabile his money. Cantabile refuses simply to accept payment of the debt, however, and instead attempts to force Charlie through a kind of ritual humiliation. Armed with a gun and multiple baseball bats, Cantabile makes Charlie stand in the same bathroom stall as he relieves himself, brings Charlie to a bar where he attempts to make Charlie publicly apologize in front of an audience that includes a widely-read gossip columnist, then takes Charlie to the top of a building under construction, where Charlie clings to a post in terror. Charlie's extraordinary cognitive response to this imminent, potentially fatal threat is 'to think (to distract myself) of all the volumes of ape behaviour I had read in my time, of Kohler and Yerkes and Zuckerman, of Marais on baboons and Schaller on gorillas, and of the rich repertory of visceral-emotional sensitivities in the anthropoid branch.' Apparently, Charlie habitually responds to trying times in this way: 'In a situation like this,' he comments, 'I can always switch out and think about the human condition over-all.'[27] One might expect such circumstances to shrink the perspective of the average individual to a narrow window of self-preservation and acute anxiety, but Charlie's vantage point instead broadens to consider what universal features of humanity he may abstract from this particular extraordinary state of affairs. Pages later, still under Cantabile's control, Charlie expounds further upon his state of mind:

> Was I afraid of Cantabile? Not really. I don't know what he thought, but what I thought was perfectly clear to me. Absorbed in determining what a human being is, I went along with him. Cantabile may have believed that he was abusing a passive man. Not at all. I was a man active elsewhere. […] So when Cantabile yelled and threatened I didn't make a stand on grounds of proper pride—'Nobody treats Charlie Citrine like this, I'm going to the police,' and so forth. No, the police had no such things to show me.[28]

[27] *Ibid.* 83.
[28] *Ibid.* 89.

Charlie takes this extreme situation as an opportunity to investigate the abstract, universal properties of humanity, rather than fixating on the material specificities of his situation. This investigation is emphatically cross-disciplinary, joining Hegelian idealism with zoological studies of apes; soon the reader will also learn of the crucial position that the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner holds in Charlie's intellectual landscape. Charlie's holistic, integrative perspective is fundamentally abstract in the literal sense of the term, which derives from the Latin *abstrahere*, 'to draw away.'[29] His concern is with essences and necessities; his intellectual procedure aims to separate the essential and the necessary from the transient and the contingent. As his citation of scientific literature suggests, this procedure depends upon Charlie's practice of empiricism. He attempts to achieve a critical distance from the conditioning influence of his immediate circumstances.

It is not accidental that Hegel is the philosopher whose name recurs most frequently in the pages of Bellow's fiction, since Hegel remains the crucial early modern theorist of the liberal subject under the conditions of modernity. Modernity for Bellow means the period following the sundering of science, religion and art into separate spheres of inquiry, and the consequent delegitimation of holistic and integrative modes of perception. The ramifications of this split have been especially visible in the philosophy and literary theory of the twentieth century, which has tended to consider attempts to think holistically and integrally unacceptably totalizing, hostile to the particularity of human experiences that vary across time and geography. Bellow's fiction evokes concrete particularity with as much accuracy and vivacity as any other postwar American novelist, as many critics and reviewers have observed, but it also understands concrete particularity as only one dimension of a metaphysical order that includes the abstract and the universal, as a different, more academically inclined group of critics have perceived. Most reviews and more journalistic responses to Bellow's work emphasize the vividness and sensory power of Bellow's style; Martin Amis, for instance, has written, 'It is as if Bellow is turning himself inside out and letting the observable world

[29] 'abstract, adj. and n.,' *OED Online*, June 2016, Oxford University Press.

poke and prod at him nerve by nerve.'[30] Judie Newman, coming from a more academic perspective, notes by contrast: 'Overwhelmingly the critical consensus presents Bellow as a writer more concerned with the universal than with the particular.'[31] What few critical perspectives manage to do is account for the validity of both of these perceptions, accommodating dialectically Bellow's undeniable attentiveness to the concrete with his equally strong investment in the abstract.

Bellow inherits his dialectical orientation from Hegel and from the deeply Hegel-influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose individualism informs the range of Bellow's thought.[32] For Emerson, concrete particularity is the inescapable reality of human experience, since each individual is 'incarnated in a private self'; the duty of each individual is to determine or discover abstract universals and manifest them within his own life:

> There are two facts, the Individual and the Universal. To this belong the Infinite, the temporal, ignorance, sin, death; to that belong the infinite, the immutable, truth, goodness, life. In Man they both consist. The All is in Man. In Man the perpetual progress is from the Individual to the Universal.[33]

Hegel understands modernity as having institutionalized the sundering of science, religion and art

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[30] Martin Amis, 'The American Eagle,' *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000* (London: Vintage, 2002), 467. Consider two other examples: for Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, the experience of reading Bellow is an 'almost physical sensation one has that each book is a fresh attempt to grab hold of knowable reality, in its many pulsating forms, and to fathom its latent messages.' In a similar vein, James Wood has written: 'Saul Bellow is probably the greatest writer of American prose of the twentieth century—where greatest means most abundant, various, precise, rich lyrical. [...] Reading Bellow is a special way of being alive; his prose is germinal.' Sam Tanenhaus, 'Musing on Saul Bellow's Triumphs and Shortcomings,' *New York Times,* 2 February 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/02/arts/02iht-IDSIDE3.4448144.html. James Wood, 'Give All,' *The New Republic*, November 2000, 37.

[31] Judie Newman, *Saul Bellow and History* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 1. Ellen Pifer has similarly drawn attention to the recurrence in Bellow's fiction of 'those seemingly arcane terms that have, for millennia, designated the realities of the spirit: words such as *mystery, grace, beatitude, blessedness.'* Keith Opdahl makes a comparable observation, categorizing Bellow's thought as 'basically metaphysical and religious, passing from the historic fact to the larger universal issue.' Ellen Pifer, *Saul Bellow Against the Grain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 2; Keith M. Opdahl, *The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction* (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), 6. For other critical accounts that stress Bellow's universality see Birgitte Scheer-Schäzler, *Saul Bellow* (New York: Ungar, 1972); M. Gilbert Porter, *Whence the Power? The Artistry and Humanity of Saul Bellow* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974); and Michael K. Glenday, *Saul Bellow and the Decline of Humanism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990). For a dissenting view that emphasizes the prevalence of hypocrisy, solipsism, and cynical ends-oriented pragmatism in Bellow's novels, as well as the egoism that the author understands as intrinsic to Bellow's authorial project itself, see Jonathan Wilson, *On Bellow's Planet: Readings from the Dark Side* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1985).

[32] For a thorough investigation of the Transcendentalist influence across Bellow's oeuvre, see Mohammad A. Quayum, *Saul Bellow and American Transcendentalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

[33] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, *Vol. V*, ed. William H. Gilman et. al. (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 1960), 229.

into an even more fragmented society whose constitution renders pursuit of the universal even more difficult and unlikely. Questions of morality, truth, justice, and being become subject to a division of labour in the form of complicated arrays of substantially autonomous governmental, jurisprudential, and academic institutions or 'expert systems,' to borrow a term from contemporary sociology.[34] Such a society leaves the individual who aspires to an integral or holistic perspective in an unfortunate situation: the American political philosopher (and, for a time, Bellow's academic colleague) Robert Pippin has paraphrased Hegel as having observed

> the 'dispersed' character of subjectivity in modern societies, all reflecting an acknowledgement of the spiritual effects of ever more divided labour [...] In such a world, no one simply could be heroically responsible for much of anything (and so could not be beautiful in action), and the legal and administrative tasks, the daily life, of modern society are indeed, in [Hegel's] favourite word, prosaic (not beautiful).[35]

A felt lack of possibilities for 'heroic responsibility' characterizes the typical plight of a Bellow character extraordinarily well. Divided labour becomes an especially prominent concern in Bellow's late fiction, especially *The Dean's December* (1982) and *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987). *The Dean's December* tells the story of Albert Corde, a university administrator who feels keenly the exigencies of his job as a university administrator and the attendant submission to bureaucratic necessity, consensus and convention. In tension with these exigencies are Corde's history and training as a journalist, which have left him with a strong belief in the social power of telling the truth. *More Die of Heartbreak*'s protagonist is the plant scientist Benn Crader, presented from the perspective of his nephew, narrator Kenneth Trachtenberg.

Benn devotes himself to plant science with an intensity that verges on the religious, and Kenneth, a scholar of Russian mysticism who takes the mystical dimensions of his subject unusually seriously, suspects that Benn may be a rare, universal soul unusually able to transcend his particular intersection of expert systems. While Benn's absorption in botany has led him to a position of

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[34] See Ulrich Beck et. al., *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).
[35] Robert Pippin, *The Persistance of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 396.

scientific prominence, he burns with a zeal to realize a more holistic, integral form of knowledge; he eagerly consumes the Russian mysticism that Kenneth supplies him in translation. When presenting his uncle's extraordinary ability to look beyond the models of knowledge offered by his professional community, Kenneth frames his character sketch explicitly with respect to 'the spiritual effects of ever more divided labour':

> Benn specialized in the anatomy and morphology of plants. The standard position of the specialist is that he knows all there is to know in his own line, without further accountability. Like: 'I fix oil gauges, don't bother me with odometers.' Or as the wisecrack used to go, 'I don't shave people, I only lather. You get shaved across the street.' Understandably, some specialties are more exacting and remove you from the world; they carry with them the right to hold aloof. Through Benn I became acquainted with some exact-science types whose eccentrics had the colour of prerogatives. Benn never claimed this privilege of human distance.[36]

Kenneth grew up in Paris with French as his first language in a home that often had such dinner guests as the novelist and poet Raymond Queneau and the philosopher Alexandre Kojève, whose work, especially the lecture series *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel* (1947), proved enormously influential in the revival of theoretical interest in Hegel in the twentieth century. Bellow's extremely close friend and colleague at the University of Chicago, the political philosopher Allan Bloom, studied with Kojève in Paris in the 1960s and edited and introduced the first English edition of the introduction.[37] Including Kojève as a character allows Bellow to consider the spiritual effects of divided labour in explicitly Hegelian terms; for instance, Trachtenberg offers the following brief paraphrase of Hegel's philosophy of history:

> You have to see it like this: The illuminated man is a microcosm incorporating universal Being in himself, with the proviso that he be on top of the edifice of universal knowledge. It goes without saying that I can't do this myself. However, you'll never be able in the slightest degree to judge these aberrant times if you don't know that there is such a thing as the great Hegelian overview.[38]

Again, the dominant mood of this passage is bathos: 'You have to see it like this,' has the tenor of

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[36] Saul Bellow, *More Die of Heartbreak* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987), 12.
[37] See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nicholls Jr (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1969).
[38] Bellow, *More Die*, 36.

casual conversation, and the deadpan 'It goes without saying that I can't do this myself,' amounts to a dramatic downshift in the gravity of the prose from 'the edifice of universal knowledge' and the 'illuminated man.' The next paragraph begins with a comparison of Hegel's composition of the *Phenomenology* in the midst of Napoleon's conquest of Prussia to Trachtenberg's father's philandering, and includes a winking phallic joke about Napoleon's cannon. But Bellow also urges the reader not to discount the propositional content of the passage on account of its bathos, attempting to render his fiction into a suitable vehicle for the types of questions that motivated Hegel to produce the *Phenomenology*. The above passage makes a simple but crucial point about the relationship between the universal and the particular: Trachtenberg, in a similar way to Emerson, acknowledges the ineluctable particularity of his experience, his 'incarnation in a private self,' when he notes that he cannot himself attain the edifice of universal knowledge. But he argues that this fact alone does not justify the complete discarding of a notion of universality. A notion of the universal, the 'great Hegelian overview,' remains an essential reference point for the practice of accurate judgment. Abandonment of a regulating notion of universality results in a mode of judgment that perceives only an undifferentiated flux of particularities (in Shelley's poem, 'the many' changing and passing while 'the One remains) in which notions of aberrance (or indeed continuity) lose validity. This is the mode of judgment of a 'show don't tell' literary regime that takes 'reality' to be those material aspects of the world that are perceptible through the senses, and that resists representation of higher-order cognitive processes by any but the most indirect inferential means.

The uniqueness of Bellow's position on the spiritual effects of divided labour emerges from the particularities of his personal history in identifiable ways. Bellow, one of the most acclaimed American novelists of the twentieth-century, was born in Canada—in Lachine, Quebec, in 1915. He spoke French and Yiddish before learning English, and only became an American citizen in 1943. He spent the bulk of his formative adolescent years in working class Chicago before entering the

University of Chicago in 1933; after two years there his parents' financial troubles forced Bellow to transfer to Northwestern, from which he graduated with a degree in anthropology in 1937. Bellow began anthropological graduate work that same year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, though he soon abandoned these studies to embark upon a writing career in earnest. His anthropological background would surface importantly in his novel *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), which describes the experience of the American millionaire Eugene Henderson searching for authenticity amongst a fictional African tribe, and more controversially in the early 1990s when Bellow came under fire for remarking that 'the Papuans had had no Proust and that the Zulus had not as yet produced a Tolstoy.' Responding to the controversy in a New York *Times* editorial, Bellow claimed that his remarks had been removed from the context of an anthropological discussion of the difference between literate and pre-literate societies.[39]

While familiarity across a range of extra-literary intellectual disciplines would become a crucial feature of his later professional career, in the late 1930s Bellow abandoned anthropology to embark in earnest upon a career as a novelist. To support himself initially he found part-time jobs, as an instructor at a teachers' college and as a writer on the Illinois Writers' Project, an initiative of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. In 1943 Bellow applied for but did not get a job with the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, an institution that would become his academic home two decades later. His initial failure with the Committee, an interdisciplinary organization committed to a holistic approach to the humanities and social sciences, was somewhat mitigated by success with a project with a comparable ethos, Mortimer Adler and University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins' guide/index to their Great Books of the Western World series. This project would consist of three volumes: an initial volume defending the ideal of liberal education titled *The Great Conversation*, and a two-volume *Synopticon*, which would index, compare, and correlate various Great Books treatments of topics such as 'Art,' 'Truth,' 'Courage,'

[39] Saul Bellow, 'Papuans and Zulus,' *New York Times*, 10 March 1994, https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/23/specials/bellow-papuans.html.

'Law,' and 'Theology.'[40]

During the war Bellow published his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), and began to spend time in New York with the intellectual milieu that formed around the *Partisan Review*; in 1945, after the bulk of the fighting had concluded, he enlisted in the Merchant Marine. After the war he traveled to Europe, where he wrote *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), partially funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship. He re-entered academia decisively in 1952, teaching at a variety of universities on the American West Coast. Between 1953 and 1957 Bellow taught at Bard College, the New School for Social Research, and the University of Minnesota, where he worked with John Berryman. In 1957 he visited his future Committee colleague Richard Stern's writing seminar at the University of Chicago, where Philip Roth was then teaching; his next appointment would be in creative writing, at the University of Puerto Rico in 1961.

Critics frequently position Bellow at the vanguard of the movement of the literary field into the university that culminated in the flourishing of the creative writing program,[41] but Bellow in fact spent little of his career teaching creative writing, and had few good things to say about the writer's existence in the university. In an undated letter of 1946, he opines: 'I don't think a writer could permanently stay at a university [...]. Teaching often gravels me, but I'm confident that I can liberate myself from it in two or three years.'[42] A year later his perspective has become even darker: 'This year I have been ill and teaching leaves me no energy for writing. I had hoped that I would be able to ask for a year's leave but I shall have nothing to live on.'[43] In another letter he compares the function of the university in the writer's development to the function of Siberian exile in Raskolnikov's: 'indispensable punishment.'[44] His belief in the incompatibility between teaching and writing persists

[40] See Zachary Leader, *The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune, 1915-1964* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), 252-253.
[41] Lawrence Buell, for instance, has noted that Bellow was the 'the first eminent American novelist to inhabit academia for [...] his working life,' and locates him at the fountainhead of the absorption of American literary production into the university. Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge, M.A.: Belknap Press, 2014), 170.
[42] Saul Bellow, Letter to David Bazelon, n.d. 1946, *Saul Bellow: Letters*, ed. Benjamin Taylor (New York and London: Viking, 2010), 42.
[43] Saul Bellow, Letter to Henry Volkening, n.d. 1947, *Letters*, 47.
[44] Saul Bellow, Letter to David Bazelon, 1 December 1947, *Letters*, 49.

into the 1950s, when he warns the critic Alfred Kazin: 'If you want to teach Bard is the place for you. But it [*sic*] you want to write also, méfie-toi!'[45] (Roughly, 'Run away!')

Bellow makes specific comments about the creative writing program relatively infrequently in his extrafictional prose and in his interviews, but the few remarks he makes view the program as a convenient form of institutional patronage, rather than a valuable pedagogical resource. As far as the pedagogical content of the creative writing program goes, Bellow appears to dismiss it as participating in the general debasement of the American university system that has resulted from its abandonment of synoptic models of education like that of the interdisciplinary Committee on Social Thought. In a 1990 lecture delivered at the University of Oxford, Bellow significantly included 'creative' in a list of keywords meant to demonstrate the perversion of intellectual discourse, for which the university has born significant responsibility:

> Sportscasters, rap musicians, university rightists, university leftists, all employ the same language, the same rhetorical devices. Here is a list of some of the words most commonly used: 'consensus,' 'sensitivity,' 'creative,' 'role model,' 'entitlement,' 'empowerment,' 'impacted,' 'quality time,' [...] 'concerned,' 'the excluded,' 'the marginalized' [...] Some of these terms come from psychology, from the social sciences, or from schools of divinity (the theologians have contributed words like 'compassion' or 'situated'—as in 'spiritually situated'). Others come from higher intellectual quarters. 'Charisma' is borrowed from Max Weber. 'Concern' is probably a translation of Heidegger's *Sorge*.[46]

A clear understanding of the perspective expressed here about the relationship between the university and the rise of 'creativity' requires a background sense of the development of Bellow's political views. By this point in his life Bellow had traveled most of the way along a career-long trajectory that began with his association with various Trotskyist organizations in the 1930s and moved dramatically rightward in the 1960s along with the politics of many other disenchanted leftists, including New York Intellectuals like Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz and Sidney Hook.[47]

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[45] Saul Bellow, Letter to Alfrd Kazin, 7 January 1954, *Letters*, 129.
[46] Saul Bellow, 'The Distracted Public,' in *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to an Uncertain Future: A Nonfiction Collection* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994), 158.
[47] This group of writers and thinkers has frequently attracted the label 'neoconservative,' as has Bellow. But American neoconservatism as it is popularly understood has mostly to do with foreign policy and global American interests, whereas the thrust of Bellow's politics has much more to do with the cultural, aesthetic, and epistemological

As in the above passage, Bellow tends to attribute an erosion of American culture to the rise of a species of academic cultural leftism that insists upon a soft egalitarianism of 'sensitivity' and 'creativity.' Such notions undermine the legitimacy of conceptions of excellence and truthfulness that hold across multiple subjectivities by insisting upon sensitively appreciating every individual for his or her putatively unique creative capacity. Bellow detected another manifestation of this cultural attitude in a strain of literary criticism that began to dominate the literary field following the upheavals of the 1960s. Writing in 1971, Bellow castigated in similar terms the writer William Phillips, co-founder of the *Partisan Review*, for his articulation of an aesthetic that embodied this ideological perspective. In Bellow's paraphrase of Phillips, genuine creativity cannot be a property of an individual, but rather a more broadly distributed social property; Bellow accuses Phillips of believing that the only true artist is 'the public itself,' and that under this circumstance every person has the responsibility to 'create.'[48] Bellow resists this sociology of aesthetics, retaining a more traditional conception of an artist as active and the audience as comparatively passive in the audience-artist relationship. He does not deprive his reader of agency entirely, but he emphatically locates creative motive force in the individual rather than society.

The importance of the keyword 'creative,' along with Phillips's idea of the collective genesis of works of fiction, cannot but powerfully recall the creative writing program's workshop structure, whose products come to be through a combination of a student's individual effort and the workshop audience's feedback and conversation. But Bellow, interestingly, tends not to link explicitly his critique of institutionalized 'creativity' with the creative writing program when he comments on the

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consequences of the present organization of society, a subject about which neoconservatism has comparatively little to say. For an analysis of Bellow's politics from several perspectives see Gloria L. Cronin and Lee Trepanier, eds., *A Political Companion to Saul Bellow* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

[48] For a summary of Bellow's criticism of the university (including Bellow's condemnation of Phillips), drawn mostly from his nonfiction, see Ben Siegel, 'Saul Bellow and the University as Villain,' in *The American Writer and the University*, ed. Ben Siegel (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), 114-135. According to Joseph Epstein, Bellow attempted to blackball Phillips's application for membership at the Century Association due to what Bellow perceived as his turning of the *Partisan Review* over to 'the hysterical, shallow and ignorant academic "counter-culture." Bellow later resigned from the Century Association, citing Philips admission as the major reason for this decision. Joseph Epstein, 'The Long, Unhappy Life of Saul Bellow,' *The New Criterion* 29.4 (2010): 8; Leader, 780n63.

workshop. He prefers instead to reflect on the professionalistic aspects of the program and its effect on the writer's position within the literary marketplace:

> I don't teach creative writing. Not because I think it useless, but because it is very tedious and difficult. A man writes because he is a writer and not because he has taken courses. A writer is interesting because of his particular perspective. Can this perspective be taught? I think not. I know that the student longs for help, but what he develops in writing courses is generally a psychological dependency. He asks the teacher—perhaps even more important, the institution—to support him against an incredulous world which will not allow him to take things into his own hands and declare himself a writer. This is partly a problem of egalitarianism or levelling. A beginning writer hesitates to anoint himself, to make a declaration of his very special character. And so he seeks institutional support. He goes to the universities and gets a Ph.D. in creative writing and feels himself armed for the struggle. Like any other licensed professional. But this is social assistance rather than creativity.[49]

Bellow analyzes the program according to the sociological framework of professionalism, considering the program as the organization writers use to credential professionally the uniqueness of their discipline. The creative writing program, in Bellow's analysis, in a way misleadingly domesticates the concept of creativity, wrongly suggesting that it is the type of property that can be institutionally detected and certified. Believing that it is this type of property, Bellow suggests, offers writers a measure of comfort and security, and his tone here remains unusually free of the scornful timbre that generally accompanies his reflections on the university. He appears to regard this promise of comfort and security as a kind of tragic illusion, because comfort and security are qualities that have nothing to do with genuine creativity, a property that institutions can neither transmit nor credential.

Thus Bellow does not quite condemn creative writing in this passage; he seems instead to regard the writer's craving for security and social recognition as an understandably human impulse. While he identifies the development of creative writing as forming part of the trend towards professionalization, he does not here launch the critique of specialization—of the spiritual effects of divided labour—that surfaces in other places in his oeuvre. Yet by 1965, the time at which he made the statement quoted above, such critiques had become a bedrock of his thinking about the question

[49] Saul Bellow, Interview with John J. Enck, *Conversations with Saul Bellow*, ed. Gloria L. Cronin and Ben Siegel (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 45-46.

of the position of the individual in a liberal society, and about—a more specific version of this question—'the lot of the artist in the twentieth century.'[50] At this point in his career Bellow had been a member of the Committee on Social Thought for about two years; when discussing the Committee in later years he would specifically celebrate its ability to transcend the blinding effects of 'divided labour' in the academic sphere thanks to its interdisciplinary approach. An institution whose boundaries spanned the range of the humanities and social sciences, the Committee of the period included at different times Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Hayek (whose office Bellow took over on arrival), A. K. Ramanujan, Harold Rosenberg, and Allan Bloom. Bellow's most recent biographer Zachary Leader describes the Committee as 'something of a *salon des refusés*, home to scholars and thinkers whose wide interests and independent characters often put them at odds with traditional departments.'[51] Yet the iconoclastic and interdisciplinary character of the Committee came with a strong belief in the value of deep investment in the Western tradition of letters, though by the time of Bellow's appointment faculty and students had been given the responsibility of defining that tradition for themselves. 'In addition to taking seminars from Committee faculty,' Leader writes,

> these students were required to pass a 'Fundamentals Examination' before writing a dissertation. [...] each student was required to draw up a list of a dozen or so classic texts, both ancient and modern, in consultation with faculty. These lists were to include works of imaginative literature, of philosophy, religion, and theology, and of history and social theory, and at least one of the works on the list had to be read in the original language.[52]

After students made these lists, they would be circulated to Committee faculty members, who would each contribute questions to the students' examination papers. A great deal of correspondence in Bellow's archive at the University of Chicago pertains to Fundamentals Examinations; one especially thick folder contains the questions he contributed, while other exchanges—especially with his

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[50] This phrase comes from Bellow's Preface to his nonfiction collection *It All Adds Up*; he uses it with reference to Wyndham Lewis, who had 'thought more deeply and written more intelligently abut the lot of the artist in the twentieth century than any of his contemporaries.' Saul Bellow, 'Preface,' *It All Adds Up*, xi.

[51] For an excellent investigation of the Committee's formation, as well as the importance of the Committee in the ideological development of American conservatism in the second half of the twentieth century, see Robert S. Thomas, 'Enlightenment and Authority: The Committee on Social Thought and the Ideology of Postwar Conservatism (1927-1950)' (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2010).

[52] Leader, 615.

colleague and sometime friend, the sociologist and prominent neoconservative Edward Shils—concerned the purpose behind the examinations, and the relationship between the purpose and their actual results.[53] Shils persistently argued for reform of the examinations, claiming in a 1978 memo that in spite of their mission to cultivate breadth in Committee students they instead produced students with 'an excessive narrowness in their culture. They know the books themselves usually quite well,' Shils continues, 'and sometimes very well, but they usually know little about other works of the same author, little about other authors of the same period or of similar currents of thought or genre. They too frequently know very little of the history of the period and the society in which the works were written.'[54] Shils goes on to propose increasing the number of essays required of Committee graduate students in their early years in order to encourage them to express ideas with a greater awareness of the contexts of their chosen texts. Bellow, by contrast, tended to take a much more optimistic view of the results of the Fundamentals Examinations, stressing in a 1975 letter to Shils the rarity and value of the Committee's interdisciplinarity within a dominant culture of specialisation:

> The Committee, though you may not agree, is a very useful thing; it has developed several extraordinary students in recent years. It is no small achievement to turn out Ph.D.s who know how to write English and are at home in several fields—intelligent people who have read Thucydides and Kant and Proust and who are not counterfeits or culture snobs. They will not disgrace the University of Chicago.[55]

Bellow's celebration of the liberal individual, equally comfortable with Ancient Greek military history, early modern German idealism, and modern French literary prose, was likely strengthened by his association with an institution that made such a point of dissolving disciplinary boundaries, yet such celebrations had been characteristic of Bellow at least since the writing of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). Augie, a kind of drifter who in his late adolescence finds himself captivated by the

[53] Bellow's submitted Fundamentals Examination questions can be found in the Saul Bellow Papers, Box 236, Folder 11, Special Collections Research Centre, University of Chicago.
[54] The quotation comes from a memo to the members of the Committee that Shils attached to a letter to Bellow dated 9 February 1978, in the Saul Bellow Papers, Box 69, Folder 9, Special Collections Research Centre, University of Chicago.
[55] Saul Bellow, Letter to Edward Shils, 8 December 1975, *Letters*, 333.

world of letters, despairs at the littleness of his own mind in comparison to all of the different knowledge disciplines that pull at him: 'Considering how much world there was to catch up with—Ashurbanipal, Euclid, Alaric, Metternich, Madison, Blackhawk—if you didn't devote your whole life to it, how were you ever going to do it?'[56] Bellow ensures Augie's reading list covers an enormous swathe of cultural territory, from the Assyrian king and collector of manuscripts Ashurbanipal to a late-seventeenth/early-eighteenth century American Indian warrior. Such eclectic lists, intended to isolate the common features of often apparently vastly different entities, became a recurrent stylistic feature of Bellow's prose with *Augie.* In *Humboldt's Gift*, Charlie's mistress Renata exclaims in exasperation: 'for a month now I've heard nothing but Humboldt and death and sleep and metaphysics and how the poet is the arbiter of the diverse and Walt Whitman and Emerson and Plato and the World Historical Individual';[57] the narrator of *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1982) describes one character as 'involved in Dadaist discussions about faith, ritual, Zionism, Masada, the Arabs.'[58] The first list connects items with the conjunction 'and,' the second only with commas, but in both the effect is the same. The lack of a single, ultimate 'and' to signal the end of the list gives the impression that the narrator could quite easily continue adding items to his list indefinitely, that the list has ended simply because lists must come to an end somewhere.

Of all his Committee colleagues, Bellow found his beliefs about the relationship between the university and liberal individualism most closely mirrored in the political philosopher Allan Bloom, who joined the Committee in 1979. He would write a thinly fictionalized tribute to Bloom in *Ravelstein* (2000), his final novel, which dealt especially with Bloom's fame in the wake of the publication of Bloom's unlikely and controversial bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987). This polemic took issue with the contemporary university on many of the same terms as Bellow, arguing that the

[56] Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (London: Penguin, 1996), 125.
[57] Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift,* 356.
[58] Saul Bellow, *Mr Sammler's Planet* (London: Penguin, 1982), 24-25.

university had become an institution for the training of specialists whose interest in individual students extends only to the point of preparing them to fill a particular niche in the division of labour. According to Bloom, the supposedly democratic character of the university system has descended into anarchy, because 'there are no recognized rules for citizenship and no legitimate titles to rule. In short there is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is.'[59] For Bloom, this state of affairs had come about as a result of the disciplinary fragmentation of the university, in which some disciplines have become isolated from one another artificially (e.g. philosophy and political science), and others have entered the university only in order to serve society's technological and professional needs instrumentally (e.g. engineering and medicine).

Bellow's nomination to a Committee position in the early 1960s was greeted by a certain amount of resistance on the part of the University of Chicago, which wondered if an imaginative writer would detract from the intellectual level of an institution largely made up of philosophers of one kind or another, sociologists, anthropologists and economists. According to Bellow's early biographer James Atlas, university provost Edward Levi originally opposed Bellow's appointment, but changed his mind dramatically after meeting the novelist over lunch: 'It was quite clear that I was talking to a learned person who was serious about learning and serious about teaching.'[60] The type of thinking that informs such resistance conceives of literature as a specialism that involves a kind of cognitive work fundamentally foreign to the other humanistic disciplines, which occupy a quite different space in the division of intellectual labour. Bloom, intriguingly, confronted this problem in reverse when he attempted to approach literature through a mode of investigation more usually found in departments of philosophy and political science. Many years before his appointment to the Committee, Bloom entered into a fractious debate with the literary critic Sigurd Burckhardt in the pages of *The American Political Science Review.* In the March 1960 edition of the journal, Bloom

[59] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 337.
[60] Quoted in James Atlas, *Bellow: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 316.

published an article entitled 'Cosmopolitan Man and the Political Community: An Interpretation of Othello,' which urged students of political theory not to disregard imaginative literature as a source of political wisdom. In Bloom's view, politics cannot afford to neglect the 'psychological depths' that literature fathoms better than any other disciplinary method: 'Before political scientists can proceed to the suggestion of policies, they must perceive the problems in the fullness of their complexity. In Shakespeare's works is to be found as complete a range of human types as any man is likely to meet in his lifetime, and they are viewed with an eye that penetrates more deeply than that of any common observer.'[61]

Burckhardt's response appeared in the pages immediately following Bloom's article, and created something of a controversy.[62] It begins by noting: 'Recently the Review has extended its hospitality to studies which are not, technically, within the discipline it serves.'[63] He offers a certain amount of faint praise for the ambition of Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa, Bloom's like-minded colleague and future co-author on *Shakespeare's Politics* (1964), before censuring their methods: Bloom and Jaffa lack 'an adequate concept of the specificity of literature as a mode of discourse different from other modes.'[64] The thrust of his article takes issue with what he takes to be the anachronistic and inappropriate importation of philosophical practices of reasoning into the discussion of a literary artefact that by its nature resists such practices. He summarizes his objection:

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[61] Allan Bloom, 'Cosmopolitan Man and the Political Community: An Interpretation of *Othello*,' *American Political Science Review* 54.1 (1960): 130.

[62] Irving Kristol, the publisher of *Shakespeare's Politics* at Basic Books, writes in a 1962 letter to Bloom that he considered including the Burckhardt debate in the published volume, but ultimately decided against it: 'I've come to one definite conclusion. It would be a mistake to include the Burckhardt controversy—that would derogate from the book qua book—make it a too occasional thing. A controversial book should provoke controversy, not be the controversy.' Bloom sent copies of the article in the *ASPR* to a number of colleagues in both political science and literature departments, many of whom responded at some length, if often critically. The most interesting response comes from the literary scholar Huntingdon Brown, who persuasively claims that Bloom does not take into account Elizabethan stage conventions and the expectations of contemporary audiences. Bloom in his reply thanks Brown deeply for the seriousness with which he addresses Bloom's contentions, dryly noting: 'I mention this to point up the difference between your approach and that of my published critic.' Irving Kristol, Letter to Allan Bloom, 27 December 1962, Allan Bloom Papers, Box 1, Envelope 5, Special Collections and Research Centre, University of Chicago; Huntingdon Brown, Letter to Allan Bloom, 18 February 1961, Allan Bloom Papers, Box 1, Envelope 5, Special Collections and Research Centre, University of Chicago; Allan Bloom, Letter to Huntingdon Brown, 1 March 1961, Allan Bloom Papers, Box 1, Envelope 5, Special Collections and Research Centre, University of Chicago.

[63] Sigurd Burckhardt, 'English Bards and *ASPR* Reviewers,' *American Political Science Review* 54.1 (1960): 158.

[64] *Ibid.* 158.

> What Bloom does not know—and as a political theorist cannot fairly be expected to know—is that a poem, even a dramatic poem, is first of all a structure of words rather than ideas. The interpreter's first question is not: What does Shakespeare think?, but rather: What does Shakespeare say? An almost mindless surrender to the poem's verbal substance must precede, and will then control, the interpreter's analysis.[65]

Burckhardt here describes a vision of what is unique about literary language that bears a strong resemblance to the literary mode that I have called the 'show don't tell' paradigm. In his view, interpretation amounts to a two-step process that begins with something he labels 'verbal substance'; he offers no positive definition of what 'verbal substance' might be, but rather defines it as the negative of 'ideas.' The question of where verbal substance ends and ideas begin proves extraordinarily difficult to think through coherently, as Bloom points out in his response, but what Burckhardt seems to be asserting is the belief that the proper specialism of literature is the 'mindless' sensory sphere, and not the world of the intellect. For Burckhardt, as for advocates of 'show don't tell,' interpretation should begin with the senses and move outward; if literature is to have anything to do with ideas they should enter the discussion only on a second-order level, while the first-order level of the literary text must resolutely resist the conceptual. Bloom perceives this in his response. 'The real basis of Burckhardt's position,' Bloom writes, 'is an emotionalism, a belief that the most important things are grasped by feeling. All this leads to is an impoverishment of our feelings.'[66] Bloom argues that the intellect and the emotions exist in a relationship of dialectical dependency, that sacrifice of one will entail sacrifice of the other. He claims that the 'ideas' that Burckhardt would file under the category of 'reason' have the capacity to provoke profound emotional responses, and that it is possible in turn for rational modes of enquiry to yield valuable information about emotions.

Bloom characterizes Burckhardt's position as an attempt to bracket off from each other modes of experience that can be distinguished in theory but in practice almost always intertwine, and he implies that this confusion has resulted significantly from the artificial partitioning of knowledge in the professional modern university. He speaks of Burckhardt's charge against him as amounting to

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[65] *Ibid.* 161.
[66] Allan Bloom, 'Political Philosophy and Poetry,' *American Political Science Review* 54.2 (1960): 458.

'practicing literary criticism without a license,'[67] explicitly recalling the same social structure of professionalism as Bellow evokes when he refers to university creative writers as 'licensed professionals.' Bloom would sound this note again in *Closing* twenty-seven years later, arguing that the anarchic way the university had historically divided itself eventually resulted in a distorted system of incentives: 'Most professors are specialists, concerned only with their own fields, interested in the advancement of those fields in their own terms, or in their own personal advancement in a world where all the rewards are on the side of professional distinction.'[68] For Bloom, the proper concern for scholar should be truth, holistically conceived; he believes the university has created a situation in which academics, invested in the pursuit of truth only within the boundaries of their specific disciplines, neglect every aspect of the 'soul' that lies outside of these boundaries. Rather than 'educated human beings,' these academics produce biologists, doctors, lawyers, literary critics. This investment in holistic modes of education, and this concomitant critique of the relationship between professionalism, universities, and literature, distinguishes Bloom, together with Bellow, from the prevailing creative regime of their time, and also, as I shall argue in what follows, from the Anglo-American modernism that formed Bellow's immediate antecedent literary context.

Most academic critics have read Bellow's work as having developed out of an active opposition to Anglo-American literary modernism. Typical accounts stress Bellow's embrace of community, affect, and warmth in opposition to the modernist characteristics of alienation, the cerebral, and the coldly monumental.[69] They also stress Bellow's attention to the particularities of an ethnic Jewish working-

[67] *Ibid.* 457.
[68] Bloom, *Closing,* 458.
[69] For the most influential argument of this kind see Daniel Fuchs's account, which attempts to establish that 'no one has so persistently and successfully gone against the grain of modernism' as Bellow. Harold Bloom has spoken of Bellow's 'endless war against each fresh wave of literary and intellectual modernism,' while John Jacob Clayton identifies a 'desperate affirmation' of 'humanity and compassion' that Bellow has developed in opposition to 'Dada,' 'the Wasteland,' and the 'cultural nihilism of the twentieth century.' Daniel Fuchs, *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1984), 3; Harold Bloom, 'Introduction,' in *Saul Bellow*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1986), 4; John Jacob Clayton, *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1968), 3.

class experience, in contrast to modernist pretensions to universality. Bellow's Jewishness takes on another significance in this context, standing out obviously against the instances of anti-Semitism that range across the modernist corpus. Ruth Wisse, for instance, emphasizes an early Yiddish parody of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' that Bellow penned with a friend in the late 1930s:

> If asked at what point American-Jewish letter gave notice of its independence from Anglo-American Modernism, I would cite the day Isaac Rosenfeld, with the help of Saul Bellow, composed this parody. Calling it 'Der shir hasharim fun Mendl Pumshtok,' 'The Song of Songs of Mendl Pumshtok,' the poem was itself a declaration of their intent to remake contemporary western literature. [...] What better way to credit [Eliot] as a poet and discredit him as an antisemite than by Yiddishizing the poet who so feared the Yid?[70]

The characteristics traditionally attributed to 'the Yid'—rootlessness, cosmopolitanism, an ability to make oneself at home across an enormous range of circumstances—significantly overlap with the position on intellectual boundaries that Bellow and Bloom—also Jewish—vigorously argued at the end of the twentieth century. These characteristics, figured anti-Semitically as a kind of viral insinuation on the part of the Jew into a healthy host society, can also be figured positively as fidelity to empiricism and a refusal to allow national or local attachments to distort the clarity of the gaze. This dynamic of Jewishness turns out to have a great deal to do with Eliot's position on literary professionalism, as well as with Bellow's response to modernist anti-Semitism.[71]

In January 1918, an article entitled 'Professionalism in Art' appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*. The article, by the barrister and essayist Arthur Clutton-Brock, attacks professionalism in various artistic and intellectual disciplines as necessarily productive of competent tedium, noting: 'Professionalism is a dull, ugly word: but it means dull, ugly things, a perversion of the higher activities of man, of art, literature, religion and philosophy.'[72] Professionalism in Clutton-Brock's view leads inexorably to an art of difficulty, which compromises the pleasure of both artist and

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[70] Ruth Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 289.

[71] The nature and malignancy of Eliot's anti-Semitism have drawn an extraordinary volume of critical commentary, with Christopher Ricks's *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) and Anthony Julius's *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) likely the most influential interventions. I do not wish to adjudicate Eliot's culpability here.

[72] Arthur Clutton-Brock, 'Professionalism in Art,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 January 1918, 49.

audience: 'it makes the technique of art too difficult, and so destroys the artist's energy and joy in his practice of it.'[73] In the course of a book review for *The Egoist*, Eliot singled the article out as deserving special rebuttal and responded with the assertion that aversion to professionalism and the cultivation of technique leads to a kind of anti-intellectualism that amounts to a British national characteristic. It is a corollary, in his view, of 'the British worship of inspiration,' which has led to 'a dodging of standards' and explains 'why in English literature there are so few really well-written novels.' For Eliot, the opposite of the professional is not the amateur or the dilettante, whom Eliot regards as beneath notice. It is rather 'the man of mixed motives,' whom Eliot understands to be especially typical of Victorian literature, offering the examples of 'Ruskin as an economist' and 'Carlyle as an historian.' Concluding his response to Clutton-Brock, Eliot offers a pithy formulation of professionalism: 'Surely professionalism in art is hard work on style with singleness of purpose.'[74]

Eliot's perspective on professionalism often takes the form of a demand that literature's creators as well as its audience and critics approach it *qua* literature, as a singular, consistent discipline with 'rights of its own,' to borrow a phrase he had used in a letter to Ezra Pound five years earlier.[75] He would articulate this demand in slightly different terminology in a withering 1919 review of Columbia professor J. W. Cunliffe's textbook on the English literature of the previous half-century. For Eliot, Cunliffe's textbook in effect commits the same sin as the writer of mixed motives, of whom Eliot thinks as the professional's opposite: the textbook does not respect literature as a discipline shaped by a unique and discrete tradition. Young audiences of textbooks such as Cunliffe's, Eliot declares, 'must be shown that Literature is an historical structure with some coherence. They must not be entertained or stupefied by a circus procession.'[76] Eliot's quarrel with Cunliffe, whom he judges to be a representative figure of 'the whole method of popular culture' as well as 'a large part of the half-educated public,' pivots around Cunliffe's disrespect for coherence, which manifests in

[73] *Ibid.*
[74] Eliot, 'Professional,' 698-699.
[75] T. S. Eliot, Letter to Ezra Pound, 15 April 1915, in *Letters of T.S. Eliot: Vol. I*, 104.
[76] T. S. Eliot, 'The Education of Taste,' in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, *Vol. II*, 60.

Cunliffe's disconnected and unsystematic treatment of a 'circus procession' of twelve writers (mostly Victorians). This review appeared in *The Athenaeum* in June; in July of 1919 Eliot detected the same failing in the creative work of his time as he did in Cunliffe's criticism while reviewing poetry by Conrad Aiken and Tristan Tzara. 'I feel,' Eliot wrote, 'that contemporary poetry is deficient in tradition.'[77] Two months later Eliot would offer his extraordinarily influential definition of the tradition in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' which appeared in *The Egoist* in two parts.

A relationship between Eliot's view of professionalism and his attitude towards Jews emerges in oblique form in his review of *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), which appeared in the *Athenaeum* in May of 1919. Eliot approvingly quotes a passage in which Adams locates the 'superiority' of an historian in 'his name, which was Cohen,' as well as 'his mind, which was Cohen also.'[78] Adams perceives this historian as embodying a typically Jewish quality of rootlessness or disconnection from national cultures or habits of thought. A comparable moment in Eliot's thinking would appear in a passage that quickly became controversial in his lecture series *After Strange Gods*, first published in 1934 and never reprinted in his lifetime. The passage at issue reads:

> The population should be homogenous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background, and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.[79]

While the language of this passage is evidently objectionable, it requires a certain amount of careful interpretation if the intention behind it is to surface clearly. The goal that Eliot aims to achieve with this social policy is the preservation of tradition, in Eliot's view the key to sustaining a deep and vibrant culture. He would set this view out at length in *Notes toward the Definition of Culture* (1948), which offers a sketch of culture as the product of frictive interactions between competing cultural identities. If cultural identities begin to lose coherence, and dissolve into an unintelligible atomism,

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[77] T. S. Eliot, 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry [IV],' *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, *Vol. II*, 66.
[78] T. S. Eliot, 'A Sceptical Patrician,' in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot, Vol. II,* 42. 'Cohen' is the historian Sir Francis Palgrave, who changed his name, according to Adams, to 'please his wife.'
[79] Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, 19-20.

then the friction generated by their interaction will diminish, and the literary and artistic tradition of that larger culture will become correspondingly impoverished.[80] Thus the adjective 'free-thinking' should be given the fullest weight: Eliot here does not seem to be objecting to Jews *qua* Jews, but rather Jews *qua* free-thinkers. Orthodox Jews, for instance, would seem to fall outside the scope of this attack, since Eliot's disapproval falls on those Jews who will mix with relatively 'homogenous' and 'unadulterate' cultural traditions and render them heterogenous and incoherent. This exegesis does not necessarily render Eliot's perspective more benign, but it should at least enable a clearer view of his intellectual landscape.

Bellow objected vociferously to the postwar canonization of Eliot and Ezra Pound, and especially to the fragmented or compartmentalized way of thinking about literature that in his view enabled the literary establishment to elide the anti-Semitism of Anglo-American modernism. He protested loudly at the 1956 campaign coordinated by a host of renowned writers to have Pound released from his incarceration in St Elizabeth's Hospital after his trial on the charge of treason, writing a passionate letter to campaign chairman William Faulkner. 'Do you mean,' he asked, 'to ask me to join you in honouring a man who called for the destruction of my kinsmen?'[81] In an early handwritten draft of *Humboldt's Gift* from the mid-1960s, Bellow speaks of how modern his poet character D. S. (not yet named Humboldt) had felt in the 1930s, having claimed 'a place in literary life against the resistance of the Henry Adamses, the genteel aristocrats who loathed the urban crowd, the immigrant and the Jew.'[82] In 1982 Bellow savaged the pioneering critic of modernism Hugh Kenner in a letter to the writer and academic Robert Boyers, following Kenner's negative review of *The Dean's December* in *Harper's*. Kenner, in Bellow's view, had decided 'to come out openly

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[80] 'I now suggest that both class and region, by dividing the inhabitants of a country into two different kinds of groups, lead to a conflict favourable to creativeness and and progress. And […] these are only two of an indefinite number of conflicts and jealousies which should be profitable to society.' T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 59.

[81] Saul Bellow, Letter to William Faulkner, 7 January 1956, *Letters*, 144.

[82] Saul Bellow, 'Notebook, circa 1964-1968,' Saul Bellow Papers, Box 134, Folder 4, Special Collections and Research Centre, University of Chicago. At this point in the composition process Bellow referred to his protagonist only as D. S.—Delmore Schwartz. The character would be called Jonas Hamilcar in subsequent drafts before attaining his final designation as Von Humboldt Fleisher.

in his Eliot-Pound anti-Semitic regalia.' Bellow continued:

> What interests me much more than what he thinks is the effect of the Eliot-Pound phenomenon, the deadly madness at the heart of 'tradition' and 'culture' as represented by those two. One had to defend poor Pound against philistine, savage America—that was tantamount to protecting art itself. What Pound was actually *saying* didn't so much matter. [...] A poet might be great despite his obsessions with Usura, Major Douglas, Mussolini, Jews. This was the line taken after the War by literary intellectuals. The inevitable corollary was that the poet's convictions could be separated from his poetry. It was thus possible to segregate the glory from the shame.[83]

Bellow argues against an understanding of literary production as a discipline that can be separated from various other intellectual dimensions; in other words he argues against a professionalistic view of authorship. To borrow the terminology of Sigurd Burckhardt, the literary intellectuals Bellow takes aim at here hold up Pound's 'verbal substance' as the literarily relevant quality, and discard ideas that plainly manifest delusion and hatred.

Yet significant ambiguities and contradictions complicate this picture. While I have suggested that the 'show don't tell' creative writing regime has emerged from a modernist way of thinking about professionalism and the literary vocation, and despite Bellow's claims about the 'madness at the heart' of the Eliot-Pound idea of tradition, Bellow's view of the twentieth-century writer's task engages with a recognizably modernist conception of tradition much more deeply than the postwar creative writing program. In the notebook draft of *Humboldt's Gift* cited above, Bellow continues: 'We learned Apollinaire and Joyce. We read in Rimbaud and Pound, "Il faut être absolument moderne," "Make It New."'[84] Bellow here thinks of Pound as a stimulating influence to literary innovation, and clearly experiences profound ambivalence around Eliot and Pound's literary and cultural practice. Even Henry Adams *praises* the Jewish historian 'Cohen' for the development of a cosmopolitan view undistorted by parochial nationalism, understandably, since Adams—like Eliot and Pound—was an American who had chosen to go abroad.[85] A near identical advocacy of the virtues of a worldview uncontaminated by local attachment can be drawn from the critical writings of Pound, who believed

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[83] Saul Bellow, Letter to Robert Boyers, 12 March 1982, *Letters*, 393.
[84] *Ibid.*
[85] Ricks makes a similar observation in *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice,* 68.

strongly in permanent, invariant intellectual and literary values that transcend the specificities of time and place, an advocacy that recurs frequently in Bellow's prose as well. In the forward that he contributed to Bloom's *Closing*, Bellow writes:

> as a Midwesterner, the son of immigrant parents, I recognized at an early age that I was called upon to decide for myself to what extent my Jewish origins, my surroundings (the accidental circumstances of Chicago), my schooling, were to be allowed to determine the course of my life. I did not intend to be wholly dependent on history and culture. Full dependency must mean that I was done for. The commonest teaching of the civilized world in our time can be stated simply: 'Tell me where you come from and I will tell you what you are.' […] I couldn't say why I would not allow myself to become the product of an environment.'[86]

The objectionable part of Adams's description of 'Cohen' would seem to be the essentializing characterization of 'his mind, which was Cohen also'; though Adams might praise the historian, the suggestion that he can be reduced to his ethnic background violates a postwar American ethics that counts self-determination amongst its highest values. While Bellow frequently created Jewish characters and argued from a Jewish perspective, he detested the label of 'Jewish writer.'[87] With Pound and with Bloom, Bellow shares a hostility to determinism and a faith in the self-creative power of the individual rooted in the transcendentalism of Emerson, who speaks of the 'unattained but attainable self': a conception of ideal personhood that never settles into final form, but remains always in process and incomplete.[88] Enfolded into this notion of personhood is a recognition of the impossibility of complete self-knowledge, of the myriad ways in which individuals remain at least partially mysterious to themselves. Bloom's argument against specialization makes precisely this point; he speaks of professionalized academics who have 'been entirely emancipated from the old structure of the university, which at least helped to indicate that they are incomplete, only parts of an unexamined and undiscovered whole.'[89] They are incomplete not because the whole has yet to be

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[86] Bellow, Forward to Bloom, *Closing*, 13.
[87] On this point see Ben Siegel, 'Bellow as Jew and Jewish Writer,' in Cronin and Siegel, eds. *A Political Companion to Saul Bellow*, 29-56.
[88] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Self-Reliance,' *Essays: First and Second Series,* ed. Douglas Crase (New York: Library of America, 2010), 9.
[89] Bloom, *Closing*, 339.

fully examined and discovered, a process that will eventual reach completion, but because they are constitutively incomplete, with the whole never manifest in given experience. Bloom implies that professionalism inculcates a false sense of closure in intellectuals, instilling a misleading impression that exhaustive knowledge of a narrow slice of the world might truly be possible.

Emerson describes a fundamentally dialectical individualism, with the present actuality of the individual—the attainable self—and the ideal potentiality—the unattained self—inextricably intertwined. Modernist conceptions of tradition, which I am claiming to be effectively identical to Bellow's conception of tradition, have the same structure. Historically critics have struggled to reconcile the two seemingly opposed faces of modernism, one traditional and one novel, one oriented towards the past and one towards the future. As Vincent Sherry puts it: 'Avant-garde and retro-grade: the disparity between the aesthetics and the sociology of the modernists continues to define a riddle central to their problematic achievement.'[90] Susan Stanford Friedman has compellingly and amusingly shown the critical inadequacies that result when scholars feel compelled to choose between one version of modernism or the other. Ultimately she shows that the critical challenge is not to make a binary choice between tradition and novelty, but to understand how the achievement of novelty depends fundamentally upon an absorption of a tradition that never completes and ossifies, but remains continually open towards the possibilities of an uncertain future. [91] This structure clarifies the historical position of the typical literature of the creative writing program, which frequently seems to repudiate the modernist investment in tradition in the name of inclusiveness, yet at the same time depends substantially upon an inherited set of fictional conventions and techniques.[92]

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[90] Vincent Sherry, *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 3.
[91] Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Definitional Excursions: The Meaning of Modern/Modernity/Modernism,' *Modernism/Modernity* 8.3 (2001): 493-513.
[92] Bennett amusingly satirizes this tendency in *A Big Enough Lie*: In a workshop discussion, one participant questions another participant's assertion that all writers should read Joyce. A debate about tradition ensues:
'Without tradition, what does any of this mean?'
'You think tradition is a source of meaning? For me? For any of the half of us? Maybe the *Updike* tradition? Or the *Mailer* or *Roth* tradition? In which women are cartoons to be fucked into silence?'
'Might we do best to talk about *traditions*?' the teacher said. 'Plural?'
'For them,' the woman said, 'plurality is exactly the problem. Vibrators are a problem. Semicolons are a problem.' Bennet, 199.

Thought of in these terms, Bellow's work appears as a literature that is not afraid to know—no critic has ever accused Bellow's prose of wearing its learning lightly—but just as importantly also appears as a literature fundamentally interested in what it does not—and perhaps cannot—know, and in investigating the conditions that have given rise to this epistemological uncertainty. This dialectical structure, by contrast, does not describe the literature of the creative writing program. A 'show don't tell' paradigm takes for granted the conditions according to which its fiction knows and then evokes the world; the conditions through which it knows the world amount to sense perception, and the conditions through which it evokes the world amount to a literary practice of concrete detail. The institutional orientation Bellow developed throughout a career spent almost entirely within a revealingly different American university context stands in opposition to this paradigm, amounting to a literary practice that constitutively rejects the definition and circumscription that result from the acceptance of professional disciplinary boundaries.

Chapter Four

The Sacrifice of Silence: Cosmopolitanism, Representation, and the Academic Rise of Jorie Graham

The previous chapter considers the work of Saul Bellow as a revealing outlier to an aesthetics and epistemology that take the knowability and representability of the world for granted. It argues for a link between this attitude and the literary pedagogy institutionalized in the creative writing program. The present chapter consists of a close examination of one poet and her poetry that argues that this attitude of taking the world for granted manifests in the poetic domains of the creative writing program as well, even in putatively 'experimental' generic traditions that seem to engage formal questions of knowledge and representation overtly.

The poet considered in this chapter, Harvard's Boylston Professor of Oratory and Rhetoric Jorie Graham, has frequently represented herself, and has often been critically accepted, as an experimentalist and modernist heir. But by the advent of Graham's era, literary experimentalism had become something different from the experimentalism I examine in my second chapter on Ezra Pound. Where Pound judges his literary experiments according to the success of his poems' correspondences to their references, Graham belongs to a poetic tradition that attempts to efface the concept of linguistic reference from its thinking and composition to the greatest extent it can. Skeptical about the possibilities of representing an external world, Graham's poetry instead attempts to present discrete, substantially disconnected moments of perception that break free of the inherent distortions brought about by the application of general concepts, or the imposition of abstract categories.[1]

[1] For a sustained treatment of this question see Chapter 4 of Andrew Goldstone's *Fictions of Autonomy* (2013), to which I will refer at other moments in what follows. Goldstone considers Wallace Stevens and Paul de Man as embodiments of a kind of limit position on poetic areferentiality: 'a theory of literary language as doomed only ever to refer to its own inability to refer to anything other than this inability, in a quasi-tautological circuit.' While I will argue that Graham commits to a version of literary autonomy bound up with her creative writing context, her position on the function of poetic language—both stated in interviews and essays and emergent in her poetry—is not identical with the position Goldstone attributes to Steven and de Man. Graham shows much more interest in the poem as a representation of perception, and more interest in poetry as a practice that may eventually contribute to the development of more

Such a position might not on the face of it seem much different from Bellow's sustained interrogation of the conditions of knowledge and representation, but I will show that it is. Where I read Bellow's fiction as taking place within the uncertainties, frustrations, and aporia that attend questions of knowledge and representation, I try to show that Graham's poetry—and much of the theory that lies behind it—has already made up its mind with respect to such questions, or at least made up its mind to avoid them. Graham's poetry, committed to preserving a vision of the world as atomistic, fragmented, and disconnected, deprives itself of the tools to engage those domains that depend upon abstraction and the procedures of categorical thought.

Graham's career trajectory presents intriguing grounds for an investigation of the postwar legacies of cosmopolitan modernism. Brought up and educated in a culturally elite social context in Italy and Paris, the multilingual Graham moved to the United States in her early twenties and attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her geographical drift opposes that of such modernist poets as T. S. Eliot and Pound, who spent their early lives in Middle America (Missouri and Idaho respectively) before traveling to Paris and London to pursue poetic careers.[2] In its conceptual sense, the term 'cosmopolitanism' refers to the ability to attain critical distance—the term found more often in Graham's poetry would be 'freedom'—from the conventional and avoid the mere reproduction of dominant discourses. The question of context therefore becomes crucial, because it identifies the particular dominant discourses *from which* the cosmopolitan figure in question attempts to attain distance. Graham's case reveals with particular clarity the context that poets in the creative writing programs of the postwar university have confronted: Humanities departments of this period, driven by an influx of Continental theory, strove to subvert dominant discourses and institute an

politically enlightened forms of perception. Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 154.

[2] For the best account of Graham's childhood years, see Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' *The New Yorker*, 14 July 1997, 62-67. For Eliot and Pound see Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984) and Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Routledge, 2013), *passim*.

ethic based on indeterminacy and plurality.[3] At the same time, creative writing programs offered writers institutional market shelters that allowed them to maintain a characteristically modernist autonomy and pursue artistic agendas unconstrained by extra-aesthetic conditions. In my reading, Graham's poetry has been overdetermined by the intersection of these two contexts: Graham sets forth repetitive demonstrations of the indeterminacy of human perception, staged in a protected, aestheticized, autonomous cognitive domain. Simply put, Graham's poetry reproduces the logic of the creative writing program.

I show that Graham has succeeded by fulfilling expectations that have surprisingly little to do with the poetry she publishes in collections and magazines. Instead, Graham has flourished in the creative writing program on the basis of her reputation as a teacher, together with a glamorous persona that depends crucially upon her cosmopolitan credentials. Graham's students tend to speak about their experience in her class in extraordinarily laudatory terms, but generally their descriptions have less to do with her impact on their poetry *qua* poetry, and more to do with her impact upon their lives as a mentor or guru-type figure. A major profile of Graham that appeared in the *NewYorker* in 1997 notes: 'For her workshop students there is no bigger event than the final thesis conference, in which she goes over their work and tells them, by means of it, who they are.' And in parentheses: 'This epiphany is known on campus as the Jorgasm.'[4] The model of teaching described here devotes as much attention to the student's selfhood as much as the student's work, and presupposes an uncomplicated continuity between these two domains. A famous poet and workshop teacher in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), who would seem to be based at least partially on Graham,[5] understands this continuity in identical terms:

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[3] The aspect of chapter that considers the relationship between poetry and theory is indebted to the model of Judith Ryan's *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), which examines manifestations of theory in the first generation of contemporary fiction to be affected by the institutional dominance of postmodern and poststructuralist philosophy. For a history of the rise of French theory in the American academy see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[4] Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' 63.

[5] Smith based the parts of the novel, set in Boston, upon her experience as a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard in the early 2000s, early in Graham's tenure at the university. Her husband, the poet Nick Laird, befriended Graham and began to sit

> Claire spoke often in her poetry of the idea of 'fittingness': that is, when your chosen pursuit and your ability to achieve it—no matter how small or insignificant both might be—are matched exactly, are fitting. *This*, Claire argued, is when we become truly human, fully ourselves, beautiful. […] In Claire's presence, you were not faulty or badly designed, no, not at all. You were the fitting receptacle and instrument of your talents and beliefs and desires. This was why students at Wellington applied in their hundreds for her class.[6]

'Claire,' a beautiful, famous, slightly flighty poet with a cosmopolitan background, similarly understands poetry as a vehicle through which the self may be apprehended and shaped, and her desirability as a teacher comes from her therapeutic capacity, rather than her ability to communicate the technical aspects of poetics. The poet Rachel Zucker, a teacher in the creative writing program at NYU, speaks at length about Graham in her memoir *MOTHERs* (2014). Zucker relates that Graham's presence at the University of Iowa was the reason behind her application to and eventual attendance of the writers' workshop. Like many descriptions of Graham, Zucker's begins with Graham's physical appearance, and the affective experience of Graham's aura: 'I remember Jorie Graham—beautiful, powerful, sad—her Botticelli hair and mournful eyes. I remember wondering how it was that she could be so charismatic and apologetic at once. Was this some feminine wile? Her presence was simultaneously commanding and shy.'[7]

Graham, in short, has created an image that meets expectations of how a poet should look, speak, and behave, with astonishing success, and has acquired a reputation as an exceptionally gifted and committed teacher of creative writing. Graham may well deserve this reputation for teaching excellence. Many of her students (e.g. Mark Levine, Dan Chiasson, Matthea Harvey) have gone on to achieve success in the field of American poetry (although institutions like the Iowa Writers' Workshop and Harvard attract students of such high caliber that exactly determining the part that

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in on her workshop; Laird acknowledges his gratitude for her support in his first book of poetry. The background of the character, whom Smith names 'Claire,' appears almost identical to Graham's: 'Her […] background had been international, privileged, and emotionally austere; she had grown up among American intellectuals and European aristocrats, a cultivated but cold mix.' Nick Laird, *To a Fault* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005); Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (London: Penguin, 2006), 215.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Rachel Zucker, *MOTHERs* (Denver: Counterpath, 2014), 4.

Graham's pedagogy has played in their success would be a challenging task). Claims her students have made about her contribution to their personal and emotional development are difficult to assess objectively, but there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of student testimonials. I suggest that Graham's rise reveals a twofold positive change in the structure of the literary field. First, it shows that a literary regime governed by the creative writing program rewards a different set of virtues than the preceding institutional structure. Second, it uncovers a dichotomy between writing and teaching that emerges in the following chapter, on the novelist David Foster Wallace, with equal emphasis. Like research and teaching in research-oriented academia, the creative writing program often seems subject to the assumption that research and teaching, i.e. creative writing and teaching, flow into each other seamlessly, and that teaching excellence follows naturally and proportionally as a subordinate consequence of literary success.

Graham's cosmopolitan, internationalist background contributes crucially to the image she has fashioned. Smith's Claire has written an early poem that reads, '*Five languages, / And no way to say I love you*'; a well-known Graham poem from 1995 begins, 'I was taught three // names for the tree facing my window. … / *Castagno*. … / *Chassagne*. … / And then *chestnut*.'[8] (Smith's poet's lines trade in cliché to an extent that Graham's poetry never reaches, but the two poems have the same structuring conceit.) Raised in Italy, arrested in the Paris protests of May 1968 and subsequently expelled from France, married into one of the most powerful political families in Watergate-era Washington,[9] Graham possesses an autobiography with a highly unusual level of internationalist glamour for a contemporary American poet. This glamour allows Graham to appeal to the more traditional side of the literary field as well as its more theoretically-oriented, explicitly political sections. The figure of the glamorous, cosmopolitan artist that Graham presents satisfies a romantic poetics that understands the autonomous creative genius to be the locus of literary creation; it also

[8] Smith, *On Beauty*, 215; Jorie Graham, 'I Was Taught Three,' *The Dream of the Unified Field* (New York: Ecco Press, 1995), 6.
[9] Graham takes her name from her second husband Bill Graham, the son of *Washington Post* owner Katherine Graham. The couple lived with Katherine Graham in Washington for a time during the Watergate years. Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' 64.

resonates with those literary communities allied with radical theory that originated in the same cosmopolitan, Parisian source.

Following Graham's champion (and now, since 1999, colleague) Helen Vendler—whose work and influence I examine in detail below—Graham's critics focus decontextually and ahistorically on her representational practice, charting relationships between the perceptual intelligence they detect in the poetry and Graham's verbal strategy.[10] Thomas Gardner and Bonnie Costello confront the question of Graham's relationship to modernism, but their assessments again proceed largely ahistorically: Gardner argues that the dynamism of Graham's poetry comes from an intensification of modernist ambivalence towards representation; Costello claims that Graham's earlier collections reveal a fundamentally modernist desire for the timeless, while her later collections contain a more characteristically postmodernist emphasis on fragmentation and flux.[11] Both accounts rely on a concept of a literary history that develops internally and autonomously, without reference to social or historical context. Julie LaRue Porter does examine Graham's work specifically in terms of creative writing, but her analysis takes a straightforward influence-based approach rather than a contextual one, detecting Graham's poetics in the work of several of her students.[12] My reading, by contrast, locates specific effects of Graham's historical and intellectual context in her poetry and poetic career, and shows the concrete influence of the institution in the development—or lack of development—of her poetry.

I begin by showing the uneasy coexistence of a commitment to high modernist autonomy and a commitment to a contemporary aesthetic of pluralistic indeterminacy through a close reading of one Graham poem, demonstrating that Graham's attempt to place herself in an Eliotic high

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[10] See especially Thomas J. Otten, 'Jorie Graham's _____'s,' *PMLA* 118.2 (2003): 239-253; Catherine Karaguezian, '*No Image There and the Gaze Remains': The Visual in the Work of Jorie Graham* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Brian Henry, 'Exquisite Disjunctions, Exquisite Arrangements: Jorie Graham's "Strangeness of Strategy,"' *The Antioch Review* 56.3 (1998): 281-293.

[11] Thomas Gardner, 'Jorie Graham's *The End of Beauty* and a Fresh Look at Modernism,' *Southwest Review* 88.2-3 (2003): 335-349; Bonnie Costello, 'Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion,' *Contemporary Literature* 33.2 (1992): 373-395.

[12] Julie LaRue Porter, 'Beyond McPoetry: Contemporary American Poetry in the Institutionalized Creative Writing Program Era' (PhD Diss., Columbia University, 2012).

modernist lineage results in contradictory poetic consequences.[13] I then show how Graham's conception of poetic freedom comes out of the intellectual context of postwar Europe, and that Graham's version of this conception of freedom turns out to be effectively identical with the version of high modernist autonomy that would be institutionalized in the creative writing program. I describe how Graham paradoxically experiences this autonomy as a deprivation of freedom, and suggest that this autonomy, in combination with her reception of the theory-suffused postwar American academy, has prevented Graham's work from evolving stylistically in the way that a poet's formal practice typically develops over the course of a career. Finally, I turn my attention to Graham's literary persona and delineate Graham's institutional negotiation of the creative writing field. Throughout I attempt to show the relationship between Graham's institutional context and her thoroughgoing commitment to a poetics of particularity and indeterminacy.

To see how such a poetics manifests concretely, consider Graham's poem 'Prayer,' from the 2002 collection *Never*:

> Over a dock railing, I watch the minnows, thousands, swirl
> themselves, each a minuscule muscle, but also, without the
> way to *create* current, making of their unison (turning, re-
> infolding,
> entering and exiting their own unison in unison) making of themselves a
> visual current, one that cannot freight or sway by
> minutest fractions the water's downdrafts and upswirls, the
> dockside cycles of finally-arriving boat-wakes, there where
> they hit deeper resistance, water that seems to burst into
> itself (it has those layers), a real current though mostly
> invisible sending into the visible (minnows) arrowing
> motion that forces change—
> this is freedom. This is the force of faith. Nobody gets
> what they want. Never again are you the same. The longing
> is to be pure. What you get is to be changed. More and more by
> each glistening minute, through which infinity threads itself,

[13] This argument follows the analysis Goldstone develops in *Fictions of Autonomy*. Goldstone notes that critics have generally approached the concept of autonomy by dismantling it as illusory and ideological. He instead approaches modernist autonomy from the relativist perspective that even if they may not embody complete autonomy, literary works may be more or less autonomous, and contends that sociological attention to the formation of modernist autonomy claims somewhat paradoxically testify to contemporary social realities. In the same way, I argue that Graham's poetics of autonomy bespeak the complex institutional context of her poetry's genesis.

> also oblivion, of course, the aftershocks of something
> at sea. Here, hands full of sand, letting it sift through
> in the wind, I look in and say take this, this is
> what I have saved, take this, hurry. And if I listen
> now? Listen, I was not saying anything. It was only
> something I did. I could not choose words. I am free to go.
> I cannot of course come back. Not to this. Never.
> It is a ghost posed on my lips. Here: never.[14]

What strikes first about this poem is that it seems not to live up to its title: it is not a prayer. But perhaps the title can be justified because it uses the word 'prayer' metalingually: the poem meditates on what it means to pray, and by extension what it means to speak.[15] In its first half the speaker narrates a vision of minnows, what appears to be an allegorical depiction of the dialectics of freedom and necessity, individuality and conformity. The second half would seem to describe an utterance, connecting the question of conformity with the question of the speech act. 'Never again are you the same,' says the speaker. 'You' here is general and could be rewritten as 'one' without sacrificing its thrust. This statement about transience and impermanence turns out to be performatively true for every individual who lives in time, since in the moment it takes to read the phrase a concentration of instants slips by that now belongs irrevocably to the past, to which nobody 'of course can come back.' The proliferation of abstract nouns and adjectives—'freedom,' 'faith,' 'pure,' 'changed,' 'infinity,' 'oblivion,' gives the sense that some sort of philosophically involved argument has taken place, though what this might be resists paraphrase resolutely. Such proliferations of abstract nouns recurs throughout Graham's poetry, especially in the work following her first two collections beginning with *The End of Beauty* (1989), at which point shorter lines and more concrete diction gave way to a much longer line and a more pronounced tendency towards abstract metaphysical speculation.

This development surfaces also in the titles of the collections, which frequently contain

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[14] Jorie Graham, 'Prayer,' *Never* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 3.

[15] In later collections, as Willard Spiegelman has noted, Graham titles poems 'Praying' instead of 'Prayer,' deepening the emphasis on prayer as process rather than as a determinate, achieved expression: 'she calls attention to the effort of making an address rather than the accomplishment of it.' 'Jorie Graham Talking,' *The Kenyon Review* 28.4 (2006): 177. *Overlord* (2005) contains six poems with such titles. Timothy C. Baker offers a solid philosophical context for Graham's conception of prayer in 'Praying to an Absent God: The Poetic Revealings of Simone Weil,' *Culture, Critique & Theory* 47.2 (2006): 133-147.

abstract nouns ('beauty,' 'unlikeness,' 'materialism,' 'place'). In a poem from *The End of Beauty* with an abstract noun in its title, 'On Difficulty,' Graham asks: 'yet what slips free of the voice to float like a brackish foam / on emptiness'; later in the poem 'they're thinking […] how finite the options one finds in the / *waiting* (after all).'[16] Her next collection, *Region of Unlikeness* (1991), continues in this vein: 'they rise // out of the shabby annihilation, / out of the possibility of never-having been seen.'[17] *Materialism* (1993) contains a poem in which a river figures as an excuse for abstract rumination in a nearly identical form to 'Prayer':

> The river still ribboning, twisting up,
> into its re-
> arrangements, chill enlightenments, tight-knotted
> quickenings and lossenings—whispered messages dissolving
> the messengers—
> the river still glinting up into its handfuls, heapings,
> glassy
> forgettings under the river of
> my attention— […][18]

Conjunction of water imagery and abstraction recurs in Graham's next collection, *The Errancy* (1997):

> all of the freedom swirling and slapping round the keel, the here,
> foaming round, as feelings—and still the pitch of the dawn
> grasping at transparence, as if something like an *hour* were
> trying to plash in, and make, and make …? what would it *make*?—[19]

Graham uses description of water as a vehicle for abstract exploration of flow and flux; water, foam, and waves seem to appeal because they offer the possibility of a freedom from determinate form. This freedom manifests temporally in a flowing or foaming body of water that never presents the same way twice from instant to instant.

In these poems, as in 'Prayer,' the philosophical content tends to amount to assertion of the primacy of indeterminacy and particularity, with an accompanying hostility to certainty and

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[16] Jorie Graham, 'On Difficulty,' *The End of Beauty* (New York: Ecco Press, 1987), 9. Graham's emphasis.
[17] Jorie Graham, 'Fission,' *Region of Unlikeness* (New York: Ecco Press, 1991), 3.
[18] Jorie Graham, 'The Surface,' *Materialism* (New York: Ecco Press, 1993), 143.
[19] Jorie Graham, 'Sea-Blue Aubade,' *The Errancy* (New York: Ecco Press, 1997), 43.

generality. Individual identity can never be apprehensible or graspable because it continually transforms into the next moment. In 'Prayer,' Graham also engages particularity synchronically, literally by rendering the world as particles: she visually registers grains of sand, 'thousands' of miniscule minnows, and 'minutest fractions.' But she opposes this commitment to indeterminacy and particularity with confident assertions phrased in universal terms about her abstract nouns—freedom, faith, purity. According to Bonnie Costello, Graham shows herself as a modernist in these moments, because they reflect a quintessentially modernist elevation of 'the timeless, the impersonal, the beautiful over the brutality and flux of history.'[20] The crucial question for the interpreter of Graham's work has to do with the specific accomplishment of the movement from particularity and flux to generality and timelessness, and whether or not this movement succeeds. Does any of the particularist content of this poem truly inform a compelling, or compellingly expressed, conception of freedom, faith or purity? The speaker seems to believe much more strongly in the material, mechanistic aspects of a universe she comes to know through the senses than in the abstractions of faith and purity. The two deployments of the slightly defensive phrase '*Of course*' are the most telling verbal inflections of a poem otherwise notable for the gravity of its diction. 'I cannot of course come back. Not to this.' They are moments of awareness, in an incantatory performance that aspires to metaphysical profundity, that the poem's concluding crescendo might tend towards obviousness and banality: time is irreversible.[21] But who would suppose otherwise?

Looking to the later work of T. S. Eliot sharpens the picture of Graham's grafting of the modernist inclination towards the timeless onto a contemporary commitment to the particular and indeterminate. Graham has described an encounter with Eliot's verse as the impetus for her entire involvement with English-language poetry; the story of the moment of this first encounter repeatedly

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[20] Costello, 'Erosion,' 375.

[21] Graham has considered to the irreversibility of time in her more recent poetry with even more explicitness, though not always through water imagery. To take another example: 'this light / is moving / across that flower on / my sill / at this exact / speed—right now—right here—now it is gone—yet go back up / five lines it is still there I can't / go back, it's / gone / […].' And even more to the point: 'and each word said in / time after this is / the subtraction we call / *life-lived* […]' 'A Bird on My Railing,' *P L A C E* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012), 18.

surfaces in interviews and profiles. Graham recalls passing a class taught by the poet and critic M. L. Rosenthal as an undergraduate at New York University and overhearing Rosenthal reciting the last lines of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' 'It was like,' Graham recalled for a profile in *The New Yorker*, 'something being played in the key my soul recognized.'[22] The anecdotal convenience and highly theatrical quality of this epiphany renders it somewhat suspect, especially given its context of a prominent interview. The anecdote fashions a personal poetic mythology somewhat too conveniently, and works through a strangely anachronistic, essentialising metaphor—as if each individual soul might possess a kind of *a priori* musical tuning.

Graham's poetry also works formally to establish itself within a genealogy of high modernism. 'Prayer' resounds throughout with the language and ideas of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, a poetic sequence that thinks of time with comparably momentous metaphysical ambition. The realm of the transient and time-bound, for Eliot, exists alongside the timeless and eternal realm of the divine, which intersects with the time-bound world at moments of revelation. 'Prayer' echoes much of the syntax and terminology of 'Little Gidding' in particular: the repeated short and declarative 'This is …' construction ('This is freedom. This is the force of faith' in Graham's poem) closes the first three stanzas of Part II of 'Little Gidding' ('This is the death of air,' 'This is the death of earth,' 'This is the death of water and fire').[23] Graham has shown a predilection for the 'This is' construction throughout her career: 'This is what time / as we knew it,' 'this is the knowable,' '*this is what you want to do now, reader*,' 'This is another current, river of rivers' (1987);[24] 'This is newness? This is the messenger?' 'This is a form of matter of matter she sang,' 'This is the medicine' (1991)[25]; 'this is what keeps up the illusion,' 'this is the torsion that constitutes the fold,' 'this is the wingbeat of the underneathly'

[22] Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' 64. For other iterations of this anecdote see Jorie Graham, 'The Art of Poetry No. 85,' *The Paris Review* 165 (2003), accessed 20 July 2014, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/263/the-art-of-poetry-no-85-jorie-graham; Craig Lambert, 'Image and the Art of Feeling,' *Harvard Magazine*, January-February 2001, accessed 25 July 2014, http://harvardmagazine.com/2001/01/image-and-the-arc-of-fee.html.
[23] T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding' II, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 203.
[24] Jorie Graham, 'Eschatological Prayer,' 'Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persphone,' 'Room Tone,' 'Of Forced Sights and Trusty Ferefulness,' *The End of Beauty* (New York: Ecco Press, 1987), 35, 59, 75, 92.
[25] Jorie Graham, 'History [But in the myth, at the beginning of our world,' 'History [So that I had to look up just now to see them],' 'Soul Says,' *Region of Unlikeness* (New York: Ecco Press, 1991), 35, 36, 90, 125.

(1997).[26] 'Infolding,' a word to which 'Prayer' gives its own line, is a key image of Eliot's poem's concluding vision of unification: 'When the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one.'[27]

But Graham and Eliot diverge in more important respects. Eliot's poem finds an enormous amount of capital in opposing, sometimes contradictory aspects of the human perceptive apparatus. Experience takes place in singular, discrete moments of time, and it appears that in an important ontological sense the present moment seems to be all that can be said to exist; yet humans also have the intuition that they can talk intelligibly about the future and the past, and use categorical concepts created at a certain moment of time to describe phenomena that exist at substantial temporal removes. Eliot figures this tension in a number of ways; one such way involves the adverb 'here' in a variety of different contexts. 'Here' both discursively describes the location of the present moment and calls the reader into the moment imperatively; it functions as a label as well as a summons to attention. In 'Burnt Norton,' for instance, Eliot offers 'Here is a place of disaffection';[28] 'Quick now, here, now, always.'[29] 'Here' in these lines first of all describes a position: Where is the place of disaffection? It is here. Contradiction emerges because 'here' in this case does not describe a concrete spatial context; the verse that expands upon the place of disaffection in further detail nominates it as 'Time before and time after / In a dim light.' The abstract amorphousness of this description increases the contrast between the presentist specificity of 'Here' and the unspecifiably transcendent register of the timeless. 'Quick now, here, now, always' expresses the same contrast, though in this line 'here' functions as much as an imperative, inviting the reader to summon his or her attention into the instant of present experience. A variety of poetic devices contribute to this gesture of summoning (apart from the literal semantic content of the language itself, which evidently also contributes). The

[26] Jorie Graham, 'Le Manteau de Pascal,' 'The Guardian Angel of the Swarm,' 'Recovered from the Storm,' *The Errancy* (New York: Ecco Press, 1997), 67, 81, 107.
[27] Eliot, 'Little Gidding' V, *Collected Poems*, 209.
[28] Eliot, 'Burnt Norton,' III, *Poems*, 182, 1.
[29] Eliot, 'Burnt Norton,' V, *Poems*, 184, 37.

three caesuras separating the final four words of the line render the speaking of 'Quick now' unusually rapid; the transition to 'here, now,' with both words surrounded by commas, invites a more reflective attitude to the present 'here' than the line's precipitous opening imperative. In comparison to the preceding three monosyllables, the two-syllable 'always' feels extraordinarily sustained, especially on its short a-sound. Again, Eliot plays up the contradiction of a timeless 'always' that can be perceived only through moments located 'here' and 'now.'

'Always,' another key word of *Four Quartets*, appears in conjunction with another significant 'Here' in the final lines of Part I of 'Little Gidding':

> Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
> Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

'Here' appears as the intersection of the dyad 'never and always.' In 'Prayer,' this dyad becomes 'Here: never.' The structural inversion reflects a difference in emphasis. For Eliot, the line finishes, affirmatively, on 'always'; for Graham, the possibility of 'always' has disappeared. The colon suggests that the second term of the dyad will decisively qualify the first. The present, for Graham, reveals not the timeless, but the impossibility of conceiving of timelessness. Thus the poem ends on a gesture of refusal, the *Never* that came to be the title of Graham's 2002 collection. 'Here' for Graham does not intersect with the timeless, but rather evokes an unsatisfactory indeterminate and fragmentary time-bound presentness. Graham's speaker experiences 'here' as a profound absence: 'longing' to be 'pure,' to access a realm of unitary absolute presence, she 'gets' instead the agonizing experience of fragmented temporal flux: 'to be changed.'

Further useful comparison can be drawn between Eliot's and Graham's syntactical ways of proceeding. Eliot favours syntactically straightforward declarative sentences, often using the 'This is' construction described above.

> This is the use of memory:
> For liberation—not less of love but expanding
> Of love beyond desire, and so liberation

From the future as well as the past.[30]

While the conceptual argument of this fragment does not necessarily reveal itself upon first reading—how the expansion of love beyond desire should have the direct consequence of liberation from the future and the past does not seem immediately obvious, for instance—the organization of the style and syntax does not present too many problems of interpretation. Graham's syntax in 'Prayer,' by contrast, varies substantially across the two parts of the poem. It begins with a long, meandering collection of clauses that accumulates modifications and qualifications before giving way to a series of short sentences, declarative in a similar way to Eliot's. But while Graham appropriates Eliot's 'This is' construction, she rarely gives any indication of what the referent of 'This' might be. A reader of Eliot's poem, if examined on the propositional content of the above fragment, could at least answer 'for liberation' if asked to describe the poem's position on 'the use of memory.' A reader of 'Prayer,' by contrast, would have a considerably more difficult time if asked to identify to referent of 'This' in the phrase 'This is freedom,' or 'This is the force of faith.' Graham's poetry prompts its readers to respond to it in philosophical terms, but ultimately refuses genuine philosophical engagement, expressing instead skepticism towards the possibility of knowledge on the one hand, and the power of language as a representative medium on the other.[31]

Even if 'Prayer,' taken in isolation, does not express a coherent idea of freedom, it is worth pressing further on the question of what the declaration 'This is freedom' might mean, because it promises to reveal a great deal about Graham's context. 'Freedom' from what? Might there be

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[30] Eliot, 'Little Gidding,' III, *Collected Poems*, 206.

[31] Many of Graham's less sympathetic critics have also noticed that Graham attributes a degree of philosophical significance to quotidian perceptions that ultimately refuse to bear it. According to Charles Berger, writing about Graham's first collection in 1982: 'Every poem in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* contains some haunting epigrammatic kernel, but too few of the meditations branching outward from these moments sustain a clear and convincing intensity.' 'Laurels,' *Poetry* 140.1 (1982): 36. For echoes of this perspective see Bonnie Costello, 'The Big Hunger,' *New Republic* 206.4 (1992): 36-39; Carolyne Wright, review of *Region of Unlikeness* by Jorie Graham, *Harvard Review* 1 (1992): 160-161; Calvin Bedient, 'Postlyrically Yours,' *The Threepenny Review* 58 (1994): 18-20; Daniel McGuinness, review of *Materialism* by Jorie Graham, *Antioch Review* 52.4 (1994): 659; William Logan, 'The Way of All Flesh,' *The New Criterion* 18.10 (2000): 63-71; Adam Kirsch, 'The End of Beauty,' *New Republic* 222.11 (2000): 35-42; Richard Eder, 'A State of Withdrawal,' *New York Times*, 2 January 2000, accessed 27 October 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/01/02/reviews/000102.02ederlt.html; Peter Campion, review of *Overlord* by Jorie Graham, *Poetry* 187.6 (2006): 522-523; James Longenbach, 'The Wasted Land,' *The New York Times*, 6 April 2008, accessed 29 October 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/books/review/Longenbach-t.html.

specific contextual or political factors that Graham experienced as constraints, constraints to which the decontextual, metaphysical evocations of freedom in 'Prayer' refer back? As noted above, 'Prayer' comes from Graham's eighth collection, *Never*, published in 2002. But Graham wrote this particular poem two years earlier, as a 'turn-of-the-millennium poem for the New York *Times* Op-Ed page.' The detail matters because it shows the poem to predate the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and comes at the very beginning of the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush, for whom 'freedom' played a key role in the presentation of his highly rhetorical foreign policy. An invocation of 'freedom' would appear very different in a piece of American literature produced after the epoch-making events that gave Americans to understand that they were under attack on the basis of their national values.[32]

In what follows I consider what Graham means by freedom in detail in relation to poetry and politics, arguing that she posits a link between the poetic deployment of language and political resistance that derives from her intellectual context—specifically postwar radical French philosophy. I then argue that the application of this particular concept of freedom amounts to a recapitulation of an idea of aesthetic autonomy common to modernism and the structure of the creative writing program, an autonomy that—paradoxically—would go on to overdetermine the content and development of Graham's poetry.

Graham states her understanding of the relationship between poetry and freedom most clearly in her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1990*, one of her few essayistic publications. She begins with a personal anecdote that narrates the experience of attending a literary event that featured the reading of fiction followed by poetry. Graham finds the contrast between the two a source of insight into the difference between the genres. Engrossed in and entertained by the opening fictional narrative, Graham feels the lack of these qualities in the subsequent poetry acutely. She finds herself initially

[32] Jorie Graham, 'Notes,' *The Taken-Down God: Selected Poems 1997-2008* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2013), 135.

alienated by the sparseness of the poetry, but gradually began to respond: 'Then I started to hear it: the silence; the words chipping into the silence. [...] No longer the rush of sentences free and unresisted into the air. Now it was words cutting into an element that was crushing in its power and weight. I thought of Sartre's notion that prose writers tame language and that it's up to poetry to set it free again.'[33] The words of prose dissolve into the air almost as soon as they are spoken, light and evanescent; the words of poetry insist upon imposing themselves more strongly, lingering a little longer. The words of poetry linger because they defamiliarize habitual ways of using language; fictional words dissolve immediately because readers/hearers assimilate them into usual patterns of more or less everyday linguistic expression without effort. Presumably Graham thinks here of the opening essay of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947), which also compares poetry and prose, and in which Sartre depicts the poet as an estranger of language, one who realizes distance from received meanings and modes of expression. 'The poet is outside of language. He sees words inside out as if he did not share the human condition, and as if he were first meeting the word as a barrier as he comes toward men.'[34] The poet sees language effectively as a non-native speaker; he sees words as barriers rather than channels of communication. For Sartre, this relates to language's referential function: 'The empire of signs is prose; poetry is on the side of painting, sculpture, and music.'[35] The prose writer understands words as signifiers, and thus considers language instrumentally as a means to an external, representational end; the poet, in contrast, understands words as ends in themselves. Sartre's linkage of language and instrumental value will be the same bridge that Graham uses to posit a political function for poetry in an age of commodity culture. She suggests that the language of contemporary America has become cheap and commodified; the pervasiveness of the sound-bite and the crisp advertising slogan have made sustained appreciations of language in its concentrated richness rare experiences. What is the essential characteristic of speech? she asks: 'Isn't [it] to

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[33] Jorie Graham, 'Introduction,' *The Best American Poetry 1990*, ed. Jorie Graham and David Lehman (New York: Macmillan, 1990), xv-xvi.
[34] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 13-14.
[35] *Ibid.* 12.

describe, to articulate an argument, to use language at the speed where the complexity and sonorousness of syntax and cadence reach the listener, to use it so that the free will of the listener is addressed—free will it is the very purpose of salesmanship to bypass?'[36] 'Addressing the free will of the listener' casts the literary experience in virtually the same terms as Sartre, for whom the act of literary communication constitutes precisely an appeal from the freedom of the writer to the 'freedom of the reader, and what is purest in that freedom.'[37]

Like Sartre, Graham understands poetry as an instrument for the accomplishment of progressive political liberation. Throughout her poetic career Graham has consistently presented her work as a poet and a teacher of poetry in this fashion, as a political force capable of freeing individual consciousnesses from injurious worldly situations.[38] There are biographical reasons for her articulation of this political commitment using a Sartrean existentialist framework: Graham attended the Université Paris Nanterre in 1967-68, a place and time characterized by, in the words of the Spanish writer Juan Benet, 'the furious and nocturnal modernity of existentialism, which, having no rivals, was for many years to have a monopoly on academic anti-conformism.'[39] In Paris she studied sociology under Sartre's political and philosophical colleague (and sometime adversary) the Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who was at the time assisted by a young Jean Baudrillard. Lefebvre occupied one of the country's most prestigious posts in sociology and counted amongst the most influential French public intellectuals in the late 1960s, so it is unlikely that Graham, who only spent one academic year at Nanterre as a first-year undergraduate, would have 'studied' with him in a sustained, meaningful, personal sense. Nevertheless, Lefebvre's views permeated Nanterre, along

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[36] Graham, 'Introduction,' *Best American Poetry*, xx.
[37] Effectively, Sartre argues that the act of reading requires a sovereign assertion of freedom through the imagination of a state of affairs that does not exist. Sartre, *What is Literature?* 46.
[38] To take another, similar example: 'I feel that if I can track in my own individual consciousness reasoning errors, slippages, misreadings, I might be able to find ways of altering them – at the very least in myself, by becoming aware, by understanding how we got here, beached; and maybe not only in myself. Maybe in the form of the poem as well – which is, of course, the beginning of others.' Jorie Graham, 'Interview,' in Thomas Gardner, *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987). 237.
[39] Quoted in Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2004), 29.

with the wider French intellectual landscape, thoroughly; Nanterre turned out to be 'crucible' of the student protests that would eventually lead to the French general strike of May 1968. Lefebvre, whose aphorisms and concepts decorated the signs of striking protestors, was one of the major driving intellectual forces behind the protests,[40] and Graham's classmate, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, became one of the protest's early instigators and most recognized leaders.[41] Graham was arrested twice; like many foreign students she was subsequently asked to leave the country. This period of her life marks her poetry and career in two ways. First, the influence of politically-oriented French philosophy would prove extremely important to her poetics. Second, these experiences would transform into highly valuable autobiographical capital that would later figure importantly in her self-presentation as a poet doing political work.[42]

The ideas behind the events of May 1968 contain a strong concept of the part the aesthetic should play in processes of political liberation, a concept that Graham would adopt. While the protests included violent confrontation, they have also found important motivation in Lefebvre's notion of the 'festive revolution.' This notion required that political change extend beyond the economic pragmatics of labour and exploitation to transform the aesthetics of quotidian experience;[43] Lefebvre and the students marching under his sign demanded an utter transformation of everyday life. Lefebvre understood the quotidian as an instrument of power designed to degrade humans to the status of components in a capitalist machine in which no authentic human experience can be possible. Such an existence produces a kind of cyborg, what Lefebvre called a *cyberanthrope*, that emerges out the veneration of instrumental function and the denial of those aspects of life that are essentially human:

> The *cybernanthrope* deplores human weakness and its own weaknesses. It knows its imperfections. It disavows the human, the human quality. It disqualifies humanism, in thought and in action. It hunts down the illusions of subjectivity: creation, happiness, passion, as empty as forgetting. It aspires to function, that is, to be nothing but a

[40] Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1998), 107.
[41] Graham, 'Art of Poetry.'
[42] See the profiles: Lambert, 'Image and Arc'; Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' 64.
[43] Shields, 107.

function.'[44]

These 'illusions' remain possible in 'moments' of what Lefebvre calls *poiësis*; transitory experiences of ecstasy or inspiration that occur undetermined by social relations.[45] This type of thinking led to Lefebvre's identification with a 'humanist' strain of Marxism that emphasized the subjective character of domination rather than objective structures that make domination possible.[46] A comparable logic animates Graham's presentation of the idea of poetry as a force that will cut through the corrosive commodity discourses of monopoly capitalism and carve out a space for authentic humanity at the core of the individual.

This line of thinking surfaces everywhere in the radical French philosophy of the time, canonically in Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* (1943). Sartre's fundamental concern is to demonstrate freedom of the will; the basis for this freedom, according to Sartre, is a structure of causality according to which the motives or goals on the basis of which individuals act have meaning only in terms of what *is not*. These goals are states of affairs that—because their existence is conditional, belonging to the future—*do not exist*. For Sartre, access to this conceptual realm of negation—the realm of *néant* or 'nothingness' to which his title refers—is the precondition for an individual's exercise of freedom; before an individual can exercise free choice he must be able to envision the possibility of his circumstances being other than they are. For Sartre, exercise of this choice is a profoundly political activity. He offers the example of a worker whose revolutionary consciousness remains dormant. The downtrodden pre-revolutionary worker suffers terribly from the conditions of his employment, but because he cannot imagine a state of affairs in which he does not suffer, he experiences these sufferings as natural. They are, Sartre says, 'integrated with his being.'[47] If the worker is to be free he must take the cosmopolitan action of producing distance and step outside of

[44] Quoted in Shields, 101.
[45] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), esp. 135-137.
[46] Shields, 107.
[47] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2005), 435.

himself, recognizing that he is not identical with his suffering or with the sum of his experience, and take his suffering as an object of detached contemplation. 'Causes and motives,' writes Sartre, 'have meaning only inside a projected ensemble which is precisely an ensemble of non-existents. And this ensemble is ultimately myself as transcendence; it is Me in so far as I have to be myself outside of myself.'[48] The condition of free choice is the ability to 'realize a nihilating rupture' with the world and oneself, assuming a perspective through which a different world and a different self may be imagined and achieved.[49]

This worldview has consequences for Sartre's conception of language. For Sartre the possibility of freedom means the continuously present possibility of an individual breaking with his past self. Because speech and writing necessarily occur in time, by the moment of their utterance they will be obsolete, referring to a referent that no longer exists, a self that has been negated. Sartre speaks of the free subject capable of conceiving nothingness as the 'for-itself' (*pour-soi*) as distinct from the 'in-itself' (*en-soi*) which cannot act freely. Thus: 'For the for-itself, to be is to nihilate the in-itself which it is. […] It is through this that the for-itself escapes its being as its essence; it is through this that the for-itself is always something other than what can be *said* of it. For in the final analysis the for-itself is the one which escapes this very denomination, the one which is already beyond the name which is given to it, beyond the property which is recognized in it.'[50] Elsewhere Sartre makes it clear that this formulation of freedom governs his understanding of what literature can do: Because the referents to which an utterance refers by definition no longer exist—since referents always 'escape denomination' by virtue of the structure of time—the reader must use his freedom to supply an imaginative existence corresponding to the words he reads.[51] Sartre disagrees with Kant's aesthetics insofar as they think of the artistic object as a fact to be experienced; for Sartre, creation of an aesthetic object implies a full *reconstitution of existence* on the part of the creative subject, and a

[48] *Ibid.* 437.
[49] *Ibid.* 439.
[50] Sartre, *Being*, 435. The inconsistent capitalization is present in the text.
[51] Sartre, *What is Literature?* 46.

receptive experience of an aesthetic object implies the same, entailing that—contra Kant—the experiencing subject who concludes an aesthetic experience will fundamentally differ from the subject who began it.[52]

Graham frequently meditates poetically on precisely such a model of ephemerality and continuous becoming. Consider the first two stanzas of 'Mist,' from 1983's *Erosion*:

> This quick intelligence that only knows
> distracted, blind,
> poking like a nose,
> forever trying to finger the distinctions: *the rose*
> *that opens in the rose,*
> *that opens in*
> *the mist*,
> its geography
>
> much quicker than
> its history.
> I live in it, it lives in me, whore to, heir to,
> I am the one it does unto. . . .
> And this is its shoreline: the edge of the continent, of the whole
> idea, the ragged rocks
> becoming foam [...][53]

The poem reflects paradigmatic concerns of Graham's poetry in a number of ways: the complicated depiction of selfhood with an 'I/me' existing in complex and shifting relation to 'this quick intelligence'; the staging of a perceptual intelligence's self-interrogation in a setting of liminality that would seem to stand in genealogical relationship to Elizabeth Bishop's shorelines. Two of the poem's driving verbs are gerunds, the intelligence 'forever trying' existing in the Sartrean continuous present of 'becoming.'[54] The stable, concrete, delineated entity—'the edge of the continent,' the 'ragged rocks' that represent the speaker's self—perpetually transform into amorphous and indeterminate 'foam.'

These 'ragged rocks' again come to Graham's poem from *Four Quartets*, in which a 'ragged

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[52] *Ibid.* esp. 46-76.
[53] Graham, 'Mist,' *Erosion* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 4.
[54] Graham's critics often note her fondness for the gerund; see e.g. Helen Vendler, *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 1995), 91; Willard Spiegelman, 'Repetition and Singularity,' *The Kenyon Review* 25.2 (2003): 160.

rock' appears in the middle of 'The Dry Salvages' as a symbol of permanence, representing the second term in Eliot's temporal dialectic: 'time the destroyer is time the preserver.' Waves wash over the rock, fog—effectively an analogue for mist—conceals it, but the ragged rock remains preserved, 'what it always was.'[55] This engagement with temporality confronts the mysteriousness of continuity, in which movement into the next moment seems to usher in a new configuration of experience while simultaneously seeming to share a continuous essence with all that has come before. Eliot places far more emphasis on the continuous essence side of the dialectic than Graham, for whom the ragged rocks, instead of remaining unaltered by the waves, dissolve into water foaming at the shoreline. But Eliot nevertheless remains highly attuned to the aspect of temporality that manifests in experience as disorienting rupture:

> 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.[56]

Time continually brings forth new configurations of experience that reveal the inadequacy of existing models of knowledge; such inadequacies are the conditions of possibility for the formation of new knowledge, which will be superseded in its turn (except, that is, for that ecstatic knowledge 'tongued with fire beyond the language of the living' available only through sudden insight into the timeless and eternal[57]).

Eliot, along with Sartre, had extraordinarily strong contextual reasons to be preoccupied with questions of freedom in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Eliot wrote *Four Quartets* facing the threat of German invasion before and during the Second World War, once referring to them as his 'patriotic poems';[58] Sartre did much of the background thinking for *L'Être et le néant* reading Heidegger as a

[55] T.S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages' II, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 196.
[56] T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker' II, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 186.
[57] T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding' I, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 202.
[58] Eliot described the last three of his *Four Quartets*, written between 1940 and 1942, as his 'patriotic poems,' though Eliot cancelled this remark in the first draft of his 'The Three Voices of Poetry'—see David A. Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot:*

German prisoner of war.[59] Graham, writing in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, has not experienced a world war as a context for her poetry; what then has motivated Graham's preoccupation with these questions? The relevant context for Graham's work seems to have much more to do with background cultural trends and forces that find expression on the level of the individual than with easily delimitable historical events. The relevant background trend here seems to be Graham's identification, noted earlier, of contemporary commodity culture as a deadener of aesthetic receptivity and a destroyer of attention spans. Intriguingly, Graham points to the creative writing program as a complicit participant in this system of cultural debasement.

Speaking to Mark Wunderlich in the year 2000, Graham figures her highly paid work as a Harvard professor as an onerous responsibility that she discharges selflessly, for the benefit of others:

> I should add that sometimes teaching feels like an extraordinary price to pay for the freedom to write poems. I find myself increasingly unable to write—to make contact with my work—while I'm 'talking out' so much, burning a hole in my silence, my not-knowing (which is, of course, one's deepest resource). I've taken to not writing at all when that starts to happen. I need certain things to remain secret from my own conceptual intellect for a poem to actually 'happen.' Sometimes I feel I'm burning my own work so that the next generation can make theirs, that theirs can be added to the whole thing we're building together after all.[60]

Graham refers to 'freedom' once again in this passage, but it is no longer the Sartrean freedom that individuals access through poetry: 'freedom' here is the economic autonomy that the creative writing program provides, enabling an individual to devote a professional life to the writing of poetry. But Graham reverses these terms. She claims that her job in the end *deprives* her of the conceptual or imaginative freedom to write poetry, deprives her of the silence she feels is necessary for poetic composition, to the extent that she experiences possession of one of the most prestigious teaching posts in the American literary field to be a sacrifice. Graham's argument comes across as at once

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Poet (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 203. Marina MacKay describes *Four Quartets* as 'the entirely situational outcome of wartime circumstances.' Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

[59] See Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Itinerary of a Thought,' in *Lives on the Left*, ed. Francis Mulhern (London: Verso, 2011), 185-186.

[60] Jorie Graham, 'That Glorious Thing: Jorie Graham and Mark Wunderlich in Conversation,' Academy of American Poets, 2000, http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/glorious-thing-jorie-graham-and-mark-wunderlich-conversation.

tactless and accurate. It seems tactless because almost two-hundred American MFA programs produce thousands of new graduates every year, most of whom will never manage to secure even an entry level creative writing faculty position, much less an endowed chair at Harvard. It seems accurate because Graham makes a plausible case that the situation of a creative discipline within a formalised institutional structure might have detrimental consequences for the practice of that discipline. John Berryman, another poet with a reputation as an excellent and extraordinarily charismatic instructor who taught Graham's teacher Donald Justice at Iowa, expressed himself in almost exactly the same terms in 1948:

> The alternative to journalism, for most American writers, is teaching, and the dangers from it are similarly complicated. They range from pure slump to pure irritation. To write is hard and takes the whole mind and wants one's whole time; a university is the perfect place not to write. [...] The energy used for good teaching is very much the energy required for good writing.[61]

Berryman's terms differ slightly from Graham's, but his point remains fundamentally similar. Teaching requires expenditure of the same resources the poet allocates towards writing poetry.

By implying that her poems would likely improve should she not have to teach, Graham at the very least concedes the possibility that she might write poetry unsupported by a creative writing program. But she appears to view this possibility as strictly notional, seeming never to have taken serious steps towards working outside the auspices of an institution. Why not? Graham received a MacArthur Fellowship in 1990; she certainly could have afforded to take at least a year or two of leave. Graham's disregard of the possibility reveals the extent of the contemporary imbrication between the field of creative writing and the field of American poetry. In the twenty-first century, the gap between the identities of professional teacher of creative writing and professional poet has become minute to the point that imagination of alternative institutional paths has begun to seem impractical.

Graham's opposition of 'silence' and 'not-knowing' to the professionalized environment of

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[61] John Berryman, 'The State of American Writing, 1948,' quoted in John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (Boston and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 204.

the writers' workshop participates in the common creative writing trope of insisting that the content of the creative writing program, the actual composition of literature, cannot be reduced to a system of professional procedures. Graham's poetic persona, as represented in various interviews, profiles, and even private correspondence, seems calculated to produce an image as far from the routinized professional as possible, cultivating qualities of spontaneity, impulsivity, and disregard for rules and norms. In Graham's *Paris Review* interview, Thomas Gardner, her interviewer, paints in an introductory paragraph a portrait of an individual 'so distracted that she had thrown twenty-three dollars in the trash along with her uneaten lunch.' The accidental discarding of the twenty-three dollars conveniently—again, somewhat too conveniently, in my reading—does a great deal of rhetorical work in the profile. It suggests that Graham's motives are uncontaminated by financial interest; she remains so immersed in a private aesthetic realm that she cares nothing for worldly wealth. The amount of money Graham discards also seems too convenient: enough that it would strike the *Paris Review* reader as a vexing loss—a not insignificant price for Graham to pay for such immersive dedication to her work—but not so significant that an unpleasant impression emerges of Graham as being so wealthy that she can afford to discard currency indiscriminately. In fact, the loss of twenty-three dollars would have been unlikely to have pained Graham too deeply: the average salary of a Harvard full professor, like Graham, was $198 400 in 2012.[62] Furthermore, this monetary loss appears again as a sacrifice for others. Gardner attributes Graham's accidental discarding of the money to Graham's mind remaining 'on a series of student conferences she had just completed,' and that that three of her office bookshelves 'hold books by ex-students; another is crammed with manuscripts by current students, all in various stages of revision.'[63] Graham has not only sacrificed her silence and her own work for her students, she has begun to sacrifice her finances as well. But in spite of the rhetorical aspects of the presentation, Gardner in the end provides a credible image of

[62] Rachel M. Wehr, 'Harvard Salaries by the Numbers,' *The Harvard Crimson*, 10 April 2013, http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/4/10/harvard_salaries_numbers/.
[63] Graham, 'Art of Poetry.'

what 'burning a hole in my silence' looks like. The busy, professionalized environment of the contemporary university here seems consistent with the flourishing of the 'speeded-up, almost decimated attention span' that Graham diagnosed in her 1990 introduction as the condition antithetical to poetry.[64]

Elsewhere, Graham presents herself as Bohemian iconoclast with more flamboyance. In an undated letter to the poet James Tate, preserved in Tate's archive at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas at Austin, Graham writes, 'It's been an insane time—but then I can hear you saying that given how I live, it always is.' She tells the story of a health scare, during which she experienced a severe headache and sudden loss of consciousness. She went to the hospital, where 'they said it was a hemorrage [*sic*] in the brain + wanted to do all these awful tests.' Graham felt better and declined the tests. The emphasis on awful suggests iconoclasm, a refusal to submit to the ugly realities of contemporary life, even if refusal entails a certain recklessness; Graham's nature rebels at the thought of participating in such bourgeois practices as personal health care. In another letter to Tate, Graham describes a trip to buy life insurance with her then husband, the poet James Galvin.

> Hello sweetie!
>
> This made me think of you. I miss you. I'm feeling utterly run down + exhausted + can't believe I'm in the particular life I'm in! I went to buy life insurance this week—LOTS of it—dragged Galvin with me. So: they asked all the questions—do you smoke? Heavens no! Drink? Never, God forbid? [*sic*] Sex? Only when we have to! Etc. I lied about my [illegible], my [illegible]—Guess what: then a little nurse with syringe + urine-sample bottle in tow showed up. Can you imagine what Jim's urine + blood admitted to? He was so hung-over he could hardly see! I started chatting to the nurse about what an unusual evening we'd had the night before—an impromptu partly to celebrate my husband's book being sold. God knows a great many people showed up! All of them smokers! All that passive smoke! Can you imagine how much passive smoke we must have injested [*sic*]—inhaled—whatever—not to mention whatever else they were smoking!
>
> God. I never thought I would flunk Life-Insurance![65]

Effusion characterizes this passage, as it does much of Graham's later, long-lined poetry. Exclamation

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[64] Graham, 'Introduction,' *Best American Poetry*, xix.

[65] Jorie Graham, Letter to James Tate, n.d., Box 25, Folder 3, James Tate Papers, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin. Previous quotation *ibid.*

marks abound, dashes seem to express the interruption of a new thought in mid-sentence, and underlining and capitalization give the impression of demonstrative and dramatic speech. Copious consumption recurs as a motif. Graham roguishly implies that she and her husband engage in behaviours of excessive drinking, smoking, and possibly drug use that contravene the social and institutional expectations of bourgeois respectability. The (rather engaging) hyperbolic extravagance of the tone creates the impression of a speaker who lives spontaneously and impulsively, doing as she likes.

Graham's case demonstrates how the creative writing program has been able to merge the seemingly contradictory social roles of the iconoclastic artist who flouts societal norms and the professionalised university-based knowledge worker. As Jacques Rancière has noted, the ideal of the cosmopolitan, autonomous artist dates from the end of the eighteenth century, when the rules of art cease to be the rules of common craft and the artist began to ascend beyond the demands of common labour and the experience of everyday life.[66] Bourdieu observes that the modernist bohemian descends from the aristocracy, in his indifference to the financial and in his commitment to the 'art of living.'[67] In this sense, Graham's family background constitutes a kind of cosmopolitan cultural aristocracy. Her father, Bill Pepper, opened *Newsweek*'s first bureau in Rome; he led the bureau for seven years before embarking on a career as a freelance journalist that would include profiles of William de Kooning, Laurence Olivier, Marcello Mastroianni, David Ben-Gurion, and Pope Paul VI.[68] Graham's mother studied painting with Fernand Léger in Paris after the Second World War; after a turn to sculpture in the 1960s she became a major presence in the international art scene, represented by the same gallery as Robert Motherwell.[69] Graham's parents lived a famously

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[66] See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), esp. 41.
[67] Bourdieu, *Rules*, 66.
[68] Dennis Hevesi, 'Curtis Bill Pepper, Author, Reporter and Traveler, Is Dead at 96,' *The New York Times*, 4 April 2014, accessed 20 October 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/05/world/curtis-bill-pepper-reporter-and-traveler-is-dead-at-96.html.
[69] Nina Burleigh, 'Beverly Pepper's Umbrian Influence,' *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 October 2013, accessed 20 October 2014, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304213904579093491321183158.

glamorous expatriate social life, hosting frequent events attended by local Italian as well as international celebrities; they also traveled a great deal. A *Wall Street Journal* profile of Pepper from 2013 describes a display of photos in Beverly Pepper's personal collection as

> a veritable *Life* magazine montage of the postwar Italian-American scene. There's Pepper in a white fur hat with Fellini; with Justice Warren on a yacht owned by the mother of *The Washington Post* publisher, Katharine Graham; on the tarmac in front of a TWA flight just back from a jaunt to Angkor Wat with her 10-year-old daughter, the future Pulitzer Prize–winner Jorie Graham; and in Rome, standing beside Norman Mailer. Among the dozens of famous faces gazing down at her when she sleeps are Ezra Pound, Mother Teresa, Hillary Clinton and American socialites Kitty Carlisle and Marietta Tree.[70]

Graham has continued to make the most of this autobiographical capital by playing the part of the cultural aristocrat. One article on her work bears the title 'The Grammar of Glamour';[71] the 1997 *New Yorker* profile claims that 'Graham is one of Iowa City's great eccentrics. Her costume of scarves, jewelry, and black velvet everything is unvarying to a fault: she wears it even to plant tulip bulbs at dawn. Her tendency to write and read poetry while driving a car has been noted by members of the local constabulary.'[72] These dynamics extend even to the presentation and pricing of her poetry collections. Daniel McGuinness, writing in the late 1980s, detects a similar aura of self-conscious aestheticism in the appearance of her books, observing that '[t]rendy, post-modern cover art' and an inflated price (a dollar and a half per poem, he calculates) herald a new 'look of the upper echelons of American poetry in the late eighties.'[73] The casting of the book as an art object to be valued in its materiality recalls the modernist strategy identified by Lawrence Rainey of transforming the artwork into 'a special kind of commodity,' whose rarity signaled its elevated status.[74]

A certain amount of exclusivity necessarily inheres in this pricing strategy, as well as in

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[70] *Ibid.*
[71] Mark Jarman, 'The Grammar of Glamour: The Poetry of Jorie Graham,' *New England Review* 14.4 (1992): 252-261.
[72] Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' 63.
[73] Daniel McGuinness, 'The Long Line in Contemporary Poetry,' *Antioch Review* 47.3 (1989): 270.
[74] Rainey principally analyzes the formation of Imagism, the publication of *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Waste Land* (1922), and the careers of Ezra Pound and H.D, arguing, for instance, that the publication of the limited first edition of *Ulysses* amounted to an effort to transform the physical text into a collector's item, and thus invite 'the common reader' to become 'collectors, patrons, or even investors.' Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 39, 44 and *passim*.

Graham's self-presentation; the efficacy of the bohemian persona depends on its contrast to the common run of societal ways of thinking and living. Thus these practices have a tendency to sit somewhat uneasily next to a commitment to progressive politics and democracy. During Graham's time at the Université Paris, for instance, she lived with a family friend, Comte Alain de la Falaise (the father of Yves Saint-Laurent muse Loulou de la Falaise, referred to in *The New Yorker* as the 'quintessential Rive Gauche haute bohémienne'[75]). Graham recalls the experience of the May 1968 protests, at which she would eventually be arrested: "'It was so strange [...] I'd get arrested and witness appalling things. [...] And then I'd go to the Comte de la Falaise's house and change my clothes and put on a hat, and he'd take me to the Jockey Club.'"[76] This level of friendship with a genuine aristocrat might seem as if it would mark Graham irredeemably as a member of the establishment, but in fact a similar contradiction quickly marked the careers of the French cultural theorists who would prove to be such a decisive radical influence in the American academic humanities. Their interdisciplinary thought, which aimed to be sensitive to structures of power and domination operative in the supposedly apolitical everyday life of late capitalism, confronted a kind of contradiction when its reception in America seemed to mirror the trajectory of any other extremely popular cultural commodity, like film: In his history of poststructuralist French theory in America, François Cusset playfully figures various major French thinkers as Hollywood stars: Jacques Derrida as Clint Eastwood; Baudrillard as Gregory Peck; Julia Kristeva as Meryl Streep, and so forth.[77] While this kind of intellectual 'glamour' coexisted uncomfortably with a radical politics that aimed at the erasure of a social structure based on hierarchical relations of material prestige, contradiction proved no impediment to proliferation, as the overwhelming presence of theory in the American humanities in the decades since the 1960s has shown. Thus the American creative writing field that Graham entered in the 1970s was well prepared to accommodate an authorial figure with the experiential

[75] Judith Thurman, 'Swann Song,' *The New Yorker*, 18 March 2002, 137.
[76] Steven Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' 62.
[77] Cusset, 1.

background of an aristocrat and the political inclinations of a radical.

The Sartrean understanding of poetic autonomy enables a conception of the poet as a political agent to coexist with an ideal of the poet, as Sartre puts it, as existing above and outside of language. Graham's poetry satisfies a Romantic idea of autonomous authorship that persists—if slightly weakened—into the modernist period, according to which the author occupies a creative space 'neither governed by nor responsible to extra-aesthetic concerns,' in Andrew Goldstone's words;[78] it similarly satisfies the contrary demand that art be politically instrumental. The flourishing of this doubled conception in Graham's case, I argue, results in part from the intersection of two institutional contexts. Graham's work first satisfies a more traditional subset of the literary academy that understands authorship from a humanist or romantic perspective. As Andrew Bennett has written, this romantic conception of authorship 'with its stress on individuality, on uniqueness and originality, on the conscious intention of the autonomous subject, has also been seen as part of a more general development of the idea of the self.'[79] But Graham's work has also found itself well-receieved by critical approaches rooted in the proliferation of continental literary and cultural theory, which has tended to understand such romantic notions as the coherent self as forms of ideology concealing the operations of political power.

Graham's most prominent advocate on the humanist side of the divide is Helen Vendler, the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor of English at Harvard, almost invariably described as 'the most powerful poetry critic in America.' [80] Generally understood to embody a method of criticism based on a traditional category of 'aesthetic success,'[81] Vendler has been condemned by the Marxist

[78] Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy,* 1, 11-13. Goldstone notes that Romantic ideas of autonomy aimed at the quasi-religious transformation of society through beauty, while modernist ideas of autonomy contained a more secular emphasis on the separation of the aesthetic from the social and historical.
[79] Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London: Routledge, 2004), 56-57.
[80] James Wood, 'Charmed Quarantine,' *London Review of Books*, 21 March 1996, 22.
[81] *Ibid.*

poet Charles Bernstein as an 'antimodernist literary canon maker.'[82] Initially a chemistry undergraduate who went on to write a PhD thesis on Yeats at Harvard, Vendler has become a theorist of the long history of poetry, having produced criticism on such temporally diverse subjects as Shakespeare's sonnets, George Herbert, John Keats, Emily Dickinson, and Seamus Heaney, among many others. Her critical mode undoubtedly opposes more politically oriented readings of poems; broadly speaking she understands poetry to express the universal elements of a poet's individuality. Introducing a collection that borrows its title from one of Graham's poems, 'Soul Says,' Vendler identifies the lyric as an arena in which 'the details associated with a socially specified self' dissolve.[83] Because the lyric transcends cultural mediation, Vendler understands the poem as an interface where the poet may be present to the reader with extraordinary immediacy. Examples of this understanding abound throughout her criticism. After offering a reading of a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, for example, Vendler confidently writes: 'I have no doubt that this progressive condensation is the structural equivalent of what went on, seriatim, in Hopkins' immensely sensual receptive apparatus and his energetic intellectual apparatus.'[84]

Vendler's belief in the success of Graham's poetry dates back to the early 1980s; she has given six of Graham's collections prominent and strongly favourable reviews.[85] Her judgments have significantly shaped Graham's academic reception, and she has consistently emphasised Graham's European cosmopolitanism as the distinguishing factor of an original poetic voice. Writing in one of the first scholarly books to give space to Graham's work, *The Given and the Made* (1995), Vendler describes her first encounter with the Italian cadences she detects behind Graham's poetic English: 'It

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[82] Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 1994), 94.
[83] Helen Vendler, *Soul Says* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 1995), 2-3.
[84] Vendler, *Breaking,* 20.
[85] Helen Vendler, 'Patterns Made By Passion,' *The New York Times*, 17 July 1983, accessed 20 October 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/1983/07/17/books/patterns-made-by-passion.html; Helen Vendler, 'Married to Hurry and Grim Song,' *The New Yorker*, 27 July 1987, 74-77; Helen Vendler, review of *The End of Beauty* by Jorie Graham, *Erato* 5-6 (1987): 374; Helen Vendler, 'Mapping the Air,' *New York Review of Books* 38.19 (1991), accessed 20 October 2014, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1991/nov/21/mapping-the-air/; Helen Vendler, 'Ascent Into Limbo,' *New Republic* 211.2 (1994): 27-30; Helen Vendler, 'Indigo, Cyanide, Beryl,' *London Review of Books*, 23 January 2003, 13-16; Helen Vendler, 'A Powerful, Strong Torrent,' *New York Review of Books* 55.10 (2008), accessed 28 October 2014, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/jun/12/a-powerful-strong-torrent/.

was that music—a set of rhythms I hadn't heard before in American poetry—which first drew me to Graham, many years ago, when a few poems of hers were printed in *The American Poetry Review*.'[86] In a 1997 *New Yorker* profile that appeared in the wake of Graham's Pulitzer Prize, Vendler describes their first meeting when Graham, then a Bunting Fellow at Radcliffe, began attending Vendler's lectures. Graham suddenly disappeared from the class without explanation; it transpired that she had been in a car accident. '"But then she came to class with these stitched-up scars on her face," Vendler told [writer of the article Steven Schiff]. "And I thought, How extraordinary, because most women would hide, with such big red stitches and lumps and scars. She just sailed serenely on. I quite admired that."'[87] While Vendler insists that her support does not account for Graham's rise, other poets interviewed for the profile disagreed. The poet Richard Howard, for example, accused Vendler of having '"overblown Jorie Graham's achievement to the point where it irritates or provokes resistance."'[88] Another poet, quoted anonymously, said: '"I just think it's really kind of disgraceful. Jorie Graham is extremely courting of people who can be useful to her, extremely flattering. She keeps all her little networks in very good repair—other poets, older poets, people in a position to do her good. If I liked her poems, if I even understood her poems, I wouldn't mind."'[89] Two years after the publication of the profile, Graham was appointed to one of the most prestigious posts in the creative writing field, replacing Seamus Heaney and joining Vendler at Harvard as Boylston Professor. The resentfulness of the unnamed poet recalls hostile reviews from poets such as William Logan (though Logan would have been unlikely to object to the quote's attribution) and Mary Kinzie, formalists who reject abstract free verse that resists evaluation according to common principles of poetic value.[90]

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[86] Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Recent American Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 91. Graham had one poem published in that journal in May/June of 1981 and ten in the September/October issue of that year; these poems, drawn from her second collection *Erosion*, are the likely occasions of Vendler's first acquaintance. *The American Poetry Review* 10.3 (1981), 10.5 (1981).
[87] Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' 65.
[88] *Ibid.* 62.
[89] *Ibid.* 62.
[90] See for example Logan's review of *Swarm*—'Flesh,' 63-71—and Kinzie's review of *Erosion*—Mary Kinzie, 'Pictures From Borges,' *American Poetry Review* 12.6 (1983): 44-45. Kinzie is known for her controversial essay 'The Rhapsodic

Graham lacks a champion of comparable stature to Vendler on the more radical literary theoretical side of the literary academy, but the amenability of her poetry to theoretically informed interpretation has been widely noted, and sometimes criticized. According to Julie LaRue Porter, 'Graham's poetry raises large philosophical questions that provide critics knowledgeable of Saussure, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Lacan with a richness and depth of material uncommon in contemporary American poetry.'[91] Logan has written derisively: 'it's hard to see through the murk of lit-crit buzzwords, the cant of English departments these days: *subjectivity, resistance, presence, unstable, margins* [...]. You wonder why someone hasn't invented Theory Bingo.'[92] Graham entered the American university system at the end of the 1960s, soon after Jacques Derrida delivered his paper 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, a convenient historical marker, as François Cusset has argued in his history of French theory in the United States, for the beginning of the poststructuralist moment in the American university.[93] Given her continental background, the American university field was well prepared for Graham's arrival. According to Vendler, 'philosophical wonder was reinforced in Graham by her schooling at the Rome Lycée Français, where, in philosophy class, students were regularly assigned essays on such intimidating abstractions as "Justice" or "Being."'[94] Moreover, Graham's period of study with Lefebvre, arrest in Paris and expulsion from France constituted ideal autobiographical capital for an environment just becoming suffused with theory-inspired radical politics.

Together with a poetry and persona that have proven extraordinarily well-suited to the conditions of postwar American creative writing, Graham has shown herself to be an adept negotiator

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Fallacy,' which argued against what Kinzie took to be the general contemporary consensus that 'the aim of poetry is apotheosis, an ecstatic and unmediated self-consumption in the moment of perception and feeling.' The affinity this characterization bears to Graham's poetics—as well as to Vendler's aesthetics of self-validating presence—is clear. Mary Kinzie, 'The Rhapsodic Fallacy,' *Salagmundi* 65 (1984): 63-79. For reactions to Kinzie's argument see Paul Breslin et. al., 'Responses to Mary Kinzie's "The Rhapsodic Fallacy," *Salagmundi* 67 (1985): 135-153.

[91] Porter, 69.

[92] William Logan, 'Song & Dance,' *The New Criterion* 31.4 (2012): 72.

[93] François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 31.

[94] Vendler, *Given,* xii, 91.

of institutional networks. She has occasionally drawn criticism on this front, sometimes due, as above, to what has been perceived as cynical flattery of poets and critics in positions of institutional power, and sometimes due to the overlap of personal and even romantic relationships with her professional life. Graham has been married four times; her last two marriages have had substantial professional imbrications. In 1977 she married her third husband, the poet James Galvin, who at the time was a year ahead of her at the Iowa Writers' Workshop; their careers would follow an extremely similar institutional trajectory for nearly the next twenty years. After graduating Galvin took a job on the Murray State University creative writing faculty in Kentucky; Graham joined him there a year later and the couple became the poetry editors of *Crazyhorse*, a prominent literary journal based at Murray State. They then moved to Humboldt State University in California. In the 1980s their paths diverged slightly for a time, with Graham taking various short-term fellowships, but by the 1990s Graham and Galvin were leading the poetry division of the Iowa Writers' Workshop with their former teacher, Marvin Bell.[95] In the late 1990s Graham and Galvin divorced, prior to Graham's move to Harvard in 1999; in 2000 Graham married Peter Sacks, a poet, painter, and scholar also at the Harvard English department, though he serves as John P. Marquand Professor of English, rather than as a teacher of creative writing. In 2005 Graham and Sacks became the focus of a scandal when a blog called 'Foetry,' a self-described poetry contest 'watchdog' that unmasked anonymous judges in an effort to combat nepotism, revealed that Graham had awarded Sacks a University of Georgia Press prize shortly before Graham and Sacks became colleagues and spouses. The scandal led to the establishment of a regulation colloquially called the 'Jorie Graham Rule' in most major poetry contests, which mandated that contest judges declare conflicts of interest.[96]

Other, less controversial evidence bears out a picture of Graham as an expert negotiator of

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[95] Schiff, 'Big Poetry,' 64; Jorie Graham (b. 1950),' *Poetry Foundation*, accessed 22 October 2014, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jorie-graham; 'History,' *Crazyhorse*, accessed 20 October 2014, http://crazyhorse.cofc.edu/about/history/.

[96] For coverage of the 'Foetry' scandal see John Sutherland, 'American Foetry,' *Guardian*, 4 July 2005, accessed 21 October 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jul/04/news.comment; Thomas Bartlett, 'Rhyme and Unreason,' *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 20 May 2005, 12-14.

the institutional networks of the creative writing program. Positive reviews of her work often come from former students;[97] many of her more established appreciative reviewers form a kind of loose coterie. In an interview Vendler describes her admiration for Bonnie Costello and Calvin Bedient, two of Graham's most consistent champions.[98] Bedient edits the New California Poetry series with Forrest Gander, another favourable reviewer of Graham's work, who was Briggs-Copeland Fellow at Harvard during Graham's first years at the university. One measure of the effect of these types of institutional connections may be seen in Graham's choices for an issue of the journal *Ploughshares* that she guest-edited in 2001, just after her move to Harvard. Her selection of twenty-seven poets leaned towards the work of younger writers; the established poets she chose included Bedient and Gander, as well as Cole Swenson and Dean Young, recent colleagues at Iowa, and Bin Ramke, the permanent editor of the poetry contest that would lead to the 'Foetry' scandal. Of the remaining twenty-two poets, fully thirteen had studied at the Iowa Writers' Workshop during Graham's tenure there; a further three studied with Graham in her first years at Harvard.[99]

In an astute, highly critical 2005 review of Graham's collection *Overlord*, the New York *Times* poetry critic David Orr argued that Graham's extraordinary success owes to her suitability for a particular institutional niche, rather than the quality of her poetry. Entitled 'Jorie Graham, Superstar,' the review attempts to demystify a creative system invested in creating a forced continuity between institutional position and aesthetic merit: 'While the items on Graham's resume are impressive, they weren't bestowed by Apollo; they were handed out by regular old human beings, often working in regular old committees. And committees of poets and critics, like committees of pretty much everyone else, are usually less inclined to go for broke than split the difference.' Graham appeals to

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[97] E.g. Joanna Klink, 'To Feel an Idea,' *The Kenyon Review* 24.1 (2002): 188-201; Dan Chiasson, 'The Actual Hawk, the Real Tree,' *New York Review of Books* 59.14 (2012), accessed 29 October 2014, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/sep/27/actual-hawk-real-tree/.

[98] Helen Vendler, 'The Art of Criticism No. 3,' *The Paris Review* 141 (1996), accessed 2 October 2014, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1324/the-art-of-criticism-no-3-helen-vendler. Bedient has also given excellent notices to Peter Sacks's paintings; Sacks, in turn, provided Bedient with an extraordinarily enthusiastic blurb for a 2009 book.

[99] *Ploughshares* 27.4 (2001/2002).

the range of the field, in part through her command of institutional politics: 'she has friendly words for avant-gardists like Susan Howe,' as well as 'friendly words for formalists like Anthony Hecht.' Thus Graham has managed to create a persona at once 'sumptuously poetic,' appealing to 'lovers of lyricism,' and 'ostentatiously thinky,' appealing to 'certain parts of poetry's largely academic audience.' To summarize Orr's argument, the creative writing program rewards poets for the achievement of an institutionally palatable poetic formula, rather than the skill with which they execute a particular formula. Orr finds Graham's execution painfully deficient: *Overlord*, he concludes, is a 'sententious, well-meaning blunder.'[100] I disagree with certain aspects of Orr's analysis. While *Overlord* certainly has its limitations, I would not explain these with a claim that Graham has been unwisely open to too great a variety of poetic modes. Graham has actually repeated something close to the same poetic mode throughout the majority of career, a theme I will take up again towards the end of this chapter. But Orr does draw a convincing sketch of Graham's position with respect to the contemporary field of American poetry, and places a salutary emphasis upon the institutionally-situated, real-world actors who make the choices that determine which poets receive prizes and jobs.

I would argue none of this evidence—not even the 'Foetry' scandal—entails that Graham should be censured for cynically and nefariously manipulating the institutional system. Artists have always historically grouped themselves according to common artistic inclinations, and there need not be anything inherently corrupt about these forms of social organization. Theodor Adorno, for example, understands the various 'isms' that made up the historical avant-garde—Surrealism, Futurism, etc.—to be the descendants of European artistic and literary schools and academies, and suggests that instead of 'shackling' their participants, the movements 'heightened' the productive forces of individual artists through 'mutual collaboration.'[101] Objections that judging practices must

[100] David Orr, 'Jorie Graham, Superstar,' *The New York Times*, 24 April 2005, accessed 29 October 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/24/books/review/24ORRL.html.
[101] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 25.

be nepotistic rather than aesthetically based, for example, ignore the possibility that the basis for a personal or institutional relationship between a poet and a contest entrant may have been aesthetic in the first place. It would make sense for a student to choose to study with a creative writing teacher because the student admires the teacher's poetics and seeks to emulate it. The teacher would then shape the student's work in accordance with her own aesthetic ideals. In such a case, a teacher's favourable disposition towards a student's poems could be evidence of aesthetic consistency as much as nepotism. Reviewing a group of prize-winning collections from the early 1980s, Graham's *Hybrids* among them, Charles Berger suggests that poets who attempt to reach a standard of disinterestedness with their judgments often make the worst judges: 'I would rather have the poet-judge go with his strongest inclinations, even if this means gravitating towards the cognate voice. The best volumes in this group show affinities with the judge's own work.'[102] Berger suggests that poets have no access to a standard of objective quality separate from their own aesthetic inclinations, and that what might seem nepotistic or 'cognate' from one angle seems a practice of aesthetic integrity from another.

Moving towards the conclusion of this chapter, I would like to show how the simultaneous accommodation of a poetics of aesthetic autonomy and a poetics amendable to postwar literary theoretical modes of thinking manifests concretely in Graham's poetry. While speaking about a diverse and often oppositional collection of thinkers and their followers in general terms risks oversimplification, Derek Attridge and Jane Elliott have compellingly argued that the various intellectual currents usually subsumed under the label of 'Theory' share at least one significantly commonality: 'a perception of a definitive link between epistemological indeterminacy and political freedom.'[103] Epistemological indeterminacy has to do with judgment and perception; a determinate epistemology, according to this way of thinking, stands contrary to political freedom because a

[102] Berger, 36.
[103] Derek Attridge and Jane Elliott, 'Introduction: Theory's Nine Lives,' in Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge, eds., *Theory After 'Theory'* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 4.

determinate judgment makes a categorical claim about an object of perception and thus attributes to it a fixed identity, an identity that becomes a political constraint. Adorno classically describes such attributions as 'identitarian thinking,' which 'says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself.'[104] This presents a tension for the poet committed to rigorously detailed practices of representation: Language, as a medium, cannot be other than categorical and approximate; a verbal description will always sacrifice some aspect of a perception's particularity. Leaving a judgment or perception 'indeterminate' means that no such sacrifice takes place, but it also means that no coherent act of judgment or perception can occur: there is, as a fragmentary line from Graham's 2000 collection *Swarm* puts it, a 'refusal that anything be measured or judged.'[105] Such a refusal can thus be thought of as an act of political contestation through language, much as Graham, in her introduction to the *Best American Poetry 1990*, understands poetry to be a site of resistance against the linguistic corrosion wrought by commodity capitalism.

Graham commits to this aesthetic of thoroughgoing indeterminacy, but she also manages to commit to an idea of poet as the creator of an autonomous aesthetic space. Calvin Bedient, one of Graham's most philosophically engaged critics, speaks of Graham's running 'argument that the human is constitutionally outside the world.'[106] While Vendler has influentially labeled Graham as a poet who reinvents herself with each book, including analyses of Graham's work in one volume titled *The Breaking of Style* and another subtitled *Strategies of Poetic Redefinition*, I suggest instead that—for all its changes in line length and experiments with punctuation—Graham's poetry expresses a model of autonomous selfhood that has remained consistent throughout her career. A great deal of her poetry performs what comes across as a search for identity, which Graham often figures as an 'I' searching for a 'you' or an 'it.' But without fail, her poems know where the search will end before it begins; without fail the supposed self that begins the search dissolves into water, foam, smoke, or nebulous

[104] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), 149.
[105] Graham, 'The Veil,' *The Taken-Down God: Selected Poems 1997-2008* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2013), 36.
[106] Calvin Bedient, 'Infected by Time,' *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 3 May 2012, accessed 20 October 2014, https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/infected-by-time.

abstract phrase ('the wingbeat of the underneathly'). This commitment to the poetic consciousness as an autonomous, aestheticized space for the performance of an introspective search for identity *is itself* a notion of selfhood, a notion of selfhood that has not altered significantly over the span of Graham's oeuvre.[107]

Graham's poetics of autonomous, aetheticised space often manifests literally through imagery of interior space in her verse. One of Graham's earliest poems, 'Tennessee June,' speaks of a spirit with the body 'landlocked within it'; the body then becomes 'the sides of a riverbed giving in,' and then a 'porch'—which is the 'little box of the body.' In the poem's last line, the spirit appears to have made its way back into either the body or the mind, though it is soon to leave: 'the spirit breaks from you and you remain.'[108] This same uncertain inside/outside play of spirit, body, 'you,' 'me,' 'it,' continues in *Erosion*; 'Mist,' quoted above, is good evidence for this claim ('This quick intelligence that only knows [...] I live in it, it lives, in me'), as is the poem 'Still Life with Window,' from the same collection. The window figures the poststructuralist trope of liminality, much as the shoreline does in 'Mist' and a great many other Graham poems; inside the house, the speaker expresses a kind of hymn to indeterminacy:

> [...] I
>
> love it in here where it blurs, and nothing starts or
>
> ends, but all is
>
> waving, and colorless [...][109]

Graham describes this interior as a space free from determinate judgment. It contains no boundaries or edges, no distinctness or discreteness.

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[107] Kirsten Hotelling Zona has argued that Graham 'locates writerly authority not in the ruptured referent, nor in the lyric "I" [...] but in the play *between* these positions—between presence and absence, desire and dislocation,' and claims that this conception of poetic subjectivity guarantees the value of Graham's poetry. Zona's polar characterization grasps the structure of Graham's consistent indeterminateness accurately, but there is no reason this structure should be the mark of quality. 'Jorie Graham and American Poetry,' *Contemporary Literature* 46.4 (2005): 670.

[108] Jorie Graham, 'Tennessee June,' *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 8.

[109] Jorie Graham, 'Still Life with Window and Fish,' *Erosion* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 32-33. I have attempted to preserve Graham's line spacing in the quoted text.

A poem from her next collection, *The End of Beauty*, represents a search for the limits of identity using the image of smoke:

> She watched the smoke where it began what it left off
> What will I recognise it to have been she thought
> smoke smoke her fingers her eyes like static all over it
> Surely I can find it the point of departure she put her hand in
> The birds and the beaks of the birds the song the heard song
> She reached in what is it begins at the end she thought
> Where is the skin of the minutes will it ever come off
> She reached in there was no underneath what was this coiling over her fingers
> She reached in she could go no further she was sealed off
> It pushed back against her it was hell she could finally lean
> It was the given and it was finally given[110]

This formal presentation of this stanza works to impart a sense of urgency to the lines with extraordinary efficacy. This text comes out of poem, 'Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone,' that double-spaces the majority of its stanzas; the single-spacing of the above lines thus appears especially concentrated. A proliferation of monosyllables also rushes the reader through the lines, as do repeated consonant sounds—'smo*ke* smo*ke* her fingers her eyes like stat*ic* all over it / the *b*irds and the *b*eaks of the *b*irds.' Again, Graham dramatises an epistemological process, a search for boundaries ('where it began') that will serve as a reference point ('the point of departure') to enable the formation of judgements ('What will I recognise it to have been') about identity.

Searches for identity continue in subsequent collections. 'Are you there in your stillness?' one speaker from 1991's *Region of Unlikeness* asks herself. [111] In *The Errancy*, published six years later, a speaker plaintively declares: 'I tried to feel the thing that blossoms in me / [...] / I tried to feel the untitled thing that blossoms in me.'[112] More recent poems continue this preoccupation. Consider the following from 2005's *Overlord*:

> I shift my self. It's me I shout to the tree out the window
> don't you know it's me, a me—I really don't care what we call it,
> this personhood—a hood isn't a bad thing, a place to live, a self-blinding.[113]

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[110] Jorie Graham, 'Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone,' *The End of Beauty* (New York: Ecco Press, 1987), 60-61.
[111] Jorie Graham, 'From the New World,' *Region of Unlikeness* (New York: Ecco Press, 1991), 12.
[112] Jorie Graham, 'Untitled One,' *The Taken-Down God: Selected Poems 1997-2008* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2013), 6.
[113] Jorie Graham, 'Disenchantment,' *Overlord* (New York: Ecco Press, 2005), 61.

With the window, Graham again figures the self as contained in a liminal space. She plays on the meaning of hood, figuring 'personhood'—individual identity—as both a neighbour*hood* and a blindfold. The metaphor implies 'personhood' to be a condition of existence that is lived *in* and looked *out of*, but at once a conventional concept that misleads individuals about the genuine nature of their relationship to the world. What might this genuine nature be? Graham does not say, but she seems to have the intuition that such a genuine nature exists: 'don't you know it's me, a me.' The speaker's shouted 'don't you know' expresses a certain frustration; in a way it seems obvious, but she still cannot find the words for it. In general Graham's poetry finds itself most expert when dramatizing the failure of extant linguistic and conceptual apparatus for the exploration of mysteriousness of the self; frequently it resigns itself to this failure without much struggle: 'I really don't care what we call it.' But the poet has devoted an enormous number of pages to trying to figure out what to call it, to the point that figuring out what to call it seems like the poetic question in which she has become most invested.

Indeterminacy in Graham's poetics applies not only to the types of self-investigation considered above, but really to all forms of perception and judgment. Her usual poetic depiction of perception proceeds by fixing upon some object, and then showing how the categorical concepts of language ultimately cannot satisfactorily represent it. Often it works by breaking some object down into ever smaller component parts, until it reaches the limit of apprehensibility. These poetics incarnate a mode of critical judgment, identified by Adorno in the 1960s, that detects difference much more readily than it detects similarity and continuity. Adorno named it the 'progressive particularization' of all art,[114] according to which audiences understand artwork as the expression of the subjective freedom of an autonomous genius without reference to higher-order categorical concepts; such 'unchecked aesthetic nominalism,' according to Adorno, must terminate in a 'literal facticity' that would dispense entirely with higher-order frames of reference and understand each

[114] Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 201.

artwork strictly as the sum of its parts. The logic becomes aporetic when 'progressive particularization' becomes a 'directive' of the literary field, and thus a universal.[115] Adorno identifies this 'impasse' in the dialectic of universality and particularity as one of the driving tensions of modernist art.[116]

Graham engages progressive particularization most substantially through the pre-Socratic problem of plurality, or the one and the many. Zeno, for instance, claimed that a worldview that understands the word to contain multiplicity must be incoherent. In *Four Quartets* Eliot presents the opposition between the one and the many from a Christian perspective; the multiplicity of time-bound and transitory moments of the quotidian contrast with the timeless and eternal nature of revealed divine truth. While Graham frequently understands 'the many' in temporal terms, i.e. as multiple slices of time, she engages plurality most significantly through the visual, as many critics have noted. Stephen Yenser, for example, argues that 'Graham is deeply antinomian, perhaps even philosophically anarchist,' a position she expresses through 'a kaleidoscopic vision of things as she thinks they are.'[117] Yenser connects Graham's practice of visual representation to an epistemological orientation, claiming that emphasis on extreme heterogeneity maps onto a denial of the existence of rules, principles, and higher-order concepts—entities that possess no concrete visual reality. Yenser then goes on to trace Graham's 'kaleidoscopic' vision to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a connection with which other Graham critics have concurred.[118]

But for Hopkins, like Eliot, worldly variegation stands in opposition to divine oneness; he ultimately reveals the 'dappled things' of a poem like 'Pied Beauty' to be the products of a God 'whose beauty is past change.'[119] For Graham, by contrast, the world almost always amounts only to

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[115] *Ibid.* 220.
[116] See Peter Osborne's discussion of this impasse in *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), esp. 83-87.
[117] Stephen Yenser, 'On Jorie Graham's *Swarm*,' *A Poetry Criticism Reader*, ed. Jerry Harp and Jan Weissmiller (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 75.
[118] See e.g. Vendler, *Breaking*; Henry, 'Disjunctions,' 281-293; Daniel Tiffany, 'Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity,' *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 72-98.
[119] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Pied Beauty,' *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman Mackenzie (London: OUP, 1990), 144.

extreme heterogeneity; she rarely acknowledges the reality of the general, much less the universal. But she nevertheless represents impulses towards universal registers of experience. Consider 'Existence and Presence,' from 1993's *Materialism*:

> And how shall this soliloquy reverberate
> over the hillside? Who shall be
> the singleness over the yawning speckled lambency?

Graham experiences a kind of religious impulse towards the 'singleness,' but no coherent eternal unifying principle presents itself to her experience. Such a principle manifests only as a 'yawning' lack represented by the heterogeneous present given to the speaker's consciousness, signified using the Hopkins-like adjective 'speckled.' The poem continues:

> An alphabet flew over, made liquid syntax for a while,
> diving and rising, forking, a caprice of clear meanings, right pauses [...][120]

In the place where the speaker first looked for unifying singleness—'above'—she finds instead the mechanisms of language, which figure in most ways as its opposite: syntax is liquid and unstable, 'diving' and 'forking' unpredictably. Even the 'clear meanings' and 'right pauses' are the expressions of caprice, which suggests the likely illusoriness of any clarity or rightness they might offer. Again, Graham undercuts language as a means of representation.

The difference between the perspectives of Hopkins and Graham reflects to a great extent their difference in context: Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, takes the existence and coherence of the universal and unitary for granted; the conceptual and therefore poetic problem becomes how to reconcile the variegation given to experience with conviction in the reality of the absolute. *Four Quartets* holds a similar orientation towards this problem of reconciliation, but thinks it through temporally rather than visually. For Eliot the time-bound and the timeless exist as differing aspects of a higher unity; the poetic problem becomes the representation of these different aspects into a holistic view of time that manages to attain coherence. In his important reading of *Four Quartets*, John

[120] Jorie Graham, 'Existence and Presence,' *Materialism* (New York: Ecco Press, 1993), 142.

Xiros Cooper argues that *Four Quartets* distinguishes itself from Eliot's earlier work precisely by virtue of its ability to reconcile 'disparate parts into discernable unity. There is no wastelandism here; cohesiveness and coherence coincide fully, deliberately.'[121] Graham, by contrast—who has had for context an American humanities academy increasingly skeptical towards all claims of determinacy—takes for granted instead the world's fractured particularity. The conceptual and poetic problem becomes how to think about the reality of any higher-order concept in a world in which the very idea of communicating something 'singular' like a 'clear meaning' seems always already a solecism.

Consider the following lines from 'Evolution,' published in *Never* in 2002, which looks at the problem of the existence of higher-order concepts through the conceptual image of part-whole relationships. The poem follows the cognitive associations of a consciousness that seems to belong to a speaker walking along a seashore.

> I step on parts of
> faces, only parts. A whole face, what is that? From here
> it seems hard to make out, also a very empty
> thing. Like the border of a nationstate.

How does the speaker talk of the idea of the 'part' so comfortably while remaining perplexed by the concept of the 'whole,' on which the existence of the part would presumably be dialectically dependent? Phenomenological visual experience offers only momentary glimpses of part*s* to a perceiving subject; every perceived object has a reverse side whose really a subject can only infer. Wholes, by contrast, belong to a class of ideas of which there are no concrete cases. Thus the 'whole face,' considered as a 'thing,' seems 'empty': its only existence is conceptual, much like the 'border of a nationstate' (absent some demarcation like a fence).

The particularist worldview positively presented, the poem proceeds to set out particularism's shortcomings:

> Being comes into this, idles,
> over the interminable logic of
> manyness, the demand that *something exist*.

[121] John Xiros Cooper, *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 166.

> Bending to look close, a spiking-up and forth of burro wings,
> channelings, a turning, a re-turning on
> itself where the broad nouns of large clamshells
> flayed open by gulls lie
> in punctuating sunlit stillness [...][122]

Graham juxtaposes the absolute singleness—'Being'—with the world as it appears to a particularist—an overwhelming plurality, an undifferentiated, unorganized 'manyness.' Where the 'logic' of 'manyness' is interminable, seemingly stable entities will simply continue to subdivide into states of affairs ever more multiple and particular, much as the distance that Zeno travels will always divide in half one more time ('Zeno reasoned we would / never get there,' says one speaker from *Overlord*[123]). In a field in which such a logic operates, how can the (strangely agentless) demand that *something exist* be met?

The poem answers by showing how this logic inevitably changes when language enters the equation. Graham signals this change by introducing linguistic concepts onto the highly visual landscape of the poem.[124] It is especially significant that the 'nouns' are 'broad,' signifying that the sweep of a noun encompasses a great many possible referents, that language works ineluctably in categories, which will be to varying extents imprecise, and in just about all cases necessarily violent to a rigorously particularist practice of judgment. Graham broadens linguistic imagery further by contemplating the '*punctuating* sunlit stillness,' a linguistic image that envelops the entirety of the setting described. A decision to express an impression through language is always a decision to sacrifice its uniqueness, the rich phenomenological precision with which it lives in the consciousness of its perceiver, by placing it in a medium that is public and conventional (like the border of a nationstate). If communication is to take place, if the nexus between the souls of reader and writer that preoccupies Vendler is to occur, the sacrifice is a necessary one.

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[122] Graham, 'Evolution [How old are you?],' *Never* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 22-23. Graham's emphasis.
[123] Jorie Graham, 'Dawn Day One,' *The Taken-Down God: Selected Poems 1997-2008* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2013), 83.
[124] Graham effects a similar overlay in 'Existence and Presence,' considered above, and in 'The Phase After History,' in which Graham figures the hand of Lady Macbeth as 'a verb slowly descending onto / the free.' 'The *Region of Unlikeness* (New York: Ecco Press, 1991), 120-121.

Graham has been consistently preoccupied by the visual and the visual arts since her first collection, as a number of critics have noted.[125] 'Broad nouns' and 'punctuating stillness' express the governing opposition of this part of the poem as one between the visual and the verbal, which corresponds to the familiar opposition between private and public. W. H. Auden articulates the tension generated by this type of opposition concisely in a reflection on the difference between the painter, the composer, and the writer. The media of the painter and the composer, Auden notes, amount to 'their private property'; the writer must make do with the ineluctably public material that is language. This has certain downsides, but also significant compensation: the writer is more protected than the painter or the composer

> from another modern peril, that of solipsist subjectivity; however esoteric a poem may be, the fact that all its words have meanings which can be looked up in a dictionary makes it testify to the existence of other people. Even the language of *Finnegans Wake* was not created by Joyce *ex nihilo*; a purely private verbal world is not possible.[126]

This perspective, with its Wittgensteinian tenor,[127] suggests the reason that immersion in an environment committed to particularistic practices of judgment would be especially problematic for a poet. Language, ineluctably categorical, simply cannot accommodate an absolute demand for detailed mimesis of moment-to-moment cognition. The sacrifice of the singular luminous particularity that a perception possesses in a moment of consciousness is the price language pays for its efficacy as a communicative conceptual medium.

Adorno understood the various movements of the historical avant-garde to be a response to

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[125] See especially Karaguezian.

[126] W.H. Auden, 'Writing,' *The Dyer's Hand* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 21.

[127] In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes: 'For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.' Wittgenstein understands the idea of a 'language' to entail the arising of meaning through social practice; a private 'language' in which an individual assigned 'meanings' to referents by fiat would not, for the later Wittgenstein or Auden, be worthy of the name. §43, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 20. Ben Leubner's article 'Bedrock, Erosion and Form: Jorie Graham and Wittgenstein' associates the complexities of meaning in Graham's poetry and the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein in a general and ultimately unrigorous way; it does not examine questions of private language. *Twentieth Century Literature* 55.1 (2009): 36-57. Curiously Leubner does not examine Graham's quotation of the *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus* (1921) in *Materialism*, a quotation that Helen Vendler claims to be particular apposite and that Calvin Bedient believes to be especially inappropriate. Bedient has the stronger case: Graham's work undoubtedly resonates with the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, but has little affinity with the early Wittgenstein's positing of rigid correspondence between word, picture and thought. Vendler, 'Ascent into Limbo,' 30. Bedient, 'Postlyrically Yours,' 19.

the aporia of 'progressive particularization'; by producing art collaboratively, these artists would begin to resolve the contradictory universalization of particularity by, as Peter Osborne has written, 'entering into a new kind of relation with universals—both old and new.'[128] But even if the 'isms' indeed managed to arrest the 'progress of particularization' for a time, this progress continues apace in the creative writing program, which—despite its location within a rule-bound institution—maintains a deep investment in a conception of creative practice that remains fundamentally mysterious. The idea of the poet as the expressive genius of an authentic selfhood that resists determinate judgment, demanding to be treated in its particularity, thrives within the autonomous space of the contemporary writers' workshop. As Graham's (and Sacks') Harvard colleague Louis Menand has noted, 'keeping alive the belief that all this training and socialization never really touches the heart of the imaginative process [...] is what marks creative-writing programs as "creative."'[129] 'Creative,' as defined by Menand, has nothing to do with creation in the sense of producing something new, and everything to do with the maintenance of a central mysteriousness. I have argued that this slippage in the definition says something important about Graham's career and oeuvre, and about postwar American poetry more generally. An embrace of particularism, I have claimed, has deprived American poets like Graham of the conceptual resources necessary to think novelty.

Graham's poetics, I have argued, remain consistently skeptical about the possibility of genuinely representing anything about the world. Similar questions about representation and communication recur in every chapter of this thesis. Pound was preoccupied by the weakening correspondence between words and things, and deplored the university's role in this process. Bellow created work after work lamenting the institutional fragmentation wrought by developing specialization, a state of affairs that he regarded as fundamentally inhibitory to the functioning of a genuinely liberal society. And the work of David Foster Wallace, to which I turn in my final chapter,

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[128] Osborne, 84.

[129] Louis Menand, 'Show or Tell?' *The New Yorker*, 8 June 2009, 107-108. Menand has also written introductions to Sacks's painting catalogues.

asks how genuine communication could be possible in a world that he believes to be intrinsically determined by institutions. These writers, along with Graham, all faced problems of communication insofar as they had to negotiate the social worlds of the twentieth-century university, and they faced problems of communication insofar as they negotiate a conception of the literary experience as communication between reader and writer. This thesis has tried to argue that these two sets of communication problems reciprocally inform each other in a wide variety of work, and that in many cases the negotiation of these disparate problems can be literarily productive. Graham's career remains of interest above all because it has shown with particular clarity the changes in the literary field that have attended the rise of creative writing. But her poetry's relationship with problems of representation and communication consists most significantly in an effort to avoid engaging these problems entirely.

Chapter Five

The Requirements of the Profession: Institutions and the Self-Frustration of David Foster Wallace

In 1987 David Foster Wallace presented a short story, titled 'Here and There,' to his creative writing seminar at the University of Arizona. The story, which would go on to win an O. Henry Award and appear in his 1989 collection *Girl with Curious Hair,* tells of Bruce, a troubled poet/mechanical engineering student who suffers from the lingering effects of a traumatic relationship. In an effort to heal psychologically Bruce enrolls in a course of 'fiction therapy,' a manifestly ironic transformation of the writer's workshop. The structuring formal conceit of the piece is its claim to reproduce the transcript of a kind of three-way conversation ostensibly between Bruce, his ex-girlfriend Kate, and a 'fiction therapist.' Bruce's fiction therapy, however, requires that he invent Kate's part of the conversation as an exercise to help him see the world from a different perspective. Thus Wallace uses single quotation marks to denote Bruce's and Kate's (of course really Bruce's) utterances, and double quotation marks to denote the fiction therapist's. While the punctuation of the piece suggests that it exists as a pastiche of different voices, the development of 'Here and There' reveals the text as—in spite of the occasional vapid interjection from the fiction therapist—basically monoglossic, a feature that will become important to the story's literary historical engagement with Anglo-American modernism.

Bruce initially does not appear to be suffering from the adolescent narcissism frequently attributed to students of creative writing and psychotherapeutic analysands alike. His energies appear at first glance to be directed externally towards problems of engineering and mathematics, as well as his senior thesis, an epic poem. One of the points of contention between Bruce and the ventriloquized Kate is Bruce's obsessive dedication to his work. Bruce wants to become the 'first really great poet of technology'; dissatisfied with the slipshod inexactness of extant semantic systems, he intends to import the nonreferential beauty of mathematics into the arena of poetry: ''Words as

fulfillers of the function of signification in artistic communication will wither like the rules of form before them,'' he says. ''Meaning will be clean.''[1] Rather than a narcissist preoccupied with his personal psychodrama at the expense of literary tradition, Bruce sees himself as a quasi-prophetic, literary-historical figure who will be the first to achieve an unprecedented Adornian fusion of scientific and literary discourse: ''I sense the impending upheaval of a great cleaning, a coming tidiness foaming at every corner of meaning [. . .] A new age and a new understanding of beauty as range, not locus.'"[2] Bruce frequently speaks in the register of a modernist prophet, whose aims seem comparable to those of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus: to 'forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race.'[3] Bruce's desire for cleanliness further compares to a recognizably modernist impulse, expressed in discourses of cultural hygiene prominent in early-twentieth-century diagnoses of 'sick' societies in the work of such figures as Ezra Pound.[4]

Utterance in this sort of register prepares the way for the tremendous bathos Wallace manages to produce as the fiction therapist urges the reader to understand Bruce's extraordinary ambitions/diction as a transparent attempt to repress bourgeois neurosis. '"I sense feeling being avoided not confronted Bruce."'[5] The language Wallace gives the fiction therapist often seems a mixture of the clichéd language of therapy, as above, and the clichéd language of literary criticism, as in the following: '"Bruce here I feel compelled to remind you that fiction therapy in order to be at all effective must locate itself and operate within a strenuously yes some might even say harshly limited defined structured space. It must be confronted as text which is to say fiction which is to say project."'[6] Leaving the speech of the fiction therapist substantially unpunctuated allows Wallace to

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[1] David Foster Wallace, 'Here and There,' *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1989), 155.
[2] *Ibid.* 155.
[3] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1999), 252-253. Wallace reworks this famous sentence in the title of his short story 'The Soul Is Not a Smithy,' first published in 2003 in *AGNI* and later collected in *Oblivion* (2004). The relevance of the phrase to the story's content is not immediately obvious, and I have not come across a critical account that explains the function of the titular allusion satisfactorily.
[4] On this topic see Robin G. Schulze's *The Degenerate Muse: American Nature, Modernist Poetry, and the Problem of Cultural Hygiene* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).
[5] Wallace, 'Here and There,' 156.
[6] *Ibid.* 153.

play up the verbal tics that bespeak the therapist's banality (and creates a marked contrast with the Bruce's much more densely punctuated grandiloquence): the fiction therapist agrees with himself ('yes'), and uses the construction 'some might even say' to suggest a conclusion without taking responsibility for it. The triple 'which is to say' equivalence aspires to sophistication, but in the end the comparative analysis seems without substance; comparing 'text' to 'fiction' to 'project' does not contribute to the clarity of the phrase.

Bruce dreams of transcending the messiness of referentiality and creating a pure verbal object; he seeks freedom for his artistic practice from previous aesthetic traditions, 'rules of form,' and understands his new poetics as a fundamental rupture, an 'upheaval.' But in the end the story insists upon Bruce's—as well as the fiction therapist's—implication in a matrix of semantic systems that admit no possibility of transcendence. The story, masquerading as a conversation between two lovers, transparently exists as a monologue guided by the occasional therapeutic prompt; illusions of the possibility of communication between selves give way to a bleak solipsism. The fiction therapist's language turns out to be determined by discourses of therapy and literary criticism; Bruce's language turns out to be determined by the conventions of a mode of literary realism institutionalized by the creative writing program, which in Wallace's satirical treatment becomes an absurd lyricism. Here Wallace parodies a mode of writing that around the same time he labeled 'Workshop Hermeticism': this subgenre describes

> fiction over which Writing-Program pre- and proscriptions loom with the enclosing force of horizons: no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past, without near-diagnostic physical description; no image undissolved into regulation Updikean metaphor; no overture without a dramatized scene to 'show' what is 'told.'[7]

'Here and There' attempts to devastate a kind of naïve romanticism that Wallace understands as common to the creative writing program and therapy, characterized by a belief in the possibility of utterance as unconditioned self-expression.

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[7] David Foster Wallace, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,' *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 40.

Thus Wallace explodes Bruce's pretensions to self-creation through language, and in the story's penultimate phrase reveals him to be simply another neurotic compensating for the fragility of his ego: 'I believe […] that I'm afraid of absolutely everything there is.'[8] In exploding these pretensions Wallace creates satire of a high order, but the moral thrust of the story remains ambiguous. Wallace portrays therapy/creative writing as an ineffective institution that dangles illusory possibilities of authenticity and wholeness in front of its analysands/students, yet the story does not seem to believe that a more assured and directed way of life might be possible. It ends with passive acknowledgement of pervasive fear; since 'fiction therapy' has been ironically eviscerated in the preceding text, Bruce finishes the story without hope of achieving either a more authentic mode of expression, or an ameliorated condition of mental and emotional health.

This satire of workshop/therapy culture has literary historical implications, given the modernist overtones of Bruce's verbal register. Wallace implies that, under different circumstances, a person who speaks and thinks like Bruce might become James Joyce; instead, in the context of the late-modern United States, modernist ambition can no longer be taken seriously, amounting to a sign of delusion and disturbance. Desire to achieve a large-scale intervention in the tradition of poetry cannot be taken on its own terms; it rather amounts to a second-order symptom of personal neurosis. The unit of analysis invested with ultimate explanatory power has become the individual consciousness and its conditioning traumas. Wallace shows ambivalence on this question, in this story and throughout the career that he would develop over the subsequent two decades. While at moments, as in much of 'Here and There,' he seems to argue that this mode of thought leads ineluctably to narcissism and triviality, at other times this mode of thought seems to govern his own thinking and behaviour.

Wallace's position with respect to modernism has received extraordinarily little attention from critics, even in spite of the explicit continuities between *Ulysses* (1922) and Wallace's *magnum*

[8] Wallace, 'Here and There,' 172.

opus Infinite Jest (1996), possibly because his relationship with American postmodernist fiction seems especially immediate and influential. The influence of such writers as Don DeLillo and John Barth can be easily detected in much of Wallace's fiction, and his pronouncements about the exhaustion of postmodernist modes of apprehension and representation in interviews and essays have become extremely well known, to the point of having formed a crucial part of Wallace's literary reputation. Particularly in view of pressing literary critical questions about the relationship between the modernist and postwar American literary fields, it is worth thinking in detail about the ways in which Wallace inherits, complicates, and resists a modernist legacy. This chapter argues that Wallace articulates a vision of the contemporary literary field in which modernism has become impossible, and that he sees the development of the creative writing program as the key contributing factor to this impossibility.

I make this argument in a scholarly context in which critics have begun to pay significantly more attention to the role institutions have played in the formation of twentieth-century literature in general, and in the formation of Wallace's oeuvre in particular. Mark McGurl, most notably, has argued that the Anglo-American modernism of the early part of the twentieth century has become institutionalized in the form of the creative writing program. McGurl 'traces the fate of U.S. literary modernism after World War II, when the modernist imperative to "make it new" was institutionalized as another form of original research sponsored by the booming, science-oriented universities of the Cold War era.'[9] McGurl has also written an article devoted to Wallace's relationship with the creative writing program that understands Wallace as a 'quintessential program figure.'[10] Other critics have seconded this view of Wallace as a paradigmatic product of creative writing. Lee Konstantinou, for instance, has written: 'Wallace was avowedly a creature of the school […] an exemplar of US education, a hyperthyroidal instance of what creative writers have the

[9] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2009), 4.
[10] Mark McGurl, 'The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program,' *boundary 2* 41.3 (2014): 32.

potential to become during the program era.'[11] But it is difficult to see how Wallace could be said to have 'avowed' himself a creature of the school, since—as I shall show—he almost without reservation goes out of his way to deplore the effect of the creative writing program upon his own literary work, as well as the postwar American literary field more generally. Konstantinou appears to want to adduce Wallace as an example of literary potential maximized through symbiosis with the university, yet his choice of adjective—'hyperthyroidal'—seems an extraordinarily unfortunately piece of diction for the furtherance of this case, given that hyperthyroidism generally produces symptoms of anxiety, fatigue and weight loss. Brian McHale has written at length of Wallace's investment in various forms of institutions, alleging that for Wallace the institution amounts to a 'world-building and world-sustaining apparatus';[12] while Alexander Rocca has alleged that 'Wallace's work implies a pragmatic recognition that, in the conditions of modernity, institutions are the vehicles that transform genius into practical power.'[13] This chapter argues that Wallace's critics have misperceived his relationship with institutions, a misperception connected to a prevalent critical misperception of the general role that institutions have played in the postwar American literary field. As for Ezra Pound, as for Saul Bellow, and to a certain extent as for Jorie Graham, who writes of the creative writing program spoiling the silence she requires to write poetry, for Wallace a highly critical view of his institutional context formed a crucial element of his intellectual and aesthetic landscape, as well as an important proxy for the thinking through of questions about the purpose and function of literature.

The claim that Wallace could serve as creative writing's greatest success story can be contested from a number of directions; likely the easiest and most persuasive is to look at what Wallace explicitly said about the teaching of creative writing from the perspective of both student

[11] Lee Konstantinou, 'The World of David Foster Wallace,' *boundary 2,* 40.3 (2013): 83.
[12] Brian McHale, '*The Pale King*, or, "The White Visitation,"' in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 204.
[13] Alexander Rocca, '"I don't feel like a genius": Davis Foster Wallace, Trickle-Down Aesthetics, and the MacArthur Foundation,' *American Literature* 71.1 (2017): 88.

and teacher. In a 1996 interview with the journalist David Lipsky (that would later become the book *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* [2010] and the basis for the film *The End of the Tour* [2015]), Wallace recalls what happened when he submitted the story considered above, 'Here and There,' to his graduate workshop in creative writing at the University of Arizona in 1987. In Wallace's telling, his professor, the novelist Jonathan Penner, responded with the following words: 'We were really excited by your portfolio. I hope this isn't representative of the work you're hoping to do for us. We'd hate to lose you.'[14] Significantly, no written record of this interaction remains, and it is entirely possible that Wallace indulged in personal mythmaking to some degree when he told this story to Lipsky.[15] A crucial aim of this chapter will be to separate myth from fact as far as possible by developing a rigorous account of Wallace's relationship with the creative writing program grounded in substantial new textual evidence from Wallace's archive at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas. But however thinly documented, Wallace's account of the incident remains of interest because it reflects an attitude he wishes to project, and the strange way in which the account emerges in the text of Lipsky's interview indicates that it holds a place of significance in Wallace's self-conception. Wallace first recalls the incident in general terms; when Lipsky prompts him for the exact quote Wallace provides it, as Lipsky writes, 'Right off the top of his head,' suggesting that the incident had proved consequential enough in Wallace's personal history to lodge in his memory with unusual clarity.[16] Wallace goes on to describe the general intellectual and creative climate at Arizona:

> It was just representative of those guys, those guys were bitter and they were dishonest.

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[14] David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (New York: Broadway, 2010), 264.

[15] This anecdote also appears in Lipsky's profile of Wallace for *Rolling Stone,* collected in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (2012), and in the extensive interview transcript published under the title *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (2010). In this interview Lipsky suggests that the 'We'd hate to lose you' comment came in the form of written feedback, whereas Max suggests it had been a verbal utterance. (No work containing written feedback from Wallace's time in the MFA program at Arizona has been preserved in Wallace's archive at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas at Austin.) In an endnote, Max describes Penner's recollection of his words: "'As I interpret them," [Penner] says, "they mean we'd hate to lose him as a real writer, hate to see him sink to a trivial level. I don't remember telling David that, but I certainly felt it."' Penner's interpretation does not substantially ameliorate the slightly menacing disingenuousness of the comment. D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), 313n14.

[16] Lipsky, 264.

> They were helpful in weird ways. I mean they had good stuff to say. But they were . . . wait. I'm about to come up with a quote. I think it's Emerson who says, 'Who you are shouts so loudly, I cannot hear what you say.'[17]

Penner, a much more traditional realist, had clashed with Wallace repeatedly over the extravagantly metafictional style of Wallace's submissions. Wallace responded by attempting to aggravate his professor even further, imitating his mannerisms amongst his classmates and submitting a satirical story to the workshop featuring a Jewish protagonist whom Penner, a conservative Jew, found 'mildly offensive.'[18] I want to emphasize two aspects of this anecdote that will repeatedly emerge and develop in different contexts in what follows. The first is Wallace's sabotaging of his own position within his institutional environment. The second is his perception, expressed in part through his misquotation of Emerson, that the creative writing program—and later I will show how he extends this critique to institutional environments more generally—produces an intellectual and creative climate of disingenuousness and insincerity.

Wallace's appeal to Emerson sketches the Arizona creative writing program as an institution defined precisely by the fact that its inhabitants do not mean what they say. Yet McGurl, along with other institutionally-oriented critics of Wallace, are nevertheless onto something when they perceive Wallace's attraction to the creative writing program. Wallace mounts a scathing critique of institutions, yet he remains perversely drawn to them as well. He exists in a strong relationship of dependency with respect to a variety of institutional forms—universities, mental hospitals, different forms of therapy, book publishing—and expresses vituperative dissatisfaction with all of them throughout his career, yet he never shows much inclination to resist or remove himself from these environments.

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[17] *Ibid.* The quotation in this form has become popularly attributed to Emerson, though he never wrote the sentence in these words. It derives from 1875's *Letters and Social Aims*: 'What you are stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary.' Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. VIII: Letters and Social Aims*, ed. Glen M. Johnson and Joel Myerson (Cambridge, M.A.: Belknap Press, 2010), 52.

[18] Max, 61-64. The work that particularly offended Penner is likely to have been "Solomon Silverfish," a story about an eponymous Jewish lawyer whose wife suffers from terminal breast cancer, and who speaks in an exaggerated Jewish vernacular.

Consider a rough outline of Wallace's productivity correlated with his institutional circumstances. Wallace had conceived and written the bulk of his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996) when his association with the creative writing academy was comparatively insubstantial, before he had accepted his first tenure-track job at Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal; fiction from this period, which includes his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) and the collection of stories *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), represents 1,919 pages of completed, published fiction in the decade that elapsed between the beginning of his writing life in 1986 and *Infinite Jest*'s 1996 publication. After accepting his job with Illinois State, and later the Roy E. Disney Professorship in Creative Writing at Pomona College (which he took up in 2002), Wallace managed to complete just two collections of short stories, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and *Oblivion* (2004), which together account for only 617 pages of completed, published fiction between 1986 and his death in 2008. The critical response to these two volumes was dramatically less positive than the response to *Infinite Jest*, a trend that can be conveniently perceived through D. T. Max's writing on Wallace for the *New Yorker*. Max's first article on Wallace, out of which his biography grew, bears the title 'The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace's struggle to surpass *Infinite Jest*.'[19] A later article that appeared on the *New Yorker*'s website bears the title 'Beyond *Infinite Jest*,' and addresses the downward trajectory of Wallace's critical reception after the mid-1990s, noting: 'Nothing Wallace would publish after *Infinite Jest* would hit such a chord again.'[20] Wallace did produce two well-received collections of journalism and essays in 1997 and 2005; after his death the text *The Pale King*, created out of a mass of fictional fragments Wallace left behind after his suicide through the enormous labours of Wallace's editor Michael Pietsch, appeared in 2011, although Wallace can hardly be said to have completed this novel in publishable form. As I will set out in detail below, in the years 1986-1996 Wallace's relationship with the university was enormously turbulent, yet this amounted to his most

[19] D. T. Max, 'The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace's struggle to surpass *Infinite Jest*,' *The New Yorker*, 9 March 2009, 48-61.
[20] D. T. Max, 'Beyond *Infinite Jest*,' *The New Yorker*, Page Tuner, 19 February 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/beyond-infinite-jest.

prolific fictional period and led to the production of his most celebrated literary achievement. In the years 1996-2008, Wallace held tenured, prestigious positions in creative writing, yet his productivity and critical reputation both declined substantially. This timeline belies the notion of a symbiotic relationship between Wallace and his supporting institutions, and decisively undercuts the idea that he could stand as a poster-child for the literary epoch that McGurl has labelled the Program Era.

The first major statement in the history of Wallace's disparagement of the creative writing program comes in the 1988 essay 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,' written shortly after Wallace finished his graduate education at the University of Arizona and first published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. In this essay, Wallace generally castigates workshops for functioning as engines of stylistic conformity, in language whose vehemence remains startling. (In 2014, the novelist and critic Chad Harbach collected a number of recent reflections on the creative writing program in the volume *MFA vs. NYC*, including 'Fictional Futures,' which—with the possible exception of Elif Batuman's contribution—stands as the harshest analysis of creative writing in the book.[21]) 'A sheepheaded willingness to toe any line just because it's the most comfortable way to survive is contemptible in any student,' Wallace writes. 'But students are just symptoms. Here's the disease: in terms of rigor, demand, intellectual and emotional requirement, a lot of Creative Writing Programs are an unfunny joke.'[22] Wallace's logic does not seem entirely coherent here. He betrays an initial temptation to blame the temperament of individual students for their 'contemptible' conformity, but then argues that this conformity turns out to be a second-order effect arising out of the structural conditions of the creative writing institution. This tension encapsulates Wallace's position with reference to institutions more generally, which features a desire for an assertion of individualism that will enable transcendence of restrictive institutional boundaries. It ultimately gives

[21] *MFA vs. NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction*, ed. Chad Harbach (New York: n+1, 2014).
[22] Wallace, 'Fictional Futures,' 61-62.

up on that possibility and settles for critiques of the institutional *status quo* that are almost invariably incisive and highly amusing, but seem troublingly aimless and repetitive over the course of a career.

More generally, this early period of Wallace's career strongly reflected these types of tensions between desire for individualistic self-assertion and despondent passivity in the face of the determinism of the institution. In his extended interview with David Lipsky, Wallace describes the experience of studying philosophy as a graduate student in 1989. He found himself dangerously depressed, drinking 'real heavy.' He would then swing in the other direction: 'for two weeks I wouldn't drink, and I'd run ten miles every morning. You know, that kind of desperate, like very *American*, "I will fix this somehow, by taking radical action."'[23] But these surges of willpower would not last long, and after less than one term as a graduate student Wallace found himself in two rather different institutions—first in McLean Hospital, a psychiatric institution associated with Harvard, and subsequently in Granada House, a halfway facility for recovering addicts. Health insurance from Harvard paid Wallace's medical bills. In his biography of Wallace, D. T. Max comments: 'McLean was the storied holding tank for many literary depressives, from Sylvia Plath to Robert Lowell, and it occurred to Wallace's friends that this gave him at least some comfort, that he thought of himself as at a mental-health Yaddo.'[24] Diane Middlebrook has noted that the poet Anne Sexton harbored an explicit ambition to gain admittance to McLean in order to place herself in the Lowell-Plath lineage; in Middlebrook's words McLean held 'an odd glamour as the hospital of choice for the occasionally mad artists of Boston.'[25] Thus in spite of much evident suffering, Wallace could also think of institutionalization redemptively as a consecration of his literary ability, and of his struggles with mental health as in some way desirable.

At a similar moment, Wallace began to develop a piece of writing that explored the tension between the individual and the institution at length, and in more philosophically sophisticated terms.

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[23] Lipsky, 63; Lipsky's emphasis.
[24] Max, *Every Love Story*, 136.
[25] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago, 1991), 308.

Published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1990, Wallace's long, winding review of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) grapples with—amongst other questions—the relationship between intelligence and unhappiness, or as Wallace puts it, in reference to Wittgenstein, 'how one of the smartest & most important contributors to modern thought could have been such a personally miserable son of a bitch.'[26] Wallace effectively understands Markson's novel as a dramatization of the problem of skepticism, and posits its protagonist's dilemma as uncertainty with respect to the existence of both the world and herself. He characterizes the book's central thrust as an affirmation of existence in the face of this possibility: '"I EXIST," is the impulse that throbs under most voluntary writing—& all good writing. And "I EXIST" would have been, in my ungraceful editorial hands, the title of Markson's novel.'[27]

Wallace draws this dialectical model of skepticism and affirmation from the work of the philosopher Stanley Cavell, with whom he studied briefly at Harvard. Although the Markson review makes little overt reference to Cavell's thought (though it does bear an epigraph from his work), the extent of Wallace's debt to Cavell emerges from examination of Wallace's copies of Cavell's texts in his personal library. Wallace annotates an essay from Cavell's 1988 collection of lectures *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* titled 'Being Odd, Getting Even: Descartes, Emerson, Poe' with particular thoroughness, making frequent explicit reference to Markson and *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in the margins. This essay would structure how Wallace imagined the possibility of individual transcendence of determining institutional contexts for the remainder of his life, even if he rarely found himself able to make this possibility a reality.

Cavell's piece posits a connection between the Cartesian *cogito* and Emersonian individualism that pivots around a key sentence from Emerson's essay 'Self-Reliance' (first published 1841): 'Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say "I think," "I am," but quotes some

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[26] David Foster Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*,' *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 79.
[27] *Ibid.* 83.

saint or sage.'[28] Cavell understands Emerson to have taken the Cartesian *cogito* not as an operation of logical deduction, but as a performative utterance of affirmation. In a passage underlined by Wallace, Cavell writes: 'This twist is Descartes's discovery that my existence requires, hence permits, proof (you might say authentication)—more particularly, requires that if I am to exist I must name my existence, acknowledge it.' Wallace glosses this passage in the margin: 'If it can be nominated, it must be.'[29] Wallace highlights further elaboration upon Emerson's appropriation of Descartes on the opposite page, writing 'Use for end > performative revision of cogito,' presumably writing himself guidance for the future structuring of the Markson review. 'Her final statement *is* cogito,' Wallace writes in the same margin,[30] likely referring to a proposition he quotes in his review from Markson's protagonist Kate:

> If I exist, nothing exists outside me
> But
> If something exists outside me, I do not exist.[31]

In the header of Cavell's essay, Wallace scrawls: '<u>VITAL,</u>'[32] and the marginal references to *Wittgenstein's Mistress* continue as Cavell's argument unfolds. 'Witt's <u>Mist</u>" Wallace writes in the header one page on,[33] and compares Cavell's descriptions of different mental states to Kate's consciousness.

But the confounding aspects of Wallace's approach to Cavellian-Emersonian affirmation come out in these marginalia as well. Towards the middle of the essay, Cavell sounds again the idea that quotation forms the negative of individualistic affirmation: 'in not daring to say something what we do instead is quote.' Wallace underlines the phrase, along with the first three sentences of the following paragraph: 'There is a gag here that especially appeals to contemporary sensibilities.

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[28] Quoted in Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 106.
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] *Ibid.* 107.
[31] Quoted in Wallace, 'Empty Plenum,' 115.
[32] Cavell, 'Being Odd,' 107.
[33] *Ibid.* 108.

Emerson writes, "Man dares not say . . . but quotes." But since at that moment he quotes Descartes, isn't he confessing that he too cannot say but only quote?'[34] In the margin, Wallace draws a rudimentary face, with the mouth a hard line of anger and eyebrows slanted severely. Cavell's thought process here mimics the structure of self-frustration that Wallace would repeat so frequently: Attempts to transcend linguistic determinism find themselves mere reproductions of the words of others, and pretense to originality finds itself exploded once again.

Cavell shapes Wallace's views on the impact of institutions with unusual strength, not only because his formulation of individualism lends itself particularly to considerations of freedom and conformity, but also because Wallace had an especially intense personal reaction to experiencing Cavell's teaching as a graduate student. D. T. Max reports in his biography:

> [Wallace] went to a seminar taught by Stanley Cavell, a philosopher who held a special place in Wallace's esteem. Cavell's lively, learned, but friendly approach to philosophical investigations in books like *Must We Mean What We Say?* was the closest Wallace knew to his own; indeed Cavell may have been one of his literary models. But in person Cavell seemed to be talking only to himself and his initiates, who circled him like acolytes. Wallace, one student remembers, interrupted the professor and asked him to 'make himself intelligible please,' a snarl on his face. Shortly afterward, he stopped going.[35]

Max correctly identifies Wallace's dissatisfaction as having to do with what he perceived to be Cavell's establishment of a closed, impenetrable circle of discourse accessible only to the initiate, but he registers neither the irony nor the significance of this dissatisfaction. Wallace understood Cavell as the philosopher who could point towards a way out of an institutional culture that strongly deterred individuals from 'daring to say something'; arriving at Harvard, Wallace discovered that Cavell was not only just as subject to this institutional logic as anyone else, but even perhaps an example of an extreme case. In the context of Cavell's thought, the request to 'make himself intelligible please' takes on an enormous irony, because Cavell uses the phrase 'making oneself intelligible' as a synonym for the existence-affirming performance of the *cogito* he discusses in 'Being Odd, Getting

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[34] *Ibid.* 113.
[35] Max, *Every Love Story*, 132-133.

Even.' (For instance: 'the conversation required to assess my life is one designed to make myself intelligible [to others, by way of making myself intelligible to myself].'[36]) This would almost certainly account for Max's source's verbatim recollection of Wallace's spiteful comment.

Thus Wallace shows frequent antipathy for Cavell in his marginalia. In his preface, Cavell writes: 'One who is as bent as I seem to be on intellectual adventures that require conducting my continuing education in public must count on friendly and productive occasions.' Beside this comment Wallace writes: 'Dick.'[37] In 'Being Odd, Getting Even' Cavell parenthetically speculates: '(The mere complication of self-reference, the stock-in-trade of certain modernizers, may amount to nothing more than the rumor of my existence.)' Next to this Wallace writes, 'Cavell,' implying that the stock-in-trade Cavell's own philosophical work may amount to nothing more than self-reference.[38] Immediately to the right of Cavell's earlier parsing of Emerson's formulation of the *cogito*—'in not daring to say something what we do instead is quote'—Wallace notes, 'DW, or C's own students,' presumably referring to his experience of observing Cavell's 'acolytes' parroting the master's ideas back to him.[39] Intriguingly, Wallace places himself—'DW'—in the company of 'C's own students,' whom he evidently despised. In all likelihood he does not indict himself for specifically the same crime of sycophancy, but rather for remaining subject to the same general tendency of using borrowed language instead of affirming his own existence and speaking for himself. In Cavell's work, Wallace sees a version of himself—an intellectual/emotional matrix preoccupied by the possibilities of genuinely individualistic expression in the face of seemingly overwhelming conditions of determinism. Wallace criticizes Cavell most harshly when he believes Cavell to have capitulated to institutional pressures of conformity, a flaw that he seems to fear may be endemic to his own creative apparatus.

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[36] Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2004), 49.
[37] Stanley Cavell, 'Preface and Acknowledgments,' *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), v.
[38] Cavell, 'Being Odd,' 115.
[39] *Ibid.* 113.

Wallace's scribbling of his own initials in the margin next to Cavell's passage represents a comparatively benign instance of a more troubling characteristic of his practice of annotation, which sheds further light on his practice of self-frustration. Examination of his personal library held at the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin reveals his fondness for annotating textual passages with the letters 'DFW' or 'DW' as a way of marking description that he understands as applicable to his own constitution or experience. Wallace would read this way in texts from different genres; he writes 'DFW' beside a passage in Don DeLillo's *Americana* (1971), for instance, describing a character admitting that he had not produced the book everyone had thought he had been working on.[40] But annotations of this type appear more prolifically in his collection of popular psychology and self-help. The pages of his copy of R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960) contain extensive underlining in multiple colors of ink, and prolific marginalia. With reference to a passage on depression and separation anxiety, Wallace writes beneath: 'DFW, Summer, 1985.'[41] Next to a paragraph about schizoid tendencies and vulnerability, Wallace notes: 'DFW in anxiety-phase, 79-83.'[42] Beneath a case study of 'engulfment,' Wallace writes: 'Like DFW's loss of ability to write fiction.'[43] Wallace has been popularly read as an exemplar of humble authenticity, especially in the more popular press, and his relationship with self-help texts has been interpreted this way; Maria Bustillos, in a journalistic piece on Wallace and self-help that appeared in *The Awl* in 2011, concludes: 'I left the Ransom Centre wondering whether one of the most valuable parts of his legacy might not be in persuading us to put [popular self-help author] John Bradshaw on the same level as Wittgenstein.'[44] I would argue that Wallace's annotations instead suggest that this distinction should not be abandoned too quickly. Wallace's self-help library does not yield a picture of an intellectual democratizer embarked upon a constructive pursuit of self-understanding, but rather a drive to revisit

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[40] Don DeLillo, *Americana* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 307.
[41] R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), 54.
[42] *Ibid.* 76.
[43] *Ibid.* 43.
[44] Maria Bustillos, 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Private Self-Help Library,' *The Awl*, 5 April 2011, https://theawl.com/inside-david-foster-wallaces-private-self-help-library-f84d5f56fccd.

compulsively the most psychically destructive periods of his life, along with the personality characteristics he judged responsible for these episodes. While Wallace has gained a reputation for theoretical sophistication and general learnedness, a good proportion of his more scholarly books do not show evidence of having been read through completely, much less repeatedly (judging from annotations as well as the conditions of the books' spines); only a few essays in the two Cavell books in Wallace's collection, for instance, show evidence of highlighting and marginalia. His self-help books, by contrast, show clear evidence of multiple, thorough rereadings; *The Divided Self* has been annotated with at least four different colors of ink, and some passages have been underlined with more than one pen.

The relationship these annotations imply between Wallace and self-help looks fundamentally the same as the perspective on therapy Wallace offers in one of his best-known short stories, 'The Depressed Person' (first published in *Harpers* in 1998, later collected in *Brief Interviews*). The story charts in painstaking detail the various therapeutic manoeuvres that the titular 'depressed person' undertakes in order to deal with her 'terrible and unceasing emotional pain,' dramatising the ineluctably recursive way in which each new therapeutic manoeuvre begets a novel form of suffering and thus further occasions for therapeutic intervention. In the story's conclusion the depressed person asks, through the narrator's close third-person voice: 'what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared to herself to be?'[45] The narrative implies that the terms the depressed person herself supplies are the correct ones, and that therapy amounts to a system for perpetuating illusions of hope for individuals who turn out to be fundamentally irredeemable. Much as with the creative writing program in 'Here and There,' Wallace suggests no credible or compelling alternative method for the amelioration of unendurable mental states, and remains content with a passive—if acutely acidic—critique of the *status quo*.

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[45] David Foster Wallace, 'The Depressed Person,' *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2007), 69.

Questions of passive critique apply more broadly to Wallace's larger career trajectory, for given the vehemence of Wallace's jeremiad against the creative writing program in 'Fictional Futures,' the question of why he remained in an institution he found so profoundly deleterious cannot be avoided. The thesis, advanced by various of Wallace's institutional critics, that educational institutions made a positive contribution to Wallace's literary productivity does not stand up under scrutiny. Attention to Wallace's career rather suggests that the creative writing program was more or less incidental to his most notable success, 1996's *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's association with the writers' workshop was comparatively insubstantial and transient during his formative years as a novelist in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and his more permanent and substantial association with creative writing only began after he had already completed the bulk of *Infinite Jest*; after accepting his first tenure-track position, Wallace never produced another complete novel, nor did he produce another critically-lauded full-length work of fiction in his lifetime.[46]

Wallace embarked on his career as a creative writing teacher immediately after graduating from Arizona, returning to his undergraduate *alma mater* Amherst to take up a part-time position. He had a miserable time. 'Please please get me out of here,' he wrote in an unpublished letter to his agent Bonnie Nadell. 'I had forgotten how much I hated Amherst College. […] I drink a lot.'[47] In January 1988 Wallace returned to his parents' house in Illinois, having failed to find another creative writing job; in the spring, he returned to Tucson, where he found work in a bakery. In the autumn he resumed teaching as an untenured instructor at Arizona, but lasted only a few weeks into the semester, and asked his parents to come and take him home, where he attempted suicide. Subsequent mental health treatment cost an enormous amount of money, which his insurance company did not entirely cover; his family made up the difference. Wallace managed to produce some work after making a kind of recovery, though his addiction issues remained; eventually he

[46] The following sketch of Wallace's institutional career generally follows the contours of Max's biography.
[47] David Foster Wallace, 'Letter to Bonnie Nadell,' 20 September 1988, Box 1, Folder 1, Bonnie Nadell Collection, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

decided to return to the academy as a graduate student in philosophy in the autumn of 1989. Wallace lasted only until late October, when confession of suicidal thoughts to the university health services department prompted another round of institutionalization, though this time student health insurance from Harvard would handle the costs.

After an extensive rehabilitation process, Wallace gradually resumed writing; he returned to academia in the fall of 1990 to another part-time position, this time at Emerson College in Boston, where he managed to remain for the entirety of the academic year, more or less without incident. But at the beginning of his second year at Emerson, in November of 1991, Wallace found himself in the hospital again, with a diagnosis of 'suicidal depression.'[48]

Wallace was released after two weeks, but did not complete the academic year, instead moving to Syracuse, where 'He lived on chocolate Pop-Tarts and soda, too poor to eat properly.'[49] Free from teaching commitments, he began to work avidly and productively on *Infinite Jest*, though this period also saw Wallace throw himself into therapy with a new level of commitment. According to Max, Wallace went to group therapy meetings and also retained a private therapist whom he paid in cash, because he lacked health insurance. Wallace's investigations focused on his mother, and he developed the hypothesis that she had been abused as a child by her father. Her consequent repression of this abuse, Wallace believed, led to her developing a thoroughgoing habit of denial, which 'set the stage for the denial of his own pain that lay behind his drug abuse and alcoholism.'[50] As a result of this therapy Wallace decided he should stop talking to his mother.

In the spring of 1992, Wallace's professional prospects began to look up. Little, Brown bought *Infinite Jest* for $80,000, a sum that enabled Wallace to survive comfortably without teaching, and, crucially, to buy health insurance. One year later, Wallace received an offer of a job at Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal, which he accepted in spite of his resolution to avoid

[48] Max, *Every Love Story*, 154.
[49] *Ibid.* 165.
[50] *Ibid.* 169.

teaching while completing *Infinite Jest*. The job would require him to teach only two classes per semester and lead to tenure, an arrangement so appealing that Wallace could not resist. In an unpublished letter to DeLillo, he reports: 'Illinois State has offered me this absurd job where I teach very little and do no committee stuff but still make enough to live on, and with a certain icky sense about availing myself of academic patronage I've decided to give it a try.'[51]

The appeal of the creative writing program to Wallace from the perspective of financial and lifestyle security cannot be denied, but I want to argue that this utilitarian appeal explains significantly less about Wallace's relationship with institutions than his compulsions around self-frustration. Wallace continued to teach even after attaining a level of financial security that few writers ever reach. In 1997, shortly after the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace received a MacArthur 'Genius' Fellowship worth $230,000, that easily could have funded retirement from the creative writing academy, for a few years at least.[52] Yet Wallace remained at Illinois State until he accepted Pomona College's offer to become the first Roy E. Disney Professor of Creative Writing in 2002.

The foregoing paragraphs sketch Wallace's relationships of dependence with respect to various institutions—the creative writing program, the mental health system, and his parents. Each of these relationships displays the same unresolving pattern of self-frustration, which bears resemblance to a condition once proposed for inclusion in the *DSM* labelled 'self-defeating personality disorder.'[53] A sufferer of this disorder 'chooses people and situations that lead to disappointment, failure, or mistreatment even when better options are clearly available,' amongst other criteria.[54] Wallace relies upon the mental health system to prop him up through his periods of most intense suffering, and as a

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[51] David Foster Wallace, 'Letter to Don DeLillo,' Box 10, Folder 10, Don DeLillo Papers, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.
[52] For an account of Wallace's MacArthur Fellowship see Rocca, 85-111
[53] For a brief discussion of the proposal of this disorder for the *DSM* see John Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997).
[54] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition – Revised (DSM-III-R)* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1987), 373-374.

source meaning through psychotherapy and self-help literature, yet his fiction mercilessly—if amusingly and insightfully—excoriates the American culture of therapy. He frequently relies upon his mother to care for him and support him financially—the paratextual matter of *Girl with Curious Hair* acknowledges 'The Mr and Mrs Wallace Fund for Aimless Children'[55]—yet also blames her for his addiction and his depression.

How does this paradigm of self-frustration manifest in Wallace's teaching practice? Wallace's teaching materials, partially collected at the Harry Ransom Centre, offer some clues, as do certain of Wallace's published comments on the subject. Consider the following remarks, made in the wake of the extraordinary success of *Infinite Jest*, and three years into Wallace's tenure at Illinois State:

> I was hired to teach creative writing, which I don't like to teach.
>
> There's two weeks of stuff you can teach someone who hasn't written fifty things yet and is still kind of learning. Then it becomes more a matter of managing various people's subjective impressions about how to tell the truth vs. obliterating someone's ego.[56]

Though Wallace begins his answer with an uncompromisingly clear statement, the remainder of his answer is more difficult to parse. Wallace thinks of the effective sphere of creative writing pedagogy as limited to a basic technical repertoire, combined with a threshold number of repetitions. He then suggests that the bulk of the teacher's responsibility has much more to do with ego-management than literary technique, implicitly invoking his familiar analogy between the writers' workshop and therapeutic institutions. Wallace seems to believe that the content of creative writing pedagogy falls short of the standard normally demanded of teaching that takes place in a university context. He had made this criticism directly a decade before in 'Fictional Futures,' concluding that creative writing programs amounted to an 'unfunny joke' in comparison to other humanities disciplines.

Although by most accounts Wallace was a dedicated teacher of creative writing fondly

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[55] David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1989), n.p.

[56] 'The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace – Laura Miller/1996,' *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 63.

remembered by his students,[57] all archival evidence suggests that his approach to his workshops was rather formulaic and uninspired, and thus consistent with the impoverished conception of teaching he set out in the 1996 interview. Wallace's teaching materials generally reflect preparation for class that could be described as meticulous but unremarkable.[58] Annotations on Wallace's teaching copies of short stories and essays tend to perceive structural features of texts, identifying third-person narration, for instance, or commenting on repeating structural devices (e.g. 'Yet another analogy'[59]). Wallace often also notes thematic shifts: 'self-pity,' Wallace writes on a copy of Lorrie Moore's short story 'People Like That Are the Only People Here';[60] he also notes that one character stands in for 'God'[61] and later scribbles 'Male vs. Female' in the header.[62] In general his comments reflect an exceedingly conventional structural-thematic approach to breaking down literary texts for his students. His major teaching textbook at Illinois State was the sixth edition of X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia's *An Introduction to Fiction*, a guide that acquaints students with different possible critical methods (historical, psychological, etc.) and advises them, for instance, on how to articulate a 'theme-statement' for a short story. (Wallace generated a handout for his class based on this section of the book.[63]) No evidence emerges that would reflect poorly on Wallace's professionalism, yet the methods indicated by the teaching materials in Wallace's archive suggest that there may be little

[57] See for instance a brief account on the *Paris Review* blog about the film director Paul Thomas Anderson, whom Wallace taught briefly at Emerson. See also Mac Barnett's article 'David Foster Wallace, my teacher,' which appeared in *The Guardian* in 2016. Neither piece offers much specificity about Wallace's pedagogical methods, and spends much more time on the ethical/inspirational dimensions of his teaching. Barnett concludes by comparing writing to having 'a real conversation,' because 'to have a real conversation, you have to figure out what you actually care about, and then you have to figure out how to make somebody else care too.' Dan Piepenbring, 'When David Foster Wallace Taught Paul Thomas Anderson,' *The Paris Review*, 6 January 2015, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/01/06/when-david-foster-wallace-taught-paul-thomas-anderson/; Mac Barnett, 'David Foster Wallace, my teacher,' *The Guardian*, 12 September 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/sep/12/david-foster-wallace-my-teacher.

[58] The collections of Wallace's teaching materials at the Harry Ransom Centre comprise syllabi, largely from his years at Illinois State and Pomona College, grammar/style exams, grammar/style handout sheets, and copies of published short stories and essays annotated for use in class; his personal library also contains copies of teaching manuals. It contains no examples of graded student work. (The archive also lacks material of this type that would testify to Wallace's own experience as a graduate student in creative writing at Arizona.)

[59] On a photocopy of George Saunders, *The Braindead Megaphone*, (New York: Riverhead, 2007), 13.

[60] Lorrie Moore, 'People Like That Are the Only People Here,' *The New Yorker*, 27 January 1997, 62.

[61] *Ibid.* 62.

[62] *Ibid.* 72.

[63] David Foster Wallace, 'Handout on THEME,' Undated, Box 32, Folder 11, David Foster Wallace Papers, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

continuity between a writer's ability to create highly innovative fictional forms, and his ability to bring a comparable degree of innovation to his teaching practice.

Many materials also relate to questions of basic grammar and style; a weekly handout wittily entitled 'Your Liberal Arts $s At Work' advises students on what renders clauses dependent or independent, and the correct usage of conjunctions. A take-home exam Wallace issued to his students at Illinois State in 1994 takes anonymized sentences from submitted student work and asks examinees to correct errors of syntax and usage: 'If you can't be sure what the original sentence is even saying, take your best guess; you won't be penalized.' (One example sentence: 'He is a morally bad individual, and has a huge amount of prejudices and hatreds.'[64]) An attitude not far from contempt emerges from these exercises, which seems to view the task of correcting such pedestrian errors as beneath the capabilities of his own prodigious intellectual apparatus, as well as beneath the usual level of intellectual rigor of university coursework. A later syllabus from Wallace's tenure at Pomona College insists:

> Part of the grades you receive on written work in this course will depend on each document's presentation. *Presentation* here means evidence of care, of facility in written English, and of empathy for your readers. The essays you submit for group discussion need to be carefully proofread and edited for typos, misspellings, garbled constructions, and basic errors in usage and/or punctuation. 'Creative' or not, E183D is an upper-division writing class, and work that appears sloppy or semiliterate will not be accepted for credit: you'll have to redo the piece and turn it back in, and there will be a grade penalty—a really severe one if it happens more than once.[65]

The tone of this paragraph bristles with resentment that this warning should be necessary at all; should a creative writing teacher really have to specify that 'facility in written English' will affect his students' grades? Wallace's willingness to deploy the borderline-pejorative adjective 'semiliterate' on an official university document bespeaks a strikingly high level of frustration with a state of affairs in which students perceive taking a course in a 'creative' discipline as tantamount to permission to

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[64] David Foster Wallace, 'Sample Sentences From Second Papers,' 17 November 1994, Box 32, Folder 11, David Foster Wallace Papers, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.
[65] David Foster Wallace, 'English 183D Spring 2008,' Undated, Box 32, Folder 6, David Foster Wallace Papers, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin, 3.

ignore the requirements of care and effort usually demanded by the academy.

I claim that all of this together suggests that Wallace understood himself as a participant in a system that structurally cannot fulfill its purpose of the transmission of literary ability from teacher to student. Wallace, speaking to Lipsky in 1996, recalled the department of creative writing at Arizona as having embodied a culture of disingenuousness during his MFA; this forms a part of Wallace's critique that creative writing programs produce cultures that render sincerity necessarily impossible by their institutional logic. The post-*Infinite Jest* short stories that make up *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion* can be well described as critiques of this kind, although they do not address creative writing specifically. They address other institutions that embody this logic, for instance the mental health system, which cannot deliver its promised recuperation of mental holism, or advertising and sales, oriented around the disingenuous enterprise of making the inessential seem essential. The lukewarm critical reception of these collections becomes especially legible in this context, for the stories of *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion* take place in an acutely claustrophobic register and feature characters hopelessly struggling against the institutional structures that determine their thought, language, and behavior.

The first story of *Oblivion*, 'Mister Squishy,' first published in *McSweeney's* in 2000 under the pseudonym Elizabeth Klemm, illustrates this dynamic especially well. The story takes as its narrative frame the unfolding of the focus group testing of a new cake product manufactured by a confectionary company with the same name as the story's title. The text's formal virtuosity consists in the progressive revelation that various elements of corporate practice and personal behavior that appear to be ends in themselves turn out to be the means for the realization of higher-order corporate goals. Wallace telescopes back and forth between description of corporate machinations and the consciousness of his protagonist, Terry Schmidt, who makes plain the personal consequences of immersion into a corporate, institutional environment.

Schmidt works as the facilitator of the focus group that makes for one of the story's major

settings. As such he feels himself to be a tiny, subordinate part in a gigantic data-gathering apparatus. He has been 'trained by the requirements of what seemed to have turned out to be his profession to behave as though he were interacting in a lively and spontaneous way';[66] his presentations to focus groups require him to appear to be speaking naturally as an individual rather than an institutional mouthpiece. He prefaces certain speeches with disclaimers designed to distance himself from corporate discourse: 'And if that just sounded like a lot of marketing doubletalk, Terry Schmidt told the Focus Group with the air of someone loosening his tie after something public's end';[67] 'Schmidt announced that he'd decided to "privately confide" to the men.'[68] Wallace creates enormous irony here: Schmidt's dismissal of marketing doubletalk is evidently a rhetorical gesture designed to earn himself the credibility to press on with a marketing doubletalk that will be all the more commercially effective for his pretense to be speaking as a private citizen rather than a corporate employee; the 'something public,' of course, has not ended. Schmidt has not 'decided' to 'privately confide' anything; the 'decision' has been made by the writer of the corporate script that the focus group facilitators have been trained to follow. His utterance could not be further from a 'private confidence'; its public delivery has been institutionally mandated. Schmidt's job requires him to trade on the supposed partitioning of self into employee and private autonomous subject. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Schmidt faces enormous difficulty in maintaining a separation between those parts of his identity he cultivates for his corporate employers, and those parts of his identity that belong to his authentic subjectivity:

> he felt somewhat sullied and implicated by the whole enterprise of contemporary marketing and that this sometimes manifested via projection as the feeling that people he was trying just to talk as candidly as possible to always believed he was making a sales pitch or trying to manipulate them in some way, as if merely being employed, however ephemerally, in the great grinding US marketing machine had somehow colored his whole being and that something essentially shifty or pleading in his expression now always seemed inherently false or manipulative and turned people off, and not just in his career [...] but in his personal affairs as well, and that somewhere along the line his

[66] David Foster Wallace, 'Mister Squishy,' *Oblivion* (London: Abacus, 2005), 9.
[67] *Ibid.* 22.
[68] *Ibid.* 50.

> professional marketing skills had metastasized throughout his whole character [...][69]

Unusually, in this story Wallace suggests a way in which his protagonist might resolve his intractable situation. Schmidt, it transpires, has planned to poison the cake products that are the subject of his focus-group tests. Schmidt feels that he has become so completely assimilated into the institutional mechanism that he has effectively ceased to exist, to recall Wallace's engagement with Cavell from a decade earlier. He believes he can only register his existence through the extraordinarily symbolic act of using the products he researches to destroy the lives of multitudes of others.

Wallace has undoubtedly proved a representative of the program era, or a representative of at least an important aspect of the program era, in his persistent self-identification with the American Midwest. As McGurl has argued, the creative writing program first emerged 'amidst a thriving, self-consciously Midwestern cultural scene,' and 'was infused with further regionalist consciousness by the several prominently southern Southerners who traveled north to teach and study there in the early years of its existence. Opposed equally to a dislocated mass culture and to a deracinated cosmopolitan high culture,' McGurl continues, 'regionalism's celebration of the particularities of place was fundamental to the aesthetic sensibilities imparted at Iowa.'[70] As a number of critics have remarked, Wallace deployed his Midwestern roots to produce a similar impression of anticosmopolitanism. Paul Quinn has paid close attention to the workings of this dynamic in Wallace's journalism. He describes the narrative persona of Wallace's essays as that of an authentic Midwesterner, who carries on his shoulder a sort of East Coast cosmopolitan demon, the product of an elite East Coast liberal arts education and implication within New York publishing networks. 'This is going to sound not just East-Coastish but elitist and snooty,' Wallace writes in preface to a comment about 'a certain fringe-type of White Trash.' 'Wallace,' Quinn writes, 'is careful to

[69] *Ibid.* 26.
[70] McGurl, *Program Era*, 148-149.

displace these observations onto an elitist "East-Coastish" viewpoint, one befitting the deep history of *Harpers*,' the New York magazine of high culture in which the piece Quinn considers first appeared.[71]

Wallace's anticosmopolitanism extended to a hostility towards foreign travel almost shocking in its intensity and extraordinarily unusual for a member of the contemporary Western literary class, along with a thorough lack of familiarity with foreign languages. In 2006, interviewed in front of an audience in Italy on an exceedingly rare trip outside the United States, he began one answer by rightly observing, 'Unlike other writers who've come here I have not traveled very much.'[72] He had come to Italy with Jonathan Franzen, who by comparison had lived in Germany, speaks German, and published a translation of essays of the German aphorist and playwright Karl Krauss (if to almost universal denigration). In a 1998 interview, for instance, Wallace admitted that he did not possess a passport;[73] in a 2004 essay he had this to say about the phenomenon of contemporary American tourism in a digressive footnote:

> My personal experience has not been that traveling [. . .] is broadening or relaxing, but rather that international tourism is [. . .] hostile to my fantasy of being a true individual, of living somehow outside and above it all [. . .] To be a mass tourist, for me, is to become a pure late-date American: alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit. It is to spoil, by way of sheer ontology, the very unspoiledness you are there to experience. It is to impose yourself on places that in all noneconomic ways would be better, realer, without you. It is, in lines and gridlock and transaction after transaction, to confront a dimension of yourself that is as inescapable as it is painful: As a tourist, you become economically significant but existentially loathsome, an insect on a dead thing.[74]

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[71] Paul Quinn, 'Location's Location: Placing David Foster Wallace,' in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies,* ed. Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 97. Immediately previous Wallace quotation *ibid.* For a recent critical account that argues for Wallace's internationalism on the basis of his engagement with world literature, see Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[72] 'Le Conversazioni 2006,' YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVzhhvCRTCo. The quoted text comes from my own transcription. In a talk memorializing her brother, collected with a variety of other tributes by the literary magazine *Five Dials*, Amy Wallace-Havens recalls watching this video on YouTube with her mother in the days following Wallace's death. *Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace, 1962-2008: A Five Dials Special* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008), 7.

[73] See Paul Giles, 'All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature,' in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel S. Cohn and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 16.

[74] David Foster Wallace, 'Consider the Lobster,' in *Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2005), 240n6.

'Existentially loathsome': Wallace's prose seethes with a discomfitingly visceral and deeply felt hatred. Wallace makes great rhetorical and literary capital out of his revulsion for an American mass culture of consumption, material and experiential, most famously in his account of his experience of a luxury cruise, published in *Harpers* as 'Shipping Out' in 1996 and later revised and renamed to be the title piece of the nonfiction collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997). In the 2006 interview in Italy, he complicates this adversarial position. Wallace narrates his experience of finding himself in a country in which he speaks 'none of the language' for the first time (at the age of 44): 'in many ways—I've been here a week—I'm a failure, at Italian. It's very difficult, and in many ways humiliating, to be in a country, that isn't mine, and to be reduced really to the status of a baby.'[75] But this discomfort turns out to catalyse a rewarding sensation of defamiliarisation: 'It's also good, in a very profound way. […] I've also noticed that I pay much more attention to people's faces, and emotional cues, and that much like a child, I am sensitive and attuned to things that when I'm home, and immersed, in English, I'm living only linguistically […] So yeah, it's painful to be here, but it's also *good.*'[76] Wallace describes listening to the textures of the Italian language, because he cannot penetrate the sense, and mentions how much he appreciates taking his time over day-to-day transactions that he would process mechanically in English. He presents this first immersion in a different linguistic context with animation, unsurprising given its freshness, but this enthusiasm again recalls the strangeness of Wallace's position: a figure of international cultural eminence of his forties, describing his first sustained experience of a country that speaks a different language. I would conjecture that the bulk of the audience for this talk, and no doubt a large proportion of the audience that has watched this clip on YouTube, would be demographically likely to have had its first experience of a different linguistic context at a young age, and to have repeated the experience with some regularity ever since. Wallace's remarks express a kind of ingenuousness: He presents his experience of a foreign-language environment as a discovery, but it will be a familiar discovery to the

[75] 'La Conversazioni 2006.'
[76] *Ibid.*

cosmopolitan university-educated class that makes up the bulk of the readership of difficult contemporary fiction.[77]

Wallace's novella 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,' published as the final piece of *Girl with Curious Hair* in 1989, brings his tendencies towards ostentatious provincialism together with a kind of meditation on the state of the literary field, delivered through a chatty and aggressively metafictional form. Wallace would turn around on the piece quickly, dismissing it in a well-known 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery: 'Everything I wanted to do came out in the story, but it came out as just what it was: crude and naïve and pretentious.'[78] The story, which on one level tells the story of two creative writing students and their John Barth-stand-in professor, explicitly considers two dominant paradigms of contemporary American fiction. The first was what Wallace would memorably and amusingly term, in the contemporary piece 'Fictional Futures,' 'Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver, in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, and narrators blank perceptual engines, intoning in run-on monosyllables the artificial ingredients of breakfast cereal and the new human non-soul.'[79] Wallace here reaches his full extremity of satirical hyperbole; in 'Westward' criticism of this subgenre, also called 'minimalism,' 'dirty realism,' and 'Kmart realism' depending on the critic's aesthetic receptivity to the style, seems tempered by respect for the subgenre's willingness to take human emotion seriously. With reference

[77] Unfortunately I have no definite, empirically defensible or verifiable sense of the class composition of Wallace's readership. Development of such a sense would be extraordinarily valuable, but the methodological impediments here are substantial. As the scholar of cultural reception Janice Radway has asked, 'If the receivers of [cultural] forms are never assembled fixedly on a site or even in an easily identifiable space, if they are frequently not uniformly or even attentively disposed to systems of cultural production or to the messages they issue, how can we theorize, not to mention, examine, the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of cultural circulation and consumption?' The only sustained scholarly examination of Wallace's popular reception comes from the critic Ed Finn, who comes at the problem from the perspective of Amazon reviews and recommendations. Finn does not use the data he gathers from these reviewers to articulate any kind of conception of the composition of Wallace's audience, but rather uses it to characterize their sense of Wallace's style and relationship to postmodernist forebears in the aggregate. He then considers certain of Wallace's literary texts to corroborate these crowd-sourced critical perceptions. Janice Radway, 'Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects,' *Cultural Studies* 2.3 (1988): 361; Ed Finn, 'Becoming Yourself: The Afterlife of Reception,' in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel S. Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2012), 152-176.

[78] David Foster Wallace, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace – Larry McCaffery/1993,' in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 41.

[79] Wallace, 'Fictional Futures,' 40.

to Carver's editor Gordon Lish, himself a writer and a crucial figure in postwar creative writing, 'Westward' begins by lamenting the recent 'Resurrection of Realism, the pained product of inglorious minimalist labour in countless obscure graduate writing workshops across the U.S. of A., and called by Field Marshal Lish (who ought to know) the *New* Realism . . .';[80] but the narrator later claims that 'it's some of the most heartbreaking stuff available at any fine bookseller's anywhere,' albeit with indeterminable irony.[81]

The binary opposite to the New Realism in 'Westward' is the postmodernism Wallace would go on to repudiate, if incompletely, throughout his career; in the 1993 interview with McCaffery Wallace would think of writers of this ilk—Barth, Coover, Burroughs, Nabokov, Pynchon—as 'real enemies,' 'patriarchs' for his Bloomean 'patricide.'[82] In 'Westward,' creative writing student D. L. Eberhardt 'actually went around *calling* herself a postmodernist,'[83] and is the story's principle representative of postmodernism, along with Barth stand-in Professor Ambrose. Wallace describes her writing in terms that recall the critique of postmodernism he launches in the McCaffery interview: 'She made a big deal of flouting convention, but there was little to love about her convention-flouting; she honestly, it seemed to us, couldn't see far enough past her infatuation with her own crafted cleverness to separate posture from pose, desire from supplication.'[84] Wallace criticizes D. L. for her inability to achieve a particular authorial perspective, characterized by an ability to make distinctions and transcend a kind of self-infatuation. He does this through ocular language, describing this transcendence as a process of 'seeing past.' Critics have generally figured cosmopolitanism as transcendence that comes as a result of achieving a perspective of distance with

[80] David Foster Wallace, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,' *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1989), 265. For a detailed account of Lish as a teacher of creative writing see David Winters, 'Theory and the Creative Writing Classroom: Conceptual Revision in the School of Gordon Lish,' *Contemporary Literature* 57.1 (2016): 111-134.
[81] Wallace, 'Westward,' 267.
[82] Wallace, Interview with McCaffery,' 48.
[83] Wallace, 'Westward,' 234.
[84] *Ibid.*

respect to oneself; often they do so through similarly visual metaphors.[85] In 'Westward,' through an explicit consideration of conditions of fiction in a fictional text, Wallace aims to achieve something similar—'if this were a piece of metafiction, which it's NOT'—says the narrator, prefacing an analysis of self-reference as 'a required postmodern convention aimed at drawing the poor old reader's emotional attention to the fact that the narrative bought and paid for and now under time-consuming scrutiny is *not* in fact a barely there window onto a different and truly diverging world […]'[86] Ocular metaphor recurs, this time as the 'window.' As Wallace concedes in his interview with McCaffery, 'Westward' was an attempt to transcend the limits of metafiction using metafiction's own procedures: 'I got trapped one time just trying expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo unmediated realist fiction that came before it.' Wallace judges the result harshly: 'It was a horror show. The stuff's a permanent migraine.'[87] For Wallace, the classic metafictionists deploy a conception of literary language that understands literary language as capable of referring only to itself; an areferential literature could have no purpose apart from an autonomous exploration of literary language's self-referential possibilities. Wallace's attempt to subvert contemporary metafictional practice by moving to a frame of reference removed by yet one more frame was thus doomed to misfire. As a consequence, Wallace would move towards a conception of literary language more in tune with Cavell's moral understanding of language as speech acts. Critics have generally followed Wallace's own account of his development here, but in what follows I will demonstrate that 'Westward' already contained a Cavellian conception of literary language in latent form.

But first more needs to be said about cosmopolitanism. I claim that for all his hatred of international travel, Wallace advocated a form of cosmopolitanism that addressed the problem of

[85] Terry Eagleton, for instance, writes of a project of 'transcendence' on the part of cosmopolitan modernists that amounts to 'the historical action of projecting oneself beyond the limits and pressure of a particular settlement into a wider perspective.' *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), 10.
[86] *Ibid.* 264-265.
[87] Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery,' 40.

how to construct an authorial perspective in a context that had deeply internalized both poststructuralist theory and a postmodernist literature that no longer believed in language's ability to be morally or referentially meaningful; as with all conceptions of cosmopolitanism, this contans a geographical component. The title 'Westward' makes the story's major geographical preoccupation explicit from the outset: D. L. Eberhardt and her husband Mark Nechtr, both students in Professor Ambrose's workshop, make their way West from the East Chesapeake Trade School graduate writing program in Baltimore, Wallace's substitution for Barth's Johns Hopkins—to Collision, Illinois, where they will attend a reunion of every living actor who has ever appeared in a McDonald's commercial.[88] The complexity of the culturally-encoded geographies becomes interesting here. Baltimore carries a reputation for economic and cultural impoverishment; it certainly does not have anything like the literary cachet of a city like New York. Wallace further lowers the cachet of the creative writing institution, from the prestigious Johns Hopkins to the fictional, vocational-sounding East Chesapeake Trade School. In consequence, the literary pretentions—for pretensions are very much what Wallace makes them out to be—of the creative writers who populate his story appear especially bathetic. Devoting oneself to a creative writing practice with the putatively philosophically sophisticated goal of subverting habitual perceptions of literary language—Wallace gives a sample sentence from D. L.'s fiction: 'Nouns verbed by, adverbially adjectival'—seems a more ludicrous project when undertaken in a trade school than in a liberal arts-oriented university.[89]

[88] The McDonald's commercial reunion subplot affords critics interested in Wallace's relationship with advertising and mass culture a great deal of fascinating material, but it diverges from my focus sufficiently that I do not treat this aspect of the story here.

[89] In his review of *The Program Era*, Fredric Jameson has briefly observed the class inflections of various elements of the creative writing field: 'unavoidable class opposition even recurs within the university: thus McGurl lets us understand that his restriction of the topic of American writing to the novel is itself a vehicle of class meaning. The poets have a nobler calling, and tend to look down on their lowly storytelling cousins; even theatre dissociates itself from this humbler and more proletarianised vocation, while yet a fourth alternative—journalism—offers the would-be writer an escape from literature and its connotations altogether.' Fredric Jameson, 'Dirty Little Secret,' *London Review of Books*, 22 November 2012, 39.

Wallace's portrait of the postmodernist D. L. at times verges on savage. She will allow herself to ride in no other car but a Datsun, she needs to ask her psychic's permission before she leaves the house, and she self-medicates with a variety of prescription drugs. She appears invariably ludicrous; the narrator, along with her husband Mark for that matter, seems to find her behaviour inexplicable and undeserving of empathy. Geography intersects with Wallace's characterization of D. L. forcefully when D. L., Mark, and a fellow traveler wind up stuck in the Central Illinois Airport, in the middle of rural Illinois; D. L., coming down off medication, becomes flustered and asks a flurry of questions that reveal her breathtaking naïveté and cultural insensitivity:

> And we're not even sure where Collision is, from this airport. How far West of here is it? Is it walking distance? Is there a road? All we've seen is corn. It's been disorienting, windblown, verdant, tall, total, menacingly fertile. This entire area is creepy. We have transportation needs. I'll bet the insects here are fierce. Is your state bird the mosquito? Is this snake country?[90]

D. L. clearly has an impression of the Midwest as a space of hostile otherness, if an utterly inaccurate one—'snake country'? Yet Wallace directs some biting satire of his own at features of the airport that seem characteristically, even stereotypically, Midwestern. Ahead of the characters in the car rental line is a farmer who wants to 'barter an entire thousand-bushel crop of prime Illinois feed corn, plus his '81 Allys-Chalmers thresher/harvester, for just three weeks' rental of anything foreign. Anything foreign at all, is what's sad. It's for his oldest kid, apparently. His kids and our kids watch the negotiations.'[91] The car is for his 'eldest son's potential wedding to a loan officer's daughter.'[92] The farmer is a gargantuan figure—'so big he unconsciously treats the counter like a footstool.'[93] A representative of the avatar Midwestern occupation, he appears as a giant, hardly human. His provincialism is such that he believes it might be possible to trade such commodities for three weeks of car rental. He displays the quintessentially provincial proclivity of believing anything

[90] Wallace, 'Westward,' 275.
[91] *Ibid.* 267.
[92] *Ibid.* 268.
[93] *Ibid.* 267.

foreign to possess value intrinsically, not even bothering to specify a particularly desirable foreign make.

Jeffrey Severs has recently offered an interpretation of the farmer, noticing that he appears in a final scene of the novel driving his tractor past a stalled car containing the protagonists. Severs reads the farmer's offer to the car rental agent as emblematic of the shift from 'a farm-based valuation to an economy of money and usury,' and argues that the farmer in the final scene effectively 'wins the westward march of progress.'[94] I think Severs makes a sound economic point, but imputing any sort of victory to the farmer risks misrepresenting the story's general attitude towards him, and towards the Midwest in general. Wallace's narrator notes that the car rental employee *pities* the farmer, but does not have compassion for him.[95] The same might be said of the narrative attitude implicit throughout the description. The narrator finds the farmer a sad figure, but never seems to understand the farmer's way of seeing and interacting with the world as anything other than ludicrous. The farmer's confusion in the face of unfamiliar cultural codes and habits does not seem to inspire an especially deep sympathetic response from the narrator; the narrator rather sees the situation as an opportunity for comedy. The farmer's surpassing of the protagonists in the final scene, if anything, seems like a gimmick plot point that exemplifies the type of opportunistic, cheap irony that the Wallace of the mid-1990s considered to be the weakest aspect of his earlier fiction.

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[94] Severs, 76.

[95] In fact, Wallace's narrator draws a curious distinction between different empathetic emotional states that does not stand up to scrutiny: 'The Avis representative's refusal of the big farmer's bartered offer has pity and empathy in it, however not compassion or sympathy.' The meaning of *empathy* tends to be restricted to the assumption of another's perspective—'the ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc.' Pity, compassion, and sympathy have related meanings, but go one step further—they have to do with how individuals become affected by the empathetic experience: viz. pity, 'tenderness and concern aroused by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, and prompting a desire for its relief; compassion, sympathy' (here the *OED* explicitly offers compassion and sympathy as synonyms for pity); compassion, 'the feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it; pity that inclines one to spare or succour'; sympathy, 'the quality or state of being thus affected by the suffering or sorrow of another; a feeling of compassion or commiseration.' Wallace, 'Westward,' 267-268; 'empathy, n.,' 'pity, n.,' 'compassion, n.,' 'sympathy, n.,' *OED Online*, June 2017, Oxford University Press.

Wallace has since earned a reputation, one substantially related to his claims to Midwestern identity, as an avatar of compassion who possesses an interest and investment in the cares and concerns of 'ordinary Americans,' Americans whose experience bears little resemblance to the experience of the Americans who populate elite universities and the expensive districts of coastal cities.[96] Part of this has emerged from *Infinite Jest*'s meditations on suffering and recovery amongst alcoholics and addicts representing a range of social classes, while part has emerged from a widely read commencement speech, delivered at Kenyon College in 2005 and later published by Penguin as *This Is Water* (2009), that urged its audience to practice increased empathy in day-to-day life. Zadie Smith, in a long essay on Wallace, makes a related, if slightly more nuanced, observation: 'Wallace's fiction cares what happens to the stupid, the coarse, and the blind. In fact, it is preoccupied by the stupid, the coarse, and the blind to a peculiar degree.'[97] Smith accurately registers the surprising proportion of Wallace's characters, taking the entirety of his oeuvre into account, who conspicuously lack the education, perspicacity, and powers of reasoning of their creator; she interprets them effectively as holy fools, whose diminished intellectual apparatus leave them free of the suffering born of excessive intellection. For Smith, Wallace 'seemed to spy in such characters—so unlike himself!—an escape from the "postmodern trap."'[98] But this formulation both gives Wallace too much credit and relies on a naïve view of representation, as if Wallace simply discovered these stupid characters in the world and carefully transferred their likenesses to the pages of his fiction. Wallace has *created* these characters, and, especially in cases like that of the farmer at the front of the car rental line, has gone out of his way to exaggerate certain cultural characteristics to the point of parody. While views of Wallace that emphasize empathy do so on the basis of genuine evidence—his effort in *The Pale King* to imagine the experience of Toni Ware, growing up in a trailer

[96] As Toon Staes has observed in his account of Wallace and empathy, the zeal with which critics have taken up Wallace's claims for fiction as an antidote to loneliness in essays and interviews from the early 1990s 'has given Wallace's work an uncomfortable air of the holier-than-thou.' Toon Staes, 'Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach,' in *David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing': New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 25.
[97] Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), 280-281.
[98] *Ibid.*

park and subject to a raft of exceptionally traumatic events, would be an excellent example, as would a number of characters from *Infinite Jest*—they also ignore Wallace's tendency to conceive and present his characters as pathologically intellectually and morally deficient to a degree of grotesqueness, and his occasional habit of presenting them as individuals occluded from empathetic access.

One of the more interesting tensions in Wallace's 1996 interview with David Lipsky emerges over the question of Wallace's estimation of his own intellect. Wallace insists that he does not see himself as intellectually superior to others, and Lipsky—understandably—cannot fathom how Wallace could make this statement without some element of dishonesty somewhere entering the equation: '*I think you still feel*,' says Lipsky, *'you're smarter than other people. And you're acting like someone—you're acting like someone who's about thirty-one or thirty-two, who's playing in the kid's softball game, as is trying to hold back his power hitting*.' Wallace, referring to his earlier illnesses, responds, 'The parts of me that used to think I was different or smarter or whatever, almost made me die.' Wallace goes on to justify this answer by distinguishing between different kinds of intelligence—'there are ways in which other people are a lot smarter than me'—which convinces to some extent, but not fully.[99] While Wallace certainly showed a tendency towards extraordinarily bad judgment across certain areas of experience, Lipsky also identifies a genuine inconsistency in the persona Wallace projects throughout his fiction, his nonfictional prose, and also in interviews. The ostentatious displays of intelligence do not fit easily with the Midwest-inflected insistences on empathy, honesty, and simplicity.

But it would be unreasonable to assume that the different aspects of Wallace's—or any writer's—persona should be perfectly coherent. I would argue that evidence from the fiction and the journalism suggests that in certain moods Wallace absolutely believes that particular individuals, or even particular human types, fully deserve to be ridiculed mercilessly, beyond any form of

[99] Lipsky, *Although Of Course*, 216-217. In Lipsky's text, italics designate questions, while unitalicized text designates Wallace's responses.

redemption, as with 'The Depressed Person.' In different moods Wallace finds this belief repulsive, and more importantly finds his own capacity to hold such a belief repulsive. He understands a compulsion to elevate his own intellect through the belittlement—even if virtuosic fictional belittlement—of the intellects of others to be a latent pathology within his psychology, over which he must always keep watch.

In general the characters in 'Westward'—with the possible exception of Professor Ambrose, who articulates positions about fiction's responsibility to communicate emotionally close to Wallace's own—appear intellectually and emotionally stunted. The Midwest and the creative writing program both become contexts that generate ridiculous individuals; the gigantic Midwestern farmer trying to trade a thresher/harvester for a car rental seems about as risible as a woman who can only leave her house with her psychic's permission working diligently to produce sentences on the order of 'Nouns verbed by, adverbially adjectival' in a vocational institution. Wallace's most potent scorn targets individuals who have given up trying to think as individuals and bowed down to the heteronomous influences of their contexts. D. L. cedes her autonomy to her psychic, the depressed person cedes her autonomy to therapy culture, Terry Schmidt finds his autonomy compromised by his corporate environment. Creative writing, Wallace argued in 'Fictional Futures,' produces students sheepheadedly willing to toe the line just because 'it's the most comfortable way to survive.'

Wallace's characters partake of a register of aesthetic experience that Sianne Ngai has discussed as 'minor,' especially her category of the 'zany' (other categories she discusses include 'cute,' 'tender,' 'gay,' and 'dainty'). These categories appear characteristically 'trivial' and 'inconsequential' in comparison to the 'major' categories of traditional aesthetic theory ('beautiful,' 'sublime'); Ngai explains them, and the zany in particular, with reference to class structure and labour relations. Ngai thinks of 'zany' as a judgment reserved for workers whose behaviour produces a particular kind of humour against prevailing conditions that include the 'casualization and

intensification of labour, the creeping extension of the working day, the steady decline in real wages—[…] an exhausting and precarious situation.' Thus the affective response they produce comes in part from their subordinate position in the capitalist dominance hierarchy; their outrageous behaviour compels readers because it demands to be understood as an exaggerated response to the suffering produced by ensnarement in an unacceptable social position. Yet Ngai argues that readers and spectators do not experience this compulsion as empathy: 'zaniness forecloses identification with the workers in precarious situations it evokes.'[100] This lack of empathy combines with the zany's diminished potency, in comparison to experiences that belong to the 'major' aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful. With the zany, 'the image of powerlessness called up for us mirrors a certain lack of power in the aesthetic experience itself.'[101]

I would argue that Ngai's zany amounts to a powerful explanatory framework for the affective situation of the characters in 'Westward,' and indeed Ngai's descriptions of 'minor' aesthetic categories describe the general affect of Wallace's novella with precision. The portrait of the Midwestern airport discomfits rather than horrifies, and its lack of exceptionality contributes significantly to this discomfort. In Wallace's fiction, monotony and banality usually appal more than explicit, manifest monstrousness; his characters endure a sordid claustrophobia, closed within a sort of bell jar of powerlessness.

Questions about the heteronomous influence of contexts appear most pressingly and interestingly in 'Westward' in the novella's second half, which focuses on the workshopping of one of Mark's short stories; narration of workshop dialogue consists mostly of Professor Ambrose's responses to Mark's work. As noted above, 'Westward' thinks of itself as a playful rewriting of John Barth's short story 'Lost in the Funhouse'—the copyright page glibly states that parts of 'Westward' were 'written in the margins of John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse,"' and the 'Funhouse,' figured as a McDonald's corporate gimmick, plays a significant role in Wallace's novella. 'Ambrose' is also the

[100] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2012), 10.
[101] *Ibid.* 10-11.

name of the protagonist of Barth's short story. But Wallace's Barth stand-in Professor Ambrose, curiously, seems not to preach the practice of the subgenre of fiction for which the name of his actual world inspiration has come to serve as a metonym. The aesthetic doctrines that emerge in Ambrose's spoken dialogue in fact diametrically oppose those of John Barth, as stated in programmatic essays and also as embodied in his fiction. Strangely, no major scholarly commentary on Wallace's novella of which I know has noted this extraordinary discontinuity. The critic and Barth expert Charles Harris, Wallace's former boss in the English department at Illinois State (and whose daughter Wallace dated seriously in the mid-1990s), has written an essay devoted to exploring what he claims to be an agonistic relationship between Barth and Wallace, which includes an extended reading of 'Westward.' Yet Harris devotes negligible attention to Wallace's fictional portrait of his antecedent, most surprisingly given his essay's area of exploration.[102]

In his workshop response to Mark's story, Professor Ambrose questions one of Mark's narrative choices: 'Why compromise this tale's carefully-crafted heartfelt feel and charming emotional realism,' Ambrose asks, 'with a sudden, gratuitous, and worst of all *symbolic* bit of surrealism like this?'[103] 'Charming' would have to count amongst the last adjectives one would expect to hear from one of the leading writers of American postmodernist fiction. Again, it belongs in the category of 'minor' aesthetic judgments described by Ngai; it damns with faint praise, and feels out of place in the mouth of a writer who has been heralded as a leading figure of 'technomodernism.'[104] And 'emotional realism'? Wallace's Barth-figure seems to be arguing that Mark has created a fictional world of such emotional authenticity that readers will forget that they are consuming a work of fiction; he seems to be urging Mark to remove a device from his story because it risks alerting the reader to the constructed fictionality of the work.

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[102] Charles B. Harris, 'The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection,' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55.2 (2014): 103-126.
[103] Wallace, 'Westward,' 360.
[104] By McGurl, who reads Barth's 1966 novel *Giles Goat-Boy* at length in his introduction to *The Program Era*, 38-44.

This perplexes, because the signature of Barth's actual-world fiction is precisely an insistent alert to the reader of the constructed fictionality of the work. Consider a representative paragraph from 'Lost in the Funhouse':

> *En route* to Ocean City [Ambrose] sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother Peter, age fifteen, and Magda G_____, age fourteen, a pretty girl an exquisite young lady, who lived not far from them on B_____ Street in the town of D____, Maryland. Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means. Is it likely, does it violate the principle of verisimilitude, that a thirteen-year-old boy could make such a sophisticated observation?[105]

Forming the template for the authorial direct-addresses of 'Westward,' 'Lost in the Funhouse' undercuts any claims to realism it might have at every turn.

A philosophical position about the possibilities and limits of literary language motivates these stylistic moments, analogous to theatre's breaking of the fourth wall. Barth rejects a referential model for the function of fictional prose; literary language does not present a symbolic image of an external reality, but rather constitutes an untranscendable closed system. Exploring the possibilities of literary language therefore means a thoroughgoing practice of self-reference, for Barth. This model of literary thinking forms a crucial aspect of Wallace's context for the writing of 'Westward,' as many critics have noted, and critics have argued about the extent to which Wallace subscribes to Barth's areferential paradigm. Marshall Boswell has claimed that Wallace distinguishes himself from Barth through an investment in a notion of representable extralinguistic reality, while Harris considers Wallace to be more continuous with Barth's understanding.[106] On closer scrutiny, the matter of this dispute turns out not to be overwhelmingly consequential. These critics all agree that Wallace moves past postmodernist self-reference to a mode of fiction much more interested in

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[105] John Barth, 'Lost in the Funhouse,' *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Tape, Print, Live Voice* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1968), 73.

[106] 'As the title clearly suggests, ['Westward'] seeks to chart, if not to arrive at, a new direction for narrative art, one that will move past John Barth's literature of exhaustion and the new realism of the 1980s.' Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 102; Harris, 'Anxiety,' *passim*.

experience and emotion; Harris wants to say (to imply, really, via *en passant* reference to Lacan) that Wallace has a more sophisticated conception of experience and emotion that considers these entities to be always already linguistically and representationally mediated,[107] though I imagine that Boswell would accept this qualification if it were phrased this way. Wallace's critics generally accept that Wallace had begun to move beyond Barthean postmodernism in 'Westward,' though I would argue that conceptual model these critics use to consider the questions of freedom and linguistic closed systems—a model that understands language and the real world as necessarily oppositional—turns out to be an unsatisfying one that leads to confusion. In what follows, the conclusion of this chapter, I will argue that the model that allows Wallace's thinking in 'Westward' to become fully intelligible again comes from the work of Cavell, and that in 'Westward' Cavell again bears the responsibility for the optimistic side of Wallace's view of literary language, even if he bears a concomitant responsibility for the conceptual framework that leads to Wallace's vision of the institution as heteronomous and determinative.

Before drawing out this view, I want to note again the stakes of this analysis for an argument about creative writing. An obvious parallel exists between closed systems of language and the creative writing program, a system that shelters its inhabitants from the exigencies of the wider literary economy and relies upon language in an obvious way. In 'Westward,' Wallace makes this parallel literal. He evokes Professor Ambrose's workshop using a Barthean fictional practice that believes literary language can refer only to itself. Thus when Wallace suggests how circuitousness might be transcended—a suggestion I will make plain in what follows—he implies that this circuitousness has been a consequence of both genre and institutional organization.

Professor Ambrose's leading of the workshop discussion of Mark Nechtr's short story presents certain challenges of complexity to the reader, not least a confusing double authorial self-insertion

[107] Harris, 'Anxiety,' 112.

on the part of both Wallace and his character Mark: the protagonist of Mark's story is called Dave, and the next most important character is called Mark. In brief, the story concerns Dave's conviction for the murder of his girlfriend—which was in fact a suicide (she stabbed herself with an arrow)—and subsequent incarceration. Dave's cellmate is the vicious convict Mark, who subjects Dave to a variety of torments. After Dave endures a long stretch of just about unbearable suffering Mark escapes, warning Dave that if he gives any information about Mark's escape plans to the authorities he (Mark) will have Dave assassinated. Dave gives his word that he will keep silent. Later, the prison warden speaks to Dave. He informs him that Mark will almost certainly have him killed regardless of whether he cooperates, and that his only chance of survival will be to work with the authorities. But Dave decides that maintaining his honour outweighs every other consideration and refuses to divulge what he knows, keeping his word to Mark. Here the story ends, unfinished. The narrator intersperses the matter of Mark's narrative with Professor Ambrose's engaged and mostly positive responses as he analyzes Mark's story in the course of his class; his interpretations provide a barbed gloss on the way critical language works in creative writing program speech contexts. One conversation 'rings true' to the professor, although he has reservations about what he perceives to be the story's insistence 'that Dave's climactic refusal to rat has nothing to do with his guilty innocence in the impalement and death of his one true love.'[108] Especially important is Ambrose's engagement with the text's lack of resolution:

> Except but so *does Dave rat?* is the question Mark Nechtr's unfinished and basically unfinishable piece leaves the E.C.T. workshop with. Does the archer [Dave] maybe rat, finally, after all? Sure doesn't look that way. But Ambrose invites us to listen closely to the kidnapped voice here. This Dave guy is characterized very carefully all the way through the thing as fundamentally *weak*. It's the flaw that informs his character. Is this the real him, bandaged, prostrate before ideas so old they're B.C.? That shit with [the warden]: that was just words. Could a weak person *act* so? Debate, before the bell rings, is vigorous and hot.[109]

[108] Wallace, 'Westward,' 368.
[109] *Ibid.* 370.

Ambrose conducts discussion on a level that refers to nothing in the way of literary principles or even other literature, and presupposes no expertise other than the most general experience of human behaviour. Again, he reveals himself to be invested in a model of literary reading that could not be further from Barthean postmodernist fictional practice. Ambrose considers the accretion of impressions that combine to form his sense of *character* and then asks how this sense corresponds with a character's *words* and *acts*; he then bases his evaluation of the text on the plausibility of the correspondence. He thinks of the character as possessing a psychological reality that transcends his evocation on the page, an atavistic mode of interpretation that recalls the character criticism of A. C. Bradley popular at the turn of the twentieth century.

This question of what exactly language does lies at the heart of Ambrose's interpretation, residing in particularly concentrated form in the distinction he makes between 'words'—'just words,' i.e. 'mere words,' a strange attitude for a man who makes his living by writing and discussing writing—and 'acts' ('that was just words: could a weak person *act* so?'). This distinction cannot but recall the branch of the philosophy of language that considers speech not as oppositional to action, but rather as a special form of action—namely, the theory of speech acts developed by the philosopher J. L. Austin and inherited and further developed by Cavell, who studied with Austin at Harvard in the 1950s. Cavell pithily illustrates how speech can act in an essay from his collection *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969). Consider, Cavell urges, the question 'Would you like to use my scooter?' In Cavell's view, this question does not constitute an inquiry into 'your' state of mind; the effect of the question is not to verify the existence of your pre-existing desire to use my scooter. The effect of the question is rather to perform the action of offering the scooter's loan.[110] Comprehension of this action, Cavell suggests, depends on a native/fluent speaker's expertise in a vast, complex, and mutable linguistic context.

[110] Stanley Cavell, 'Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*,' *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: CUP, 1976), 126.

Cavell's development of Austin's theory comes from his effort to understand this linguistic context more capaciously. Through eclectic interpretations of Emerson, Freud, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, Cavell comes to understand the speech of the individual as the performance not just of an action, but of an entire individual existence. Out of this comes Cavell's particular investment in film as the medium that reveals the entirety of the individual existence with special clarity. In *The World Viewed* (1971), Cavell's philosophical account of Golden Age American cinema, Cavell speaks of the moment in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) when Scarlett O'Hara slaps her black maid for deceitfully claiming to possess expertise in midwifery: 'the result was a revelation not of human individuality, but of an entire realm of humanity becoming visible [...]. What was the white girl assuming about blackness when she believed the casual claim of a black girl, younger and duller and more ignorant than herself, to know all about the mysteries of childbirth?'[111] Cavell takes from Freud a view of utterance as revealing those dimensions of the individual that lie beneath conscious awareness: 'the self is concealed in assertion and action and revealed in temptation and wish.'[112] As for Wittgenstein, for Cavell utterance reveals the publicly generated linguistic structures that linguistic communities use to make sense of their experience.

As citation of Freud and Wittgenstein goes some way towards suggesting, Cavell's understanding of individual action and speech skews in the direction of determinism. Unconscious factors generated in early childhood govern adult behaviour; utterances that seem to issue from autonomous choice really have their source in socially determined language. But Cavell takes from Emerson the idea that in spite of all the ways in which individual existence seems utterly determined, the individual with the morally correct perspective acts *to take responsibility for it anyway*. In the domain of utterance, Cavell argues individuals should take responsibility even for those unconscious or unremembered elements of linguistic context or cultural history, those dimensions of a speaker's

[111] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking, 1979), 34.
[112] Stanley Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy,' in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 72.

context outside or beneath the speaker's conscious awareness yet expressed with every speech act. For Cavell, Emerson expresses this idea through the comparative metaphor of speaking for oneself versus quoting: man 'dares not say "I think," "I am," but quotes some saint or sage'; 'in not daring to say something what we do instead is quote.'

I want to argue that 'Westward' has internalized this Cavellian position that comes at the problem of the representative capacities of language not as a question of measuring the correspondence between words and actual world referents, but as a question of the moral relationship between speakers and their utterances. This question surfaces most prominently in Wallace's close third-person description of 'Dave's' deliberations about whether to rat:

> The adult world, in Dave's opinion, has turned out to be a basically shifty, shitty place. It's risky and often sad and always wildly *insecure*. It beats him over the head, just how insecure and fragile is his place in his own lifetime. He knows, now, that nearly everything you call Yours in the world can be taken away from you by other people, assuming that they want it enough. They can take away your freedom of location and movement, if there's judgment. Men you didn't vote for can take your life with one red button, Jack. The world can take your loved ones, your love, your one beloved. Your dreams can be taken. Your manhood, integrity of cock and bum: vapour before a gale. What's *his*, then, that he can hold tight, secure?
>
> This is the one thing, he says. He's had time to think, and he's no idiot, and he's been able to come up with just one thing. They can't take your honour. Only that can be only given. And it *can* be given—with good reason, without good reason. But only given, that. It *belongs* to him. His *be-longing*. The one arrow he just can't lose, unless he lets it fly. His one thing.[113]

Dave's conception of honour as having fundamentally to do with what cannot be taken from him recalls explicitly Cavell's discussion, in the essay in *In Quest of the Ordinary* most heavily annotated by Wallace, of the correct way to take responsibility for existence, to assume 'the capacity to say "I."' For Cavell this takes 'daring,' takes 'claiming what belongs to you and disclaiming what does not belong to you.' Cavell identifies this motif of acquisition and possession in the work of Thoreau, and notes that 'what Thoreau calls acquiring property is what most people would consider passing it by.'[114] The acquisition of genuinely valuable property, for Thoreau and for Cavell, amounts to the

[113] Wallace, 'Westward,' 368-369.
[114] Cavell, 'Being Odd, Getting Even,' 113.

acquisition of property that cannot be taken away, namely a truthful orientation towards existence and expression, what 'Dave' names 'honour.'

Yet ultimately the story expresses ambivalence on the question of whether 'Dave' remains honourable, or whether he rats. Not even Mark, the story's author, knows: 'Well and understandably Mark Nechtr wants to know, too. Does the archer who's guilty of his lover rat? Doesn't he, Mark Nechtr, have to know, if he's going to make it up?'[115] Mark's equivocation proves illustrative of the larger dynamic that would persist throughout Wallace's career. Wallace time and again expresses desire to assume the truthful orientation towards his being that 'Dave' in 'Westward' names honour, Emerson names self-reliance, and Cavell names 'the capacity to say "I,"' but he never goes so far as to assume it with conviction. Indeed, I have attempted to argue that much of the richness and significance of Wallace's fiction comes out of this equivocation—out of his ingenious, complex, and sometimes complicated demonstrations of the ways in which the world foils attempts to take responsibility for individual existence at every turn. Popular understandings of Wallace as an avatar of simplicity, sincerity, and compassion, which have to an extent bled into more critical accounts, miss this complexity, taking Wallace's anti-irony protestations far too uncritically.[116] (They also miss that Wallace earns the credibility to make claims for simplicity, sincerity, and compassion by demonstrating an equal or surpassing predilection for theoretical sophistication and highly difficult, demanding novels and short stories.)

A developing critical opinion, led by *The Program Era*, has suggested that the novel and valuable feature of the postwar and contemporary creative writing regime has been the transition from an individualistic, Romantic characterization of authorship as the expression of unique subjectivity to a more collective, structural notion of creativity that functions on the level of the

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[115] Wallace, 'Westward,' 370.

[116] For considerations of these dynamics see Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,' in David Hering, ed., *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles & Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131-146; Adam Kelly, 'Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace,' *Post45*, 17 October 2014, http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/.

system.[117] Wallace's work, particularly the fiction published after *Infinite Jest*, expresses an awareness of something close to this more systematized condition, yet this awareness takes the form of a lament for an unendurable state of affairs. I have tried to describe Wallace as a frustrated individualist, and I have attempted to show that Wallace almost always finds the source of this frustration in an institution. Wallace may as well have been thinking about himself when he wrote in 'Mr Squishy' that his protagonist Terry Schmidt had been 'trained by the requirements of what seemed to have turned out to be his profession to behave as though he were interacting in a lively and spontaneous way.' The tortuously passive construction 'what seemed to have turned out to be his profession' expresses Schmidt's sense that he has been powerless to intervene in the course of his own life through acts of will, but equally expresses the condition of the teacher of creative writing, who begins with the desire to write fiction but finds himself devoting a significant proportion of his professional life to another activity entirely. Wallace experienced this disjunction as intolerable, producing critique after critique of an institutional culture that compromised the individualism of its inhabitants, yet never acting to transcend this institutional culture himself. Awareness of this dynamic enables a necessary reevaluation of Wallace's career, which, in spite of its overwhelming tragic dimensions, critics still tend to describe in terms of success.[118]

To an extent these critics describe Wallace correctly; I have not meant to deny his achievement. I have instead tried to show that this achievement has depended on a profoundly fraught and contradictory interaction with his institutional context. From the perspective of

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[117] For McGurl, the 'true originality' of the postwar creative writing regime 'is to be found at the level of its patron institutions, whose presence is everywhere visible in the texts as a kind of watermark.' McGurl, *Program Era*, 4.

[118] Claire Hayes-Brady's recent *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* does take steps towards acknowledging the centrality of failure in Wallace's work, but tends to think in terms of how Wallace deals with manifestations of 'rupture' and 'incompleteness' he finds in the world, rather than understanding failure to be structurally immanent to Wallace's fictional practice and career. As with much Wallace criticism, failure for Hayes-Brady transforms into soteriological potential: 'It is in the failure of communication that the possibility of redemptive connection lives.' Loren Glass's article 'Fail Better: Literary Celebrity and Creative Nonfiction in the Program Era' offers compelling examples of writers within the creative writing program making literary capital out of failure, and includes a brief discussion of Wallace's 'Fictional Futures.' Claire Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 186. Loren Glass, 'Fail Better: Literary Celebrity and Creative Nonfiction in the Program Era,' *Post45*, 24 May 2016, http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/05/fail-better-literary-celebrity-and-creative-nonfiction-in-the-program-era/.

Wallace's fictional and critical gifts, this context may well have been ideal; Wallace's satirical and analytical intelligence made exceptionally good capital out of his fraught and contradictory experience of institutions. But from a personal perspective, Wallace's relationship with institutions looks considerably more troubling; it figures as an obstructing factor that led to intractable and intolerably painful patterns of self-frustration. Accurate assessments of Wallace's career will have to take full account of the conflict and aporia that Wallace's fiction has shown to be fundamental to the practice of postwar American creative writing.

Afterword

The Value of Creative Writing: Reflections on the Field and Avenues of Further Enquiry

One of the most striking features of the twentieth-century rise of creative writing has been the rhetorical vehemence with which discussion over its merits and demerits has taken place, more or less since its inception. In 1955, well before the workshop had attained its mature institutional form, Malcolm Cowley had this to say: 'the present writing programs are either suffused with artiness and yearnings toward Creative Self-Expression, or else they are actually courses in critical analysis. […] I'd like to see a writing program that was a *writing* program and not […] a treatise on how to masturbate on the typewriter in ten easy lessons.'[1] In 1996, Jonathan Franzen reflected upon 'a culture in which television has conditioned us to accept only the literal testimony of the Self.' Franzen links this problem with the development of creative writing:

> Any given issue of the typical small literary magazine, edited by MFA candidates aware that the MFA candidates submitting manuscripts need to publish in order to obtain or hold on to teaching jobs, reliably contains variations on three generic short stories: 'My Interesting Childhood,' 'My Interesting Life in a College Town,' and 'My Interesting Year Abroad.' […] I mourn the retreat into the Self and the decline of the broad-canvas novel for the same reason I mourn the rise of suburbs: I like maximum diversity and contrast packed into a single exciting experience.[2]

Geoffrey Hill, in the course of making some remarks in 2005 on the theologian Karl Rahner's concept of self-expression, included this barbed aside:

> It has to be said that Rahner's 'self-expression' is not quite what self-expression is taught to be in various creative-writing classes; it is more self-subsistent that they suggest; I am not sure that what is now known as the 'confessional' element is vital to it […]. But confessionalism is not exhibitionism, and the so-called 'confessional' movement in post-modern art and literature is mainly a mating-display clumsily performed.[3]

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[1] Malcolm Cowley, *The Long Voyage: Selected Letters of Malcolm Cowley, 1915-1987*, ed. Hans Bak (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014), 507.
[2] Jonathan Franzen, 'Why Bother?' *How to Be Alone: Essays* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 80. The essay was originally printed as 'Perchance to Dream,' *Harper's*, April 1996, 35-54.
[3] Geoffrey Hill, 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics,' *Collected Critical Writings* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 567.

McGurl has justified his project in *The Program Era* partly as a corrective to invective of this type, asking at the end of the book if 'American fiction, after all, [isn't] unprecedented in its excellence?'[4] McGurl makes a case for this excellence throughout the book, noting for instance the 'virtuosity' of Robert Olen Butler's 'performance of narrative mobility' in portraying a conversation between a Vietnamese woman and her unborn child in an 'amazingly audacious and poignant story' from 1992. Elif Batuman, in her long review of McGurl's book in the *London Review of Books*, speaks by contrast of Butler's story as 'symptomatic of the large-scale replacement of books I would want to read by rich, multifaceted explorations whose "amazing audacity" I'm supposed to admire in order not to be some kind of jerk.'[5]

'There is no arguing with taste,' Batuman notes by way of preference to her remarks on McGurl's treatment of Butler's story; this remark cuts to the heart of the matter. The critical discourse around the historical significance of creative writing continues to be dominated by evaluations that in the end really come down to the question of critics' personal preferences. Cowley, Franzen, and Hill all censure the creative writing program for its investment in the selfhood of its participants, but their true problem with the program really turns out to be their dislike for the literature it produces. Franzen acknowledges a taste for heteroglossic novels that contain a plethora of discourses from a vast diversity of sources, but there is no reason why a novel displaying such characteristics should *ipso facto* be aesthetically more valuable than a novel with strong autobiographical dimensions. Hill suggests that the 'confessional' quality proper to creative writing actually amounts to a mating display; presumably he means to suggest that creative writers seek to express themselves in creative work in the belief that the luminous uniqueness of these selves, and the sensitivity with which they have been set forth, will attract the admiration of their peers. But this analysis depends on several assumptions that would require a great deal of foundational argument,

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[4] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2009), 408.
[5] Elif Batuman, 'Get a Real Degree,' *London Review of Books*, 23 September 2010, 5.

were Hill writing in a more scholarly context, and raises several questions. To what extent does the preoccupation with the autobiographical, or the confessional, or any generic tendency the creative writing program has been thought to engender, stem from the institutional structure of the creative writing program, and to what extent does the creative writing program passively accommodate a preoccupation with self-expression (for instance) rooted in factors extrinsic to the literary field? How much does the creative writing program influence the students that come into its ambit, and by exactly what mechanisms does this influence take place? Do critiques apply to those few winners who emerge from creative writing programs every year to publish reasonably widely read poetry and fiction, as well as to the much larger majority of creative writing students who go on to make a living in ways not directly connected with the work done during their MFAs? How do critiques apply across the substantial range of different institutional configurations that the creative writing program has taken on in the twentieth century? Much of the extant criticism of creative writing programs, this thesis included, has focused disproportionately on Iowa, given its outsize influence on the postwar and contemporary American literary field, but work on a typology of the different forms of the writers' workshop will be necessary to future studies in this critical area.

In this thesis I have argued that the development of the creative writing program explains postwar and contemporary American literature's decreased polyvocality, engagement with culturally and historically disparate intertexts, and experimental ambition. I have presented this as an analysis of formal changes in literature and structural changes in the literary field across time that tries to remain as disinterested as possible. I have claimed that the narrowing of the typical institutional path of the American writer in the twentieth century has corresponded to a narrowing of the sphere of engagement of twentieth-century American literary work. While inclination and personal preference have inevitably entered the equation at a number of junctures, I have come away from this research convinced that a great deal of work on positive questions to do with the creative writing program remains to be done. Questions linger about what actually takes place in creative writing programs,

how creative pedagogy functions in classroom situations and through instructors' editorial comments on students' poetry and fiction, how creative pedagogy varies across different institutional contexts, and how student-teacher interactions correlate with changes in students' poetry and fiction. Such questions could be effectively addressed through ethnographic observation of creative writing classrooms across a variety of different institutional contexts, and comparison of the data gleaned from ethnographic observation of pedagogical procedure to patterns of development in student poetry and fiction. In addition, little work has been done on how editing works in the creative writing program, and how instructor-lead editorial practices differ from editing in modernist collaborations, such Pound's contributions to *The Waste Land*.[6] The history of the creative writing program in the twentieth century could be usefully conceptualised through the frame of the history of collaboration and revision in the twentieth century, through comparison of modernist practices of co-authorship and editing to the forms of collaboration that have emerged in the writers' workshop. (My own future research interests lie generally in this direction.)

Urging further research on the creative writing program that places a premium on disinterest and objectivity, at least as regulating ideals, may appear excessively cold and unresponsive to the nuances of individual literary work. But I believe that careful attention to institutional contexts does not—or should not, anyway—entail a deterministic view of literary works, and need not be mutually exclusive with a more appreciative critical orientation. While this thesis rests on the premise that attention to the networks, modes of organization, and forms of collaboration of the contemporary literary field reveals how institutions shape poetry and fiction in a way that literary scholarship has tended to overlook, it rests also upon an equally strong conviction that attention to

[6] A structural impediment to this work lies in the paucity of available material. David Foster Wallace's archive, for instance, contains no work with instructor edits or comments, neither from his years as an MFA student nor from his years as a teacher of creative writing. Edited student work seems not to be commonly collected in writers' papers. The archive at the University of Delaware of Donald Justice, for instance, a teacher of creative writing for decades, contains no examples of edited student work according to online finding aids. The same tends to be true for other notable teachers of creative writing, for instance John Berryman (archives at University of Minnesota and Columbia), Marilynne Robinson (the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale), Philip Levine (New York Public Library) and Karl Shapiro (Library of Congress and University of Maryland).

the institutional shows with richness and precision the ways in which writers do not reduce to simple products of historical and geographical context. A more thorough scholarly picture of the creative writing field and its historical development will offer even more resources for fruitful critical registrations of the achievements of twentieth-century American literature.

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