Criticism and Our Modes of Abstraction

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Abstract: This essay argues that any adequate account of literary studies as an intellectual discipline has to reckon with the aesthetic nature of literary works. To make my case, I draw on the philosophy of John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead, the aesthetics of Susanne K. Langer, and accounts of criticism by Louise Rosenblatt and Kenneth Burke, all of whom I show to be indebted to William James. Key to my argument is their redefinition of knowledge in terms of "modes of abstraction" and their elaboration of concepts geared towards registering the distinctive kinds of abstractive thinking at work in criticism and the arts.

Around the 1920s, philosophers working within the pragmatist tradition made a strategic rhetorical shift. They had initially framed the novelty of their approach by stressing its proximity to the emerging practices of laboratory science. Charles S. Peirce's "pragmatic maxim" of 1878, for instance, promised to put philosophical inquiry on an "experimental" basis, testing out the consequences ideas had in practice.[1] William James, who spearheaded experimental psychology at Harvard, and the young John Dewey, who also put in time at the lab bench, made similar statements in the decades that followed.[2] To link philosophy with experimental science in these years was an avant-garde gesture; after all, very few experimental labs had been established in the U.S. or anywhere else at the time. Adopting a "scientific" approach to philosophical questions was something new.

Fast forward several decades and the situation changes remarkably. No longer an outlier, experimental science had by the 1920s become the touchstone for what counted as knowledge within the university, elevated by the professionalization of the disciplines that gained momentum at the turn of the century. In this altered context, an appeal to scientific techniques was more likely to be greeted with easy nods than with skepticism, and Peirce's founding gesture threatened to sound like mere scientism. So pragmatist thinkers changed tactics. Consider two representative examples. In 1925, Dewey began *Experience and Nature* with the warning that professional philosophy had become *too* indebted to the sciences, in ways deep and difficult to notice. The very notions of knowledge and reality that guided modern epistemology and metaphysics had, he argued, taken their shape from assumptions narrowly tailored to the physical sciences, assumptions like the primacy of inert matter or the ideal of objective observation. In response, Dewey tried to lever philosophy away from science, this time by turning to criticism and the arts. Similarly, and also from 1925, Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* aimed to loosen science's grip on philosophical thinking by telling a historical story about the emergence of a "new mentality" marked by the success of techno-scientific practices.[3] That success, Whitehead argued, had reshaped not only "the imaginative contents of our minds" but also the organization of education, thus digging in the metaphysical suppositions even more deeply (2). All areas of higher learning, he explained, had been remodeled on "the method of training professionals," a method entwined with the new cultural esteem for scientific knowledge (197). Like Dewey, Whitehead rounded off his story by looking to "art and aesthetic education" for intellectual resources (199). If Peirce and James began by adopting a scientific sensibility to ground abstract ideas like truth and knowledge in experience, their inheritors came to recast this approach through insights drawn from aesthetics.

I've invoked this pivot in the history of pragmatism because I find it instructive for dealing with the muddled role that *knowledge* plays in recent characterizations of criticism. Does literary criticism "produce knowledge," as the ubiquitous bit of administration-speak has it? Many insist that it must. Never mind for the moment if that insistence takes the form of an extended argument (Jonathan Kramnick on "truth," Eric Hayot on "reason"), a condition of modern disciplinarity as such (John Guillory's institutional history), or an oft-cited but under-elaborated virtue (as in *The Teaching Archive* by Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan). The reach for knowledge as a trump card in discussions of disciplinary worth is widespread. So widespread—so automatic in formulation and unquestioned in reception—that one might forget the prominent historical alternatives. Yet from the earliest days of university-level literary criticism, critics have argued that the intellectual effort involved in studying verbal works of art is distinct from the kinds of thinking at work in the natural and social sciences, the kinds most readily associated with knowledge. If we go to a poem for knowledge, such critics maintain, it's of a very specific and attenuated kind. Some version of this idea runs from I. A. Richards and the New Critics up through Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Joseph North, and, most recently, the consideration of critical states of "not-knowing" by Emily Ogden and Michel Chaouli.[4] The split between the knowers and the not-knowers runs deep. And that's a problem, because I doubt that one side is simply right and the other wrong.

Here's where the 1920s reformulations of pragmatist philosophy can help. For not only did Dewey and Whitehead attempt ambitious metaphysical revisions aimed at correcting the selective distortions of professionalized knowledge; they also provided a subsequent generation of mid-century critics and aestheticians, including Susanne K. Langer, Louise M. Rosenblatt, and Kenneth Burke, with frameworks for describing the distinctive types of thinking at play in

literature and criticism. Taken together, these philosophers and critics offer a less-familiar account of the integration of criticism into the modern research university than the one we're used to hearing. The standard story—established by Gerald Graff and reiterated by Guillory—focuses on the uneasy partnership between philological scholars and non-professional critics.[5] On this account, the scholars produced knowledge and research, but only by bracketing aesthetic experience, while the critics emphasized the aesthetic nature of criticism, but at the risk of giving up knowledge claims. This history nicely explains why aesthetic criticism is an odd duck in higher education. But it also makes it difficult to imagine how things could be otherwise. No wonder, then, that Guillory, who makes knowledge-production the *sine non qua* of professionalized disciplines, has little to say about the aesthetic nature of literary works, even as he acknowledges its centrality to literary study. Only in the final pages of *Professing Criticism* does he get around to specifying the nature of critical knowledge as aesthetic (because tied to feeling) and as taking the form of "understanding" (because it deals with meanings rather than facts). That late placement alone shows how much important work remains to be done.

Whitehead and Dewey, and with them Langer, Burke, and Rosenblatt, offer resources for this work, not least because they began where Guillory leaves off. They used the ill-fit between aesthetic criticism and the university as a spur to enlarge our understanding of what knowledge is and how it operates. And they built on this understanding to envision a higher education that cultivated a wider array of cognitive capacities than can be captured through narrowly defined paradigms of research. In what follows, I'll draw from this group of thinkers to bring the apparent tension between knowing and not-knowing, between research and criticism, into a different and less intractable light. I'll start big, with Whitehead's treatment of specialized knowledge practices as "modes of abstraction." This metaphysical framework, with its

thoroughgoing revision of our usual senses of the abstract and the concrete, will enable me to recast the relation between knowledge and aesthetic experience in complementary rather than antithetical terms. Then, in the second section, I'll draw on Dewey and Langer to describe the mode of abstraction operative in aesthetic thinking, one tied to a particular type of symbol-use: what Langer calls non-discursive rather than discursive symbolization. Finally, I'll sketch the implications this all has for criticism, using Rosenblatt and Burke as my primary examples. Criticism, I'll argue, is characterized by a dynamic movement across discursive and non-discursive ways of knowing, each feeding into the other. Ultimately I hope to show that this picture of criticism can both honor the truism that literary critical knowledge is inseparable from the experience of literary texts (you have to read the poem for yourself) and suggest why such experiential knowledge belongs in the university.[6]

I.

If a narrow notion of knowledge crowds out aesthetic criticism, one ready response is to widen the category, preferably by pluralizing it. This is the tack taken by Whitehead and Dewey in the 1920s, and it still resonates today. Case in point: one of the most philosophically ambitious entries into the thriving genre of disciplinary defense, Eric Hayot's *Humanist Reason* (2021), begins with a complaint that could have come straight from *Science and the Modern World*. "What's striking about modern society," Hayot observes, "is that the epistemological forms associated with one very particular set of truth-procedures"—the sciences, especially the natural sciences—"have come to dominate the idea of reason as such."[7] The diagnosis is the same as Whitehead's. But the response is tellingly different.

Let's begin with Hayot, then, to see how he frames the problem in the present. When he puzzles over the "epistemological weirdness of scientific reason's dominance," he worries most about how this disposition leaves humanities scholars without a language for presenting what they do as "reasonable" (9). The danger, he explains, lurks not in the category of reason as such but in the humanist "metadiscourse" that leads scholars of the arts to distance themselves from reason's realm. Think "murder to dissect" and other polemical oppositions of art and science from the late eighteenth century on. Drawing especially on the German hermeneutic tradition—which made sharp divisions between the human and natural sciences based on both object and method—Hayot argues that this pervasive way of thinking about the humanities rests on an assumed metaphysical division between the singular example and the general law, the concrete particular and the rationalized abstraction. On this account, the poem always outstrips any effort to grasp it as an instance of more general categories (as a sonnet, as written by Keats, as from the nineteenth-century, and so on). It's a stubborn, concrete individual and must be regarded as such. Yet, Hayot argues, once humanistic objects are defined as singular and therefore as spoiled by the generalizing grip of science, it becomes near-impossible to say out loud how reasonable, in the sense of shareable and generalizable, humanistic methods really are, much less to persuade skeptical administrators of our discipline-specific knowledge. We generalize all the time, he insists; why not own up to it? Only because we're stuck in a metadiscourse that casts an affiliation with reason as a betrayal of the ethical imperatives of the art object, not to mention a capitulation to the violent and ideologically-charged history of Western rationality.

Hayot insists that changing the metadiscourse involves nothing less than an overhaul of how we usually think of the concrete and the abstract. Rather than treat them as metaphysical categories—one dealing with our immediate experiences, the other pertaining to how we think

about them—Hayot defines them as entwined operations that define historical cultures of thought. “The study of a given culture’s modes of particularization and generalization, concretion and abstraction,” he explains, doubles as “a history of its epistemological practice” (49). The two sides bleed into one another: “what we call a ‘particular,’” Hayot notes, “is the social product of a great deal of abstract, generalizing work, and vice versa” (49). This means that we shouldn’t parse disciplines according to those that deal with objects in their concrete particularity and those that deal with objects in terms of abstract generalities. Better to focus on “the *relationship between particularity and generality*” defined by a “discipline’s rhetoric and practice of knowledge-formation” (56, italics in original). And yet, Hayot concludes, “almost no one thinks this way,” because adopting this perspective means “abandoning any sense of the absolute *methodological* distinction between the sciences and the humanities,” as well as the “strong ethical claims” that go along with it (56, italics in original).

Hayot shows the limits of his touchpoints here. For if the hermeneutic tradition begins with a division between *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft*, the pragmatists commit to no such founding rift. Even when polemicizing against “scientific” versions of knowledge, their real target was the way that selective assumptions derived from the experimental sciences had been generalized into metaphysical concepts. In other words, they took aim at the “metadiscourse” of their time. And to do so, they produced a *general* theory of inquiry—of how we come to learn and to know—that could then be nuanced in relation to particular intellectual situations and practices.[8] Thinking, for Dewey and Whitehead, proceeds along the same basic lines, no matter the disciplinary setting. What changes—in another anticipation of Hayot—is the nature of the abstractions and concretizations involved.

How, then, does this tradition approach abstraction? What picture of epistemological practice does it give us? Here I'll focus on Whitehead, starting with his observation, in *Science and the Modern World*, that "You cannot think without abstractions" (59). There are at least two ways to misunderstand where Whitehead is going with this. The first is to lump him with Bergson and expect a hard division between the abstractions of thought and the more immediate intuitions of concrete experience. That would place him within Hayot's account of the reigning metadiscourse, which is not where he belongs. The second is to assume (like Hayot) that abstraction is synonymous with generalization and therefore housed primarily in the intellect. Whitehead's version is both simpler and stranger than that. For him, abstraction means selection, a *drawing-out* as the etymology of ab-stract implies. This general sense of selection allows Whitehead to place abstraction deep within the workings of nature and mind alike. In the quotation from *Science and the Modern World*, the point is that thinking is necessarily selective: we're always focusing on something at the expense of something else. Whitehead thus trades the grand pathos usually associated with abstraction—the idea that our abstracting intelligence yields only distorted access to a realer, if irrational, realm beyond thought—for the reminder that every inquiry is partial. And this reminder entails an enjoinder: "accordingly," he concludes, "it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your *modes* of abstraction" (59). What are our modes of abstraction?

Here we can return to James, whom Whitehead called "that adorable genius," and to his radical empirical effort to embed knowledge in experience, an effort that scrambled the usual divisions of the abstract and the concrete (*SMW* 2). Against the familiar picture of reality as a concrete totality from which thought picks and chooses, James saw reality as an ongoing process whereby selective operations contrive to produce the concrete world. Think of it this way: all

living things filter their environment according to their sensory systems, needs, and purposes. A dog crafts a different life-world from my living room than I do, noticing different possibilities and using those possibilities to orient action. Those actions, in turn, shape the environment. There's no getting back to a pre-selective block of the real that perceptual operations draw from because whatever is there to be abstracted is already, itself, a result of earlier selections. In James's radical empiricism, even the "stream of concretes" that comprises experience exists not as a primal reality but as the ever-changing outcome of selective abstractions.[9]

Whitehead's metaphysical system, worked out most carefully in *Process and Reality* (1929), puts this Jamesian insight at its center. We need not get bogged down in details here, only note that Whitehead carries this back-and-forth between abstraction and concretion all the way to the heart of reality. Everything that *is*, for Whitehead, comes to be through a constructive process in which concrete entities are made through their abstractions of what already exists. He even dusts off an archaic word, *concrescence*, to convey his sense that concrete experiences *become* concrete through the way they selectively grasp their environments. The concrete has to be made, and it's made through selective abstractions. The focus of those selections, and the manner in which they are made, contribute to the character of the concrescence. The dog's experience arises from a different set of abstractions than mine. For Whitehead, this dynamic extends throughout nature, encompassing even the plants in the garden and the electrons in their fields.

One upshot of this perspective is that the abstractions associated with human knowledge don't alienate us from the world but rather join us to its most intimate workings. As Whitehead states, "abstraction expresses nature's mode of interaction," extending far beyond human mentality. And so when thought abstracts, as it always does, it is "conforming to nature"; "it is

exhibiting itself as an element in nature."[10] The insight is essentially a Darwinian one, and James and Whitehead, along with Dewey, were some of the first truly Darwinian philosophers.[11] They regarded the activities of human mind as manifestations of nature, not—as had so often been assumed—as ways of observing, representing, or mirroring nature. Indeed, they held that the reason that knowledge *works* is that it is a mode of engagement embedded in the stream of experience, one abstractive technique among many, and not a clarifying agent standing on the banks. "The world is subject-matter for knowledge," Dewey wrote, "because mind has developed *in* that world."[12]

Knowledge, then, as a mode of abstraction, is a way of shaping concrete experience. Or, to borrow the parlance of Alva Noë, a contemporary philosopher working in this radical empirical tradition, modes of abstraction constitute ways of *achieving the world's presence*. They are techniques of "skilled access," means of *realizing* the world. Like Whitehead, Noë gives these techniques a broad definition, finding them in sensorimotor systems—the abstractions that carve out an organism's *umwelt*—no less than in philosophical concepts and specialized practices. In each case, a style of selecting coaxes a different variety of presence or experience, where *experience*, once again, "is not something that happens in us or to us; it is something that we do; it is something that we make."[13] We make it through abstractions, such that the contemporary phrase *knowledge production* might usefully be glossed as *experience production*, since the idea is always to use a particular set of selective and connective operations to make the world present in a particular way. In this view of knowledge, the two senses of *realize* converge: ways of understanding double as ways of making-real.

Whitehead's account of abstractions provides a useful framework for thinking about disciplines. Just as each organism is defined through the selective way it sorts its environment, so

too are disciplines characterized by their specific abstractions, how they select from and organize the elements of human experience. This is a creative process: the abstractions peculiar, say, to sociological or aesthetic readings of poetry will select different features for attention and juxtapose those features in divergent ways, in relation to a variety of other objects, and the result will effectively be a different experience, a different mode of presence. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* becomes a different object—is realized differently in experience—when apprehended as offering strategies for Black survival, as in Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* (2016), as opposed to when it is treated as an example of the rising prestige of historical fiction, as in Alexander Manshel's *Writing Backwards* (2023).[14] This approach cuts a middle path between the idea that disciplines are geared to some pre-existing feature of the world (the social for sociology, the aesthetic for criticism), and the opposing idea that disciplines press phenomena into the molds of their own procedures.[15] Abstractions, after all, abstract from something; they aren't mere inventions. Yet neither do they simply move some portion of the world from here to there. Abstractions transform. And *modes* of abstraction, understood as coordinated styles of selection and composition, pull aspects of the world together into new configurations, new objects of knowledge, new orientations for action. As Dewey insisted throughout his long career, knowledge is additive: it changes the situation in which it arises, adding new "traits and possibilities" to the things of experience that "did not *previously* belong to them" (*EN* 381). Learning that water has the chemical composition "H_2O" does not simply add another fact to the knowledge bank; it reveals new relations between water and other parts of experience, new *meanings* for water (*EN* 193). The same goes for the handling of water in, say, Marilyn Robinson's *Housekeeping*: there, too, some new complex of meaning is produced when selective abstractions are knit together into a new experience.

Defining disciplines in terms of their abstractions emphasizes their partiality up front. This point returns us to where we began, with Hayot's lament about scientific reason's hegemony. One of the reasons Whitehead and Dewey drew so much attention to the selective and transformative nature of all thinking is that they worried that abstractions peculiar to the natural sciences—like "fact" or "physical cause"—had been dangerously generalized beyond their sphere. The selectivity of these abstractions had been downplayed to the point of being forgotten, not least because the technological advances they enabled were so spectacularly successful. Over time (Dewey and Whitehead each start their accounts in the seventeenth century), modes of thinking and doing characteristic of the specific practices of experimental science had come to represent thinking and knowledge as such. Absurdities resulted, for when "reality" is defined through the abstractions of the physical sciences—which abstract *away* from purpose, value, and meaning in order to isolate causal sequences—much of human life as it is lived appears unreal. "Scientists animated by the purpose of proving that they are purposeless constitute an interesting subject for study," Whitehead wryly noted.[16] The complaint here isn't that the sciences as such are misguided. It's that ideas that function perfectly well as operating assumptions in the laboratory wreak havoc when treated as general truths. Thus the need "to be vigilant in critically revising your *modes* of abstraction" (*SMW* 59).

The modern research university threatened to make this situation even worse. Since the end of the nineteenth century, as Whitehead explains in *Science and the Modern World*, "effective knowledge" had been equated with "professionalized knowledge," generally on the model of techno-scientific research. And professional knowledge "produces minds in a groove." Being in a groove isn't all bad. It speeds up the rate of research. But it "has its dangers," since sticking to a groove means "contemplating a given set of abstractions" at the exclusion of

everything those abstractions abstract from (*SMW* 197). This is the problem of *professional deformation* that Guillory, writing about the same Progressive-era moment, has analyzed to understand the distinctive tics of literary study. Any focused training, any education that schools students in a given set of disciplinary abstractions, inevitably desensitizes learners to some things in the process of sensitizing them to others. That's a feature not a bug of specialized study. But Whitehead insists that it becomes a bug, and a very pernicious one, when professionalism is "mated with progress," such that all "serious thought" is confined to grooves and those grooves, with their abstractions, become naturalized (*SMW* 205). What's important here is not just that every discipline has its groove, but that the very idea that serious education should proceed along specialized grooves caters to the particular practices of the research sciences. Not all modes of abstraction are allowed to dig in.

We can mark a contrast here in the ways that Whitehead and Guillory address the same institutional situation, shaped no doubt by their respective historical positions. Guillory, writing a century after Whitehead, treats the professionalization of the university as an accomplished and immovable fact; rather than contest this fact, he details how the institutional pressure to professionalize created now-common features of contemporary literary critical discourse (e.g., vagueness about its object of study; a tendency to inflate the political efficacy of interpretive work). Whitehead, on the other hand, along with Dewey and Burke, warned against the professionalization of knowledge at a moment when it still seemed possible to right the ship. They searched for alternatives, different ways of handling the abstractions necessary for thought that wouldn't elide the selective character of those abstractions. And each of them landed on some version of rethinking knowledge, including scientific knowledge, in light of the aesthetic: Whitehead recommended "art and aesthetic education" to counter the "method of training

professionals" (*SMW* 199, 197); Burke embraced a "rationale of art" to correct the overabundance of "scientific rationalization" that had denied the reality of value and purpose; and Dewey, at the end of *Experience and Nature*, treated all knowledge practices as artistic practices.[17] Even "scientific method," which Dewey glossed as "the art of constructing true perceptions," is one selective artistic technique among many (*EN* 379).

The problem with the knowledge-factory model of the research university is that it inevitably takes the products of one mode of abstraction as the model for all research. It measures the humanities by the tape of the sciences, and so sets them up to fail. The account of abstractions I've been developing offers a different way to approach the diversity of disciplinary knowledge, one that has the potential, at least, to make more room for aesthetic approaches. If we keep the creative, partial operations of abstraction in mind, we are led to ask a different set of questions of each discipline: not "what knowledge has it produced?" but "what are its abstractions, and what has it made with them?"[18]

We're now ready to gauge the distance between Whitehead and Hayot. Though they start from the same motivation—to roll back the epistemological dominance of the sciences—they differ in how much they're willing to revise the category of reason. Hayot's happy to leave it as it is. When he provides a short (and intentionally reductive) account of "humanistic method" to be taught in high schools alongside the (similarly reductive) account of "scientific method," he emphasizes the procedures of generalization, pattern-finding, and argument that apply to any number of scholarly pursuits (179-83). Reason itself hasn't changed much; it's just presented in a more humanist-friendly guise. Whitehead's account of disciplines as modes of abstraction, on the other hand, makes room for countenancing—and cultivating—other kinds of intelligent selection, other ways of making-present. And this wider view allows him to include the "not-

knowers" I mentioned earlier: critics who join Sontag in seeing "every work of art . . . as a certain handling of the ineffable."[19] This kind of criticism is an obvious and essential part of the discipline, but Hayot's schema leaves it out, presumably because its proximity to the non-discursive paints it as "irrational." Whitehead helps us to see this side of literary studies as marked by a particular mode of abstraction, a kind of thinking familiar to anyone, but on heightened display in the arts.

II.

Whitehead called philosophy "the critic of abstractions" (*SMW* 59). Its task, he explained, was to correct the tendency to let the selective habits of one intellectual practice claim dominion over all. When he invoked "art and aesthetic education," in *Science and the Modern World*, he clarified that he did so in a "general sense": not as a plea for music history or painting classes, exactly, but as a strategic bid to find a vantage from which to criticize the reigning abstractions within higher education (199). But that raises a question: how can Whitehead's framework for guarding against the dangers of professional specialization be applied to the disciplines that actually specialize in art and aesthetic education? What, in other words, are *the abstractions of the critic*?[20]

Whitehead didn't develop his ideas in this direction. But Dewey, who delved deeper into the arts after publishing *Experience and Nature*, and Susanne K. Langer, a logician-turned-aesthetician who studied with Whitehead, did. Each of them worked with the expanded notion of thinking outlined above to venture definitions of the varieties of thought foregrounded in the creation and experience of art. For both, this meant addressing aspects of experience that elude discursive formulation, like Sontag's "ineffable." They thus continued the reformulation of the

concrete and the abstract undertaken by Whitehead to make sense of the apparent "paradox of abstraction in a mode supposed to be characterized by its concreteness," as Langer phrased it in a nod to her former teacher.[21]

Dewey links the arts to what he calls qualitative thinking. All thinking, he argues, occurs within a *situation* imbued with a "pervasive and internally integrating quality," something akin to "affective tone." This tone is not a projection of the thinker but a real feature of the situation that "qualifies" the thought.[22] Some situations are tragic, some frightening, some annoying. They really are. And though we don't exactly "know" these qualities—Dewey says that they are "had" rather than "known"—they provide the "background, point of departure, and regulative principle of all thinking."[23] They orient thought, and so belong in any complete theory of inquiry. Yet because the most philosophically venerated forms of thinking, those associated with epistemology and logic, tend to ignore this qualitative backdrop, the immediate "had-ness" of situations either falls out of view or gets dismissed as mysticism. This is another instance of grooved abstractions, or professional deformation, commonly expressed in the opposition of thinking with intuitions or feelings. Dewey dismisses that binary as obscuring the modes of intelligence that stay close to our qualitative embeddedness in situations. Thinking, for him, is a more varied affair than the logicians' abstractions would have us believe.

Dewey holds that his expansion and pluralization of thinking equips us to notice something distinctive about the arts as practices of skilled, knowledgeable making. All knowledge practices are situationally qualified, but they differ in how much or even whether their selections keep this situation in view. Put starkly, scientific inquiry abstracts away from the qualitative backdrop; artistic thinking "intensifies" it, quickens us to its workings, abstracts *with* and *through* it.[24] Again, all thinking is qualitatively tinged: the excitement with which a biologist

follows an unfolding experiment is every bit as important as the curiosity that shapes a sculptor's attention to the emerging forms in the clay. But the former won't stage her excitement in the write-up of her results. Procedures are reported, to be sure, but not the quality of the experience. The sculptor, on the other hand, attends to the qualitative situation unfolding in the act of creation and shapes her own actions in relation to how they modulate, sharpen, or isolate qualitative features of the experience. Her goal is not to report on an experience but to craft in clay or stone the conditions for having an experience, one with a particular qualitative character. Qualitative thinking involves knowing how to compose situations that can be qualitatively "had." That's the goal that guides its abstractions.

Think of it this way: we're all familiar with writers who claim that they are not in full, conscious control of their creations, that their reasons for making one choice rather than another are—unlike our usual sense of "reasons"—unable to be set into words. Perhaps you've even felt this momentum yourself, in conversation or writing: an intuitive sense of the proper next step. Dewey asks us to acknowledge these as instances of thinking rather than of thinking's opposite (feeling, intuition, etc.). Learning to cultivate such thinking in relation to a medium is, he suggests, the endeavor of the arts.

Langer launched a similar argument in her philosophical bestseller *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) and its sequel, *Feeling and Form* (1953), but with a new emphasis on *symbolization* as the ur-process of mental life. Symbols, in her hands, took on a Whiteheadian ring: "a symbol is any device whereby we are enabled to make an abstraction," she wrote (*FF* xi). Acts of symbolization are for Langer as myriad as the types of abstraction we found in Whitehead. They stretch from the ways we carve out sensory worlds to the emotional coloration of a perceptual scene and on to the most abstruse equations of symbolic logic. What holds these together is that

they all accomplish selective transformations that give form and orientation to experience. "Our merest sense-experience is a process of *formulation*," she explained, and such formulations, as demonstrated by Gestalt psychology, shape how the world shows up for us.[25] Aligning rationality with abstractive symbolization, and then tracking how deeply symbolization shapes consciousness, set Langer up to rescue whole realms of human practice that had been disparaged as reason's fallen opponents: myth, dream, feeling, and, of course, the arts. She aimed to "bring within the compass of reason much that has been traditionally relegated to 'emotion,' or to that crepuscular depth of the mind where 'intuitions' are supposed to be born, without any midwifery of symbols, without due process of thought, to fill the gaps in the edifice of discursive, or 'rational,' judgment" (*PNK* 97-98).

This is a far more ambitious reworking of "reason" than the one we saw in Hayot. What's more, the stakes are higher. Langer feared that the clunky contrast between emotion and thought not only obscured the actual varieties of cognitive life but also pushed ineradicable features of human existence outside the boundaries of cultural—and educational—concern. Why cultivate what looks like "feeling" if it's just a distraction from, or even obstacle to, the real goal, *knowledge*? As a woman working in male-dominated field, Langer knew too well the way that labels like "intuitive," "emotional," or "bodily" served to dismiss experiences from the serious attention of logicians and epistemologists.[26] Perhaps that's why she clung to *reason* as a category, rather than, like Dewey, *inquiry* or *thinking*. She wanted to drive home that these mental operations were relevant to the concerns of tough-nosed analytic philosophers. But she faced a major challenge: the entrenched assumption that all thinking, all intelligent symbol-use, is discursive, that "language is the only means of articulating thought" (*PNK* 87). In a more focused version of Whitehead's approach in *Science and the Modern World*, Langer narrated the

historical conditions that led philosophers to mistake the styles of reasoning expressed in language as the *only* abstractions or symbolizations worth countenancing, and then shined a light on what fell outside those narrow grooves. The arts alone, she argued, devastated the logician's slender definition of thinking. Music and painting aren't made of language—but they undeniably deal in meanings. How can they be brought inside the "compass of reason" (*PNK* 97)?

In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Langer proposes a distinction capable of translating the opposition between the rational and irrational, meaning and mere feeling, into a contrast between two styles of symbolic thinking: discursive and presentational. Discursive reasoning is the familiar kind, the sort that the study of logic has long been built on. It unfolds in time as thought moves from point to point, within a wider linguistic system. I'm relying on discursive reasoning to write this paragraph, just as you are as you read it. Langer has no qualms with this as a method —who could? But she rejects the idea that this is the *only* way we think. In presentational symbols, which dominate in the realms of myth, ritual, and art, the meaning arrives in "simultaneous, integral presentation" (*PNK* 97). This is not to say that they always convey their meaning in a flash, even if it sometimes feels that way; rituals take time. The point is rather that these symbols present a relational complex that insists on being taken as a whole, one that gains import through the relations it establishes within itself rather than through the reference it has to a wider semiotic system.

In *Feeling and Form*, Langer develops this distinction to frame a theory of art. She characterizes the artistic symbol as "an articulate expression of feeling, reflecting the verbally ineffable and therefore unknown forms of sentience" (*FF* 39). By *articulate*, she means that the symbol is *articulated*, as we would say of a robot arm or a bendy bus; it has multiple joined parts. By "of feeling," she means something like Dewey's "quality." Where logical forms

abstract *away* from qualities, artistic forms work with the qualities themselves, arranging and composing them in relation to a medium. For the mathematician, it doesn't matter if we're talking about two apples, two oranges, or two people: two times two equals four. For the biologist, it doesn't matter if we're talking about *this* mouse or *that* one, so long as certain features of the individual have been made to demonstrate a set of relations that should hold for all mice under certain experimental conditions. But for the painter, the particular qualities and values of the colors on the canvas and how they hold together in perception all matter; they are all part of the symbol and its import. What these articulations *express* is an abstraction of feeling: not an emotive outpouring from the artist but a material embodiment of the artist's understanding of the "ineffable" but by no means unthinkable aspects of sentient life.

At this point Langer stakes her claim for the knowledge conveyed in the arts. Speaking of music, her most beloved art form, she writes that the composer's symbolic forms "bespeak his imagination of feelings rather than his own emotional state, and expresses what he *knows about* the so-called 'inner life'" (*FF* 28, emphasis in original). The composer, in other words, demonstrates knowledge of qualitative experience by creating musical arrangements capable of provoking a particular quality of experience. The symbol's "import," then, is "felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function" (as it would be in mathematics or logic) (*FF* 32). It is "felt and directly known" (*FF* 31). We can hear, in the background here, James's distinction between "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge-about": between knowledge in the sense of getting to know something through experience and knowledge in the sense of reading a report about it.[27] Langer fits artistic symbols inside the former category. "To understand the 'idea' in a work of art," she writes, "is therefore more like *having a new experience* than like entertaining a

new proposition" (*PNK* 263). That puts artworks beyond easy translation into discourse and ties their import to the encounter with the presentational symbols themselves.

But wait: in linking artistic symbols to ineffable quality and non-discursive thinking, have I left myself unable to deal with literature, that most discursive of the arts? I don't think I have. Most of us would agree that there are aspects of poetry and fiction (even more, of drama) that, while presented in language, are "said" not through the words themselves but through their qualitative relations with other words, images, or aspects within the work. We call these presentational features "formal" or "stylistic." Or, with Sianne Ngai, we call them "tonal." Ngai, after all, builds her theory of tone in part on Langer's account of the artistic symbol, insisting that literary criticism requires a concept of a holistic atmosphere that "remains loosely fastened to signifying practices, even if it is not literally a sign itself."[28] Dewey and Langer show us why aesthetic criticism needs such a notion, and how we might understand its operations. When artists abstract qualitatively, they engage actual constituents of a historical and cultural situation, giving them an intensified and ordered form that then becomes available for other modes of thought. Non-discursive symbols don't get in the way of the discursive work of criticism. They enable it.

III.

I've maintained throughout that the early-twentieth-century philosophical revolt against narrow definitions of professionalized knowledge can provide resources for addressing a particular impasse within literary studies, in which pleas for aesthetic criticism appear antithetical to justifications of "what we know," and vice versa. Guillory takes for granted that literary studies must define itself as "a disciplined set of procedures for the production and

transmission of knowledge."[29] Michel Chaouli, from the other camp, cites and dismisses this very passage in arguing that the only "criticism worth doing" is at best indifferent and more often antagonistic to "procedures" and methods of knowledge production.[30] The differences are so deep that shifting between the two ways of looking at literary studies feels like a duck-rabbit exercise: you can only see one or the other. Can the framework of modes of abstraction give us a different view?

In this section, I'll focus on Louise Rosenblatt and Kenneth Burke, two critics who drew directly on Dewey, James, and Whitehead to detail the types of creative abstraction involved in literary criticism. Both built on the fundamental insights elaborated above: that concrete experience results from selective abstractions; that intellectual practices wield their selections to realize their objects of knowledge; and that, in the arts, "knowing" a work is inseparable from experiencing it. "Someone else can read the newspaper or a scientific work for us," Rosenblatt observed in relation to this last point; "No one, however, can read a poem for us."[31] This stubborn attachment to experience is, I would hazard, the hardest thing about humanistic thinking to defend at present, despite its being so fundamental as to border on the banal. *Of course* you have to read the poem for yourself. But what kinds of thinking are involved in that process, and how do they draw from and feed into the techniques of interpretation and argument more often associated with the epistemology of the humanities? Burke and Rosenblatt each offer answers to these questions by attending to how criticism shuttles between abstractions of quality and abstractions of discourse.

Rosenblatt, who once commanded a mighty post within schools of education, developed a full-fledged literary theory based on James's notion of selective attention and Dewey's treatment of knowing as an art. Her approach never quite cracked the mainstream of literary

studies—no doubt *because* she was associated with schools of education—but her sophisticated treatment of how language operates "within an experiential matrix," and her focus on the cognitive skills required to make verbal works of art happen, merit renewed attention.[32] Perhaps she's in line to get it: as Guillory notes in an aside, Rosenblatt grapples with a set of concerns that have reentered literary studies thanks to the work of Rita Felski, concerns about the entanglement of reader and text, and of method and object.[33] Rosenblatt prompts us to see these entanglements in terms of a dynamic process of abstraction and realization, one in which poems appear and disappear, lose and gain significance, according to how they are made in acts of criticism.

More than almost any other critic, Rosenblatt takes seriously the fundamental yet elusive reorientation of aesthetic theory at the heart of Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934): that the "work of art" is not the painting on the wall or the book in your hands but rather what that object "does with and in experience."[34] As a result, she doesn't extrapolate her theory of art by cataloging the observable features of objects already classed as aesthetic (as, it must be admitted, Langer does). Rather, like Dewey, she begins with the conspicuous fact that aesthetic experience arrives haphazardly, serendipitously, and often not at all, even when we're reading the same passage. Sometimes, we might say, art *happens* in our engagement with a work—sometimes it doesn't. To clarify this point, Rosenblatt distinguishes between the "text"—the marks on the page or the sounds that hit the ear—and the "poem," which is an "event" that "comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and 'the text'" (*RTP* 14, 16-18). The text is the object; the poem is what that object does with and in a reading experience. The model is straight from *Art as Experience*. And yet the source that Rosenblatt most likes to cite for support is *Knowing and the Known* (1949), Dewey's late restatement of his theory of knowledge as the product of a

"transaction" between an object of knowledge and an inquirer.[35] Calling the poem a transactional event was, for Rosenblatt, a way of bringing criticism in line with Deweyan epistemology. It was her way of training attention on the modes of intelligence required to know a poem.

Specifically, Rosenblatt distinguished two types of reading involved in criticism: *aesthetic* and *efferent*, the latter from the Latin word "efferre," "to carry away." Efferent reading seeks out information that the reader can then use. Rosenblatt illustrates with a mother "whose child has just swallowed poisonous liquid and who is frantically reading the label on the bottle to discover the antidote" (*RTP* 23-24). The mother reads quickly, with a pressing purpose, and the qualitative features that attend the activity—her fear, her sense of urgency—are not folded into the reading but wisely kept at bay as she pulls out the instructions she needs. In aesthetic reading, by contrast, attention fixes on the qualitative tendencies and relations that accompany the experience of the words as they unfold. "*In aesthetic reading*," Rosenblatt explains, "*the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text*"; the emphasis is on "the qualitative lived-through experience" (*RTP* 25, 30, emphasis in original). This, for Rosenblatt, is the kind of reading that turns a text into a poem. Without attention to the qualitative experience sparked by the written words—a quality that pervades the whole situation of reading—there's no aesthetic object, because what Rosenblatt means by a "poem" is precisely the event in which attention bends to take in the felt qualities of a developing experience.

Let's step back and ask how all of this applies to our basic question about the varieties of knowing in literary criticism. The first thing to note is that aesthetic and efferent reading both turn on selective attention. That is, rather than present efferent reading as abstracting a message from a primordially un-paraphrasable and concrete poem, Rosenblatt treats both poem and

message as results of abstractive processes. The difference is in what and how they abstract, not whether. That means that each can be approached in terms of what it has made with its modes of abstraction, or how it has realized an object of knowledge geared to its discipline-specific goals. To return to our earlier example, *Beloved* becomes a different object when read aesthetically by Sharpe and efferently by Manshel—but both produce the novel as an object of critical knowledge through their selective abstractions of Morrison's narrative. Of course the contrast is never quite this stark: Rosenblatt encourages us to treat the efferent-aesthetic contrast as "*a series of gradations between the nonaesthetic and the aesthetic extremes*" (*RTP* 35, emphasis in original). All criticism, including these opposing readings of *Beloved*, requires both "an effort to indicate the sensed, felt, thought, nature of the evocation" of the work *and* the application of "some frame of reference or method of abstracting in order to characterize it" (*RTP* 135). Knowledge about how to make the poem (knowledge by acquaintance) mixes with knowledge produced *about* the poem.

One of the advantages of Rosenblatt's approach, then, is that it treats aesthetic reading as a learned skill, a crucial component of criticism's epistemology. Usually the accent is placed on "frames of reference"—literary history as a parade of successive schools—but Rosenblatt shifts attention to the difficulties of teaching students how to "evoke" the poem (*RTP* 134). Anyone who's taught literature for any length of time knows that very often the poem doesn't "happen" for students, at least not at first. In fact, it's not a stretch to say that many of our distinctive classroom practices are aimed at cultivating the ability to experience literary works as meaningful aesthetic objects: reading, and re-reading, the text out loud; asking for responses; focusing attention on particular passages and asking, again, whether and how they have changed the students' realization of the poem's meaning. As Buurma and Heffernan argue, literary studies

stands out from other disciplines for the extent to which it is "enacted rather than rehearsed in classrooms," so much so that "the answer to the question, 'Did I miss anything last week?' is truly 'Yes—and you missed it forever.'"[36] Without the experience—of the class, of the poem—there's nothing to learn. We thus acknowledge in our teaching what we find difficult to voice in our claims to epistemic value: that the route of aesthetic inquiry through the person of the inquirer is a fixture rather than a fault of critical knowledge. Our practices thrive in the "live circuit" between reader and text. But that doesn't mean that anything goes. The small-group seminar—premised on the idea that students learn through the medium of group conversation—provides a testing ground for sorting out features of one's evocation of the work that are convincing (i.e., shareable) and those that aren't. You may be tired when reading, or distracted by the fact that the protagonist shares a name with your ex, but unless you can persuade your classmates that those aspects of your experience are important for their evocation of the work, then you have to refine your sense of what counts as the poem. These skills of discernment require practice and refinement, as Elaine Auyoung has shown in her work on perceptual learning, and we testify to this belief in the practices of our teaching.[37]

Literary critical knowledge, from this perspective, requires attending to and communicating one's own qualitative experience, which in turn means translating between the non-discursive and the discursive. Arguably this could be said of literature, too. Poets and fiction-writers also ride the line between presentational and discursive symbolization, creating linguistic arrangements that communicate more than they say through the techniques of form, style, and tone cited earlier. Sometimes critics avail themselves of such methods (think Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* or late Roland Barthes); sometimes they stick more strictly to arguments and straightforward claims. But the fact that they, too, are at the margins where

quality meets discourse conveys the deeper import behind what Jonathan Kramnick calls "medium coincidence," the fact that literary criticism shares a medium with its object.[38] The simple observation that poets and critics both work in language is, after all, both true and misleadingly simple. For as we've seen, there's language and then there's language: language as discourse, unfolding in time as logical argument and apprehended efferently, and language as a medium for the creation of presentational symbols, read aesthetically.[39] We need the latter to account for the commonplace experience of literature as prompting "an epiphany of knowing something through words that could not be put into words," as Chaouli writes, quoting the novelist John Williams.[40] Rosenblatt helps us to see the task of criticism as involving not just the welding of the critic's language to the language of the text, but also the movement between the experience of the poem and the evocation, communication, and analysis of that experience.

Where Rosenblatt built on theories of selective attention to widen what counts as knowledge worth learning in literary studies, Kenneth Burke, who was roughly her contemporary, mapped out the intricate interplays between abstraction-as-realization and abstraction-as-generalization in the practice of criticism. He helps us to see how evoking a poem and interpreting a poem feed into one another. First, though, let's note how squarely Burke sits within the traditions I've been charting. In *Permanence and Change* (1935), he cites Dewey and Whitehead to warn against the dangers of professionalized knowledge, joining their protest against the modern tendency to raise the selective emphases of one set of interests (which Burke called "technological") into general frameworks for thinking about life and society.[41] And in *Counter-Statement* (1931) and *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), he developes his own vocabulary for distinguishing between knowledge that deals in facts and knowledge that shapes experience: revelation and ritual, information and form, semantic and poetic meaning. By now

the basic contrast will be familiar. While one mode of thinking "*avoids* drama," in the sense of minimizing the qualitative situation that provokes thought, the other "*goes through* drama," such that thinking inheres in the experience as a process.[42] Burke, more than Rosenblatt, turned his attention to how these modes interact.

Burke's signature concept of language as "symbolic action" insists that the act of naming is creative: it changes how the thing named is realized in experience. In this way Burke holds to the radical empirical insight that concrete experience must be made through selective operations, be those sensory perceptions, Gestalt frameworks, or poetic categories. That's why, as he puts it, "all living things are critics."[43] This broad framework informs Burke's particular inquiries into the selections we make in language. Burke begins like Dewey by recognizing that all thinking—and all symbol use—occurs within specified situations. Symbols, Burke says, "size up" situations; they provide an orientation or attitude that prompts one to act on some possibilities rather than others. They focus attention. This holds for technical jargon across all fields of inquiry. Knowing what a nucleotide or camshaft is will help the biologist and mechanic do their jobs, just as knowing what delayed decoding or the gothic is will help the reader of Faulkner. The first lesson to draw from Burke's perspective, then, is the basic point that reading descriptions or interpretations of literature change how that literature is experienced, and therefore what that literature is. Criticism does not simply draw from aesthetic experience; it feeds back into it, such that critical knowledge consists in all of the concepts, categories, and descriptions that contribute to the achievement of its object.

The second lesson from Burke is that the notion of symbolic action can pull together the aesthetic and scholarly sides of literary studies, setting them in an ecological rather than antagonistic relation. Burke does this by emphasizing the way that artworks themselves blend

together qualitative and generalizing abstractions. They are ritualistic—that is, experiential—formulae for inhabiting attitudes and orientations towards typical situations. Take Burke's most famous essay, "Literature as Equipment for Living" (1938). There he proposes that "each work of art is the addition of a word to an informal dictionary."[44] That is, *The Waste Land* and *Moby-Dick*, no less than "nucleotide" and "gothic," pick out patterns within "typical, recurrent situations" in order to orient action (300, 293). Speaking of Aesop's fables and other such proverbs, Burke insists that the "strategies" that literary symbols offer in response to these typical situations are as "generalized" as philosophical propositions. "One doesn't usually think of them as 'abstract,' since they are usually so concrete in their stylistic expression," he writes; "but they invariably aim to discern the 'general behind the particular'" (301). True, literature requires reading for "form" rather than "information," since literary artists build up their generalizations through arrangements of qualitative particulars. But the cognitive value of literary works—what makes them "equipment for living"—fits within the general framework of reason that we saw in Hayot: they identify patterns. So does Burke's "sociological criticism." Across his books, and especially from *Attitudes towards History* (1937) forward, he tries "to codify the various strategies which artists have developed with relation to the naming of situations" ("LEL" 301). He treats generic categories like tragedy and comedy as techniques that "size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes" (304). The job of the Burkean critic is thus twofold: it requires a facility with aesthetic "rituals" (the way these attitudinal strategies are dramatized) as well as the analytical search for regularities and developments across these strategies over time.

What I admire about Burke is how happily, and thoughtfully, he embraces this duality, even as it runs against "the categories of modern specialization" ("LEL" 303). He models how to

move between the qualitative abstractions involved in evoking a poem and the discursive practices of pattern-finding and argument. And he reminds us that the boundary between the two always shifts in relation to our efforts. As we invent ways of sizing up our experiences of art, we change the meaning of the works described. Far from being opposed, then, aesthetic criticism and the scholarly production of knowledge about literature require one another. They are distinct modes of abstraction and realization that, though not necessarily friendly to each other when exaggerated into theoretical positions, fit together nicely within the usual workings of literary study. They enjoy a symbiotic relation, where each can abstract from what the other realizes.

IV.

My goal in this essay has been to make the Jamesian tradition available for contemporary reflections on literary studies. I've shown how Whitehead and Dewey widened the range of what counted as intelligent inquiry by redescribing knowledge practices as arts of abstraction, ways of selectively "achieving" an object of thought.[45] With them in mind, we might be emboldened to revise the reigning ideals of disciplinary knowledge production from the perspective of our practices, rather than try to squeeze our practices into the reigning ideals. To specify that task, I've looked to those thinkers who brought the radical empirical framework to criticism and the arts. Langer specified symbolization as a mode of abstraction and then distinguished between discursive and non-discursive types, thus bringing into the scope of logic realms of human thought that had been dismissed as "emotional" or "intuitive" and therefore as unworthy of educational cultivation. Rosenblatt shifted from the symbols themselves to ways of reading them, moving the emphasis from art to criticism, and Burke, a rare blend of critic and metaphysician, demonstrated how to jump between the varieties of knowing involved in studying literature.

Taken together, these thinkers provide an argument for aesthetic education that avoids the pitfalls that can accompany defenses of the humanities in the public sphere. As Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon note in *Permanent Crisis* (2021), such defenses tend to bite off more than they can chew, claiming nothing less than to heal the spiritual wounds of modernity.[46] Like Hayot, Reitter and Wellmon base their argument on the influence of the German hermeneutic tradition on contemporary understandings of the humanities (what Hayot calls our metadiscourse). But the figures I've discussed take a different approach. By pitching the arts as practices of qualitative thinking, they base a claim for aesthetic education on the simple recognition that it targets important and ineffaceable aspects of human cognition. We could go even further and say that when the presence of non-discursive thinking is ignored, crucial features of human life are left unattended, unaddressed, and open to manipulation. Literary criticism, as a component of aesthetic education, bears witness to these procedures of qualitative thinking, focusing in particular on the symbolic systems that have been developed to facilitate them. Critics involve themselves with these modes of abstraction, which are necessary for making literature happen, in order to make them more widely intelligible, to show others how they operate in particular instances, and to reflect on their historical and cultural workings.

Is this pedagogical justification enough? Like the early-twentieth-century radical empiricists, I've taken as my target a straight-jacketed notion of intellectual inquiry. Yet as I draw to a close, I hear my reader wondering: what if the real problem isn't an overly scientific notion of reason but the narrowly economic notion of *value* that, against all pretenses of higher education as an enterprise of learning, treats universities according to the logic of the bottom line? Here I can only agree that economics may well be the groove of abstraction that has been most recklessly generalized of late, and add that this concern was also on the mind of the

philosophers and critics I've cited. When Whitehead addressed the Harvard Business School on the occasion of the opening of their new campus, he reminded his audience that "universities cannot be dealt with according to the rules and policies which apply to the familiar business corporations."[47] In this matter, too, we must be vigilant in critically revising our modes of abstraction.

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Charles S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" [1878], *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1 (1867-1893), eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), 132. See also Peirce's well-known definition of "lithium" in terms of the experimental trials required to isolate it in "Sundry Logical Conceptions," *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2 (1893-1913), ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1998), 286.

[2] See, e.g., William James, *Pragmatism* in *Writings: 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 507-08, especially his reference to the chemist Wilhelm Ostwald.

[3] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* [1925] (New York: Free Press, 1967), 2. Subsequently cited parenthetically as *SMW*.

[4] See I. A. Richards, *Poetries and Sciences: A Reissue of* Science and Poetry *(1926, 1935) with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1970); for the New Critics, Nicholas Gaskill, "The Close and the Concrete: Aesthetic Formalism in Context," *New Literary History* 47, no. 4 (autumn 2016): 505-24; Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1961); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004); Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2017); Emily Ogden, *On Not Knowing: How to Love and Other Essays* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2022); Michel Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me: Where Criticism Begins* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2024).

[5] Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987); John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2022).

[6] A quick caveat: I've cast these philosophers and critics as belonging to a "pragmatist" tradition, but in truth that's a loose way of talking. Neither Whitehead nor Langer identified as pragmatist—and for that matter, even Dewey abandoned the term. What holds these figures together as belonging to a coherent tradition, despite their differences with one another, is their shared debt to William James. They all draw from his radical empirical approach to experience. But since that radical empiricism stood hand-in-hand with his pragmatist approach to philosophical questions, and since pragmatism is the more recognizable term, I've opted for "pragmatism" in this introduction. A more precise designation for this group is "radical empiricist" or, more simply, "Jamesian."

[7] Eric Hayot, *Humanist Reason: A History. An Argument. A Plan* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2021), 8. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

[8] For an account of how this embrace of a general theory of inquiry matters for arguments about the humanities, see Sami Pihlström, *Toward a Pragmatist Philosophy of the Humanities* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2022).

[9] William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* [1912] (New York: Dover, 2003), 50.

[10] Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* [1927] (New York: Capricorn Books, 1955), 26.

[11] See, for instance, Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007) and Trevor Pearce, *Pragmatism's Evolution: Organism and Environment in American Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2020).

[12] John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* [1925] (New York: Dover, 1958), 277. Subsequently cited parenthetically as *EN*.

[13] Alva Noë, *The Entanglement: How Art and Philosophy Make Us What We Are* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2023), 58.

[14] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2016); Alexander Manshel, *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2024).

[15] For a compatible account of disciplinarity, see Jonathan Kramnick, *Paper Minds: Literature and the Ecology of Consciousness* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2018).

[16] Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1929), 12.

[17] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* [1935], third edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 66.

[18] I've taken inspiration here from Isabelle Stengers's reading of *Science and the Modern World* in *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011), chapter 9.

[19] Susan Sontag, "On Style," in *Against Interpretation*, 36.

[20] In Part One of *Professing Criticism*, Guillory raises a similar question about Burke's argument for "an *art of living*" as a guard against the culture's pervasive "technological psychosis." See Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 66. I have written more extensively about Whitehead's engagement with aesthetics in Nicholas Gaskill, "Back to the Classroom: What Whitehead Took from Art, and What a New Aesthetic Paradigm Can Take from Whitehead," in *More-than-Human Aesthetics: Venturing beyond the Bifurcation of Nature*, eds. Melanie Sehgal and Alex Wilkie (Bristol, UK: Bristol Univ. Press, 2024): 205-220.

[21] Susanne K. Langer, *Form and Feeling: A Theory of Art Developed from* Philosophy in a New Key (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1953), 10. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically as *FF*.

[22] Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1987), 111. John Dewey, "Qualitative

Thought," in *Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 5: 1929-1930, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 246.

[23] Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," 261.

[24] Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," 251-52.

[25] Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* [1942], third edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 89. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically as *PNK*.

[26] For an account of the misogyny Langer had to overcome to get *Philosophy in a New Key* published, and for a wider discussion of the book's lasting influence, see Joel Isaac, "Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942)," *Public Culture* 32.2 (2020): 355-61.

[27] William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 [1890] (New York: Dover, 1950), 221. James, to be sure, didn't invent the distinction. He cites John Grote and Hermann von Helmholtz, and references the way the contrast is expressed in other languages: e.g., French (*connaître* vs. *savoir*), German (*kennen* vs. *wissen*), and Latin (*noscere* vs. *scire*).

[28] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 46.

[29] Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 344.

[30] Michel Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me*, 76, 65.

[31] Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* [1938], fifth edition (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995), 33.

[32] Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* [1978], second edition with new preface and epilogue (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1994), 42. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically as *RTP*.

[33] Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 99. Guillory reduces Rosenblatt's work to a variety of reader-response theory.

[34] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* [1934] (New York: Perigee, 1980), 3.

[35] John Dewey, with Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* [1949], in *The Collected Works of John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 16: 1949-1952, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1989).

[36] Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2021), 4.

[37] Elaine Auyoung, "Becoming Sensitive: Literary Study and Learning to Notice," *PMLA* 138, vol. 1 (January 2023): 158-164.

[38] Jonathan Kramnick, *Criticism and Truth: On Method in Literary Studies* (Chicago: Univ.of Chicago Press, 2023), 71.

[39] I discussed the virtuous circle between ways of reading and ways of writing—alluded to here in the combination of Rosenblatt and Langer—in "The Arts of Attention: Stengers, Fictions, and Aesthetic Education," forthcoming in *An Ecology of Practices: Thinking with Isabelle Stengers—Whitehead, Cosmopolitics, Gaia*, eds. James J. Bono, T. Hugh Crawford, and Steven Meyer (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).

[40] Michel Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me*, 85. The quotation is from Williams's novel *Stoner* [1965] (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), 98.

[41] Burke, *Permanence and Change*, especially the chapter on "Occupational Psychosis."

[42] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* [1941] (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 149.

[43] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 5.

[44] Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 300. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically as "LEL."

[45] Noë, *Entanglement* 106.

[46] Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2021).

[47] Alfred North Whitehead, “Universities and Their Function” (1927), in *The Aims of Education* [1929] (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), 104.