Pragmatism and democratic embodiment: the poetics of constructive conflict in Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and Laura (Riding) Jackson

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Pragmatism and Democratic Embodiment: The Poetics of Constructive Conflict in
Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and Laura (Riding) Jackson

by

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Abstract

My dissertation, “Pragmatism and Democratic Embodiment: The Poetics of Constructive Conflict in Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and Laura (Riding) Jackson,” establishes a methodology based on William James’s notion of the subject (1890) as fluid to interrogate how these poets, working roughly between 1860 and 1970, complicated questions of writing in order to critique systems of gender. I reconsider a presumed relation between language and feminism in Modernist Studies that understands the aesthetic practice of unsettling linguistic norms to be counter to feminist concerns relating to the body. Through this reassessment, I argue that the poets anticipated problems associated with categorical systems that underlie second wave feminism and via their critique of systematicity offer a crucial voice for third wave feminism.

Extending ideas proposed by contemporary feminist pragmatists, who also question second wave notions of stable identity, I point out how Jamesian subjectivity is predicated on both an assertion and disruption of the habitual. My methodology illuminates how these women, through evoking and unsettling linguistic routines, encourage readers to participate in the immediacy of the moment without relying on entrenched patterns that tend to think for us. This reading, in Judith Butler’s terms, demonstrates how the iterable nature of language can provide a scene of agency as subjects think and act without an over-determined dependency on normativity. As each chapter unfolds, I substantiate that the poets through the assertion and interruption of the habitual constructed selfhoods that were more pliable and accommodated them as writers and artists. For example, Dickinson, in a loophole dynamic to evade ridicule and exposure, reconceives the site of her room as an escape to a kind of freedom, thereby, transgressing the limits of domesticity without leaving the domestic space of her home. However, her modernist descendants, in an oppositional tension with the male avant-garde, are keen on expressing the value of embracing the instability of identity. Stein redefines the notion of “genius” as masculine, Loy offers alternatives to the polarizing mind/body split in the American Dada Movement, and Riding develops a secular spiritualism based on the feminine and the material ground of language.
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Pragmatism and Democratic Embodiment: The Poetics of Constructive Conflict in Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and Laura (Riding) Jackson

Introduction

This dissertation examines the work of four American poets, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and Laura (Riding) Jackson through a methodological lens based on William James’s notion of the subject (1890) as fluid to consider how the poets, working roughly between 1860 and 1970, disrupted reading norms in order to critique systems of gender. Through an analysis of their work, I reassess an assumption in Modernist Studies that has understood the aesthetic practice of fragmentation in language to be counter to feminist concerns relating to the body. I argue that their interruption of systems stems, in part, from a desire to rethink Western Metaphysics dependency on binaries, thereby, allowing them to explore new selfhoods that could accommodate them as writers, artists, and thinkers. The poets’ feminism comes not from establishing a women’s writing, in which patriarchal orders in language are dislodged to produce a site for women, but instead from translating a hierarchical paradigm based on polarization and contention to a democratic paradigm that is based on equal relations and unity. I argue that the poets offer a remediating voice that intervenes in subsequent debates between second wave and third wave feminists on issues of subjectivity, agency, and the exclusionary principle embedded in categorical frameworks.

By thinking through the Jamesian ontological perspective—that refuses Western Metaphysics attachment to systems—I illuminate the way these poets connect language and gender. Their poems (and, in the case of Stein, Loy, and Riding, their essays)
underscore how habituated practices, both in the reading/writing process and gender construction, ultimately produce hierarchies that are then assumed to represent truth. The notion of subjectivity as mobile—in which habitual patterns are dislodged and placed in relation to new contexts in the passing moment—appeals to the poets because it opens possibilities for identity as old constraints, such as those involving gender constructs, are revised according to new historical conditions and demands. Through this movement of the self—what I will call “mobile relationality”—the poets undo the metaphysical totalizing self and advocate for an ontology that is pliable in its constant transitional movement. In this way, I point out that these poets offer a way to perceive of subjectivity that counters second wave notions of the stable subject and promotes a third wave notion of the subject that is unstable yet engaged with ‘other’ and capable of agency in effecting change in the world. Furthermore, in distinct ways, through the unsettling of linguistic norms, they each provide a reading practice that prepares one for the uncontainable nature of reality without a reliance on systems that—while furnishing an organizational function—establish hierarchies and produce frameworks for social inequities.

Challenging the notion that fragmentation in writing dissolves subjectivity, the poets, in Judith Butler’s terms, demonstrate how the iterable nature of language can make available a scene of agency as subjects think and act without an over-determined dependency on normativity. What makes these poets so remarkable, I contend, is their anticipation of problems relating to categorical determinants in second wave feminism and, through their critique of systematicity in both language and gender, they also offer a vital contribution to third wave feminism.
As marginalized subjects, experiencing the inequities of patriarchal societies, the Jamesian ontology is crucial in its democratizing implications. All four poets were powerful thinkers and yet they had to deal with polarized systems that associated men with matters of the mind and woman to domesticity and the body. My use of the term “democracy,” then, is not in reference to macro-political concerns of nation or state. Rather, I perceive a common thread running through the poets under discussion revealing a micro-political or ethical way of living that is democratizing in its undoing of binaries that underlie hierarchical mechanisms. In varying ways, the poets are cognizant of the potential ramifications of this ethical way of life and how it might impact socio-political contexts; however, their focus is on an individual’s ongoing relation to the world, rather than political institutions. James reveals this understanding of democracy in his critique of conceptual thinking. As he points out, mind and body are integrated in that perception (mind) cannot be separated from sensory experience. James posits that impressions associated to sight, sound, and touch travel from the body through the nervous system to the brain.¹ Reality is embodied mind in an ongoing relational engagement with the physicality of things in the world. In this paradigm, there is no outside versus an inside, that is, there is no possibility of overriding concepts imposing hierarchical positions. The non-dual paradigm produces democratic wholeness through, to use Jacques Derrida’s term, “supplement.” Difference enfolds and enlarges the whole as individuals add to and change the past. In this way, the poets translate Western Metaphysics categorical and hierarchical sense of the individual to an understanding of reality and the self that is similar to Jamesian notions of democratic relationality. This translation promotes a way of being in the world based on equal relations which, in turn, provides a space that offers

¹ See *Psychology: Briefer Course*, p. 15-16.
alternatives to the hierarchical mechanisms overshadowing their voices as female artists and writers. Furthermore, in various ways, they assimilated these ideas based on democratic mobile relationality into their poetics of constructive conflict.

Their difficult texts that dismantle the notion of author as authority over passive reader and disrupt communicative systems require readers to actively think, imagine, and participate in the immediacy of the moment without a dependency on overriding, habituated patterns. The methodological lens based on mobile relationality is helpful in revealing how the poets use language to encourage this democratic connection to the world through an embodied, experiential praxis. Readers perform democratic relationality in that ranking systems of language are continually undone providing them the opportunity to think beyond conditioned and automatic impulses. The poets demonstrate how the disruption of communicative systems can expose patterns in our lives that reinforce a hierarchical and potentially polarized relation to ‘other.’ Codes of language work to hide the constantly moving, immediate and body-based reality through categorical structures that are assumed to be truth. The value of disrupting systems is that we get a jolt and are thrown into the moment. One is granted the opportunity to observe habituated tendencies—to see them as habits rather than reality. In this way, through democratic relationality, they offer a practice that strengths the capacity to think and negotiate beyond norms such as those established by hetero-normativity. As Judith Butler argues, this kind of involvement with language is socially relevant in its insurrectional capacity. In *Excitable Speech* she defines “insurrectionary speech” as a confrontation in which an interaction with words throws one out of “normal” modes of behavior, necessitating self-reflexivity as comfortable ways of perpetuating the status quo are
dislodged (163). Applying her idea of speech to the reading process, disjunctive writing has an insurrectional function in that it produces a confrontational moment for the reader. Expected reading practices are confounded, requiring the readers’ ongoing auto-critique, placing them in the immediacy of the passing moment where a relational engagement with the text, particulars of the moment, and context creates a generative and democratic (not based on ranking systems of language) relation to alterity. In this praxis readers become skillful at identifying the limitations of routine and practiced in active thinking, providing them the capability to engage with the systems of the world without succumbing to complacency.

The poets, in their emphasis on a democratic relation to the world, put into question notions associated to Logos, in which the Word stands between divine Truth and the world of time and space. Logos is connected with the transcendental that supplies and is the resource for meaning. Truth is understood to be external to the world, suggesting that the Word is a representative or shadow of a greater truth. The methodological lens illuminates how the poets advocate for a life lived with awareness that hierarchical mechanisms embedded in Western thinking are constructs and that it is possible to respond to those man-made systems from a position of agency rather than habituated repetition. The moment of agency resides in the individual’s choices in the passing, relational moment. Again, this mobile relationality in the ongoing moment is democratic in the sense that there is no attempt to reproduce an ideal; instead the individual must actively participate as the assumed “truths” of the past are placed in relation to new contexts and conditions in time. This challenge to Logos is consistent in the poets under discussion—particularly in the way they highlight the individual’s agency in the ongoing
present moment. However, their ideas regarding democracy and the individual vary in how they accommodate for or understand the individual in relation to the social-political contexts.

For example, Dickinson’s challenge to metaphysical truth can be seen in her oppositional tension with Aristotelian notions of the lyric, in which she encourages a desire for harmonic and representational closure without providing completion. The oppositional dynamic confirms her understanding that “Suspense—does not conclude,” that uncertainty and unsatisfied longings place readers in a position to think and participate in the relational moment with the text, time, and change (Fr 775). A similar oppositional dynamic—that utilizes hierarchies as a way to unsettle hierarchical mechanisms—can also be seen in her unsettling of gender binaries. By redefining the site of her locked room as an escape to a kind of freedom where she was provided psychic space to think and write, Dickinson transgresses limitations of domesticity without leaving the domestic space of her home. Dickinson’s understanding of democratic relationality is a philosophical resistance to hierarchies of stable truth as well as a strategic move that she applies to her situation as a middle-class, nineteenth-century female subject who was severely restricted by domesticity. However, Dickinson’s dispute with hierarchies of meaning embedded in Logos, as Shira Wolosky posits, threatened linguistic signification but does not collapse its system (xiv-xvi). Dickinson contests the concept of Logos as someone frustrated with its failure to adequately represent the world she inhabits and leaves the task of dismantling that paradigm and envisioning new possibilities to her descendants.
The three Modernist poets under discussion were working in an intellectual milieu that was uneasy with the new political mechanisms of mass democracy. Many high modernists were concerned that liberal values would be eclipsed in the move from restricted democracy to democracy based on industrial and corporate interests (Potter 5-7). Stein, Riding, and Loy in their emphasis on the individual are in part responding to this anxiety felt by the larger community regarding the new development of mass or corporate democracy. As marginalized subjects feeling the effects of patriarchy, they are invested in the idea of equality that is suggested in “democracy.” However, they are also opposed to the institutional systems of Democracy, particularly one dominated by economics. Mobile relationality provides them a structure from which to think through ways in which equitable conditions might be possible, while at the same time allowing them to challenge political systems of Democracy that create hierarchies under the guise of equality. Their stress on a democratic or ethical way of life is based on an individual’s insight into the power of entrenched patterns and the individual’s ability and willingness to counter those patterns through engaged, active thinking. However, Stein’s notion of this ethical way of life—in contrast to Riding and Loy—has a stronger hold on the individual and is tied to her desire for public recognition. She uses Jamesian mobile relationality to define a reading/writing process that is democratic in its disruption of reading routines that rely on hierarchies of language. This disruption of the habitual—that wakes the reader up to the new moment without the interference of language systems—creates an intimacy between text and reader (a relation to language that Stein calls “romance”). Her feminism has to do with demonstrating how “romance” can contribute to a paradigm in which individual subjects are practiced in functioning without automatic
responses that ultimately systemize and rank. She wants readers to become aware of a possible approach to existence that cultivates the ability to see through entrenched patterns, such as those involving categorical distinctions that provided men the option of unquestioned status in their role as writers and geniuses and limited women to positions of support. Stein’s ideas of democracy become entangled in her concern for literary fame and are further complicated by her disregard for first wave feminism. Unlike Riding and Loy (who, despite their reservations about the first wave feminist movement, engaged in discussions relating to feminist concerns), Stein dismisses the “cause of women” stating it has nothing to do with her, refusing any dialog (Stein Writings 1903-1932 743). However she is—through Jamesian ideas of mobile relationality—interested in undoing hierarchical mechanisms and gestures toward a democratic paradigm that would provide an equitable space for her talents as a leader, writer, and artist.

Riding’s notion of democracy, like Stein’s, underscores the individual and a way of life in which automatic responses are challenged in the passing moment. Through the reader’s “initiative” a space without conceptual and hierarchical precepts becomes available.2 However, for Riding, this democratic relation to the world is painstakingly expressed through a concern for “other.” In The Telling she discusses how the individual’s relation to language both evokes one’s “rational” as well as imaginative capabilities. These characteristics of language have the capacity to help subjects go beyond their competitive, survival-based instincts (“self-claiming” self) to a “human souled” self (“Being”) that is aware of its deep connection to humanity in the history of existence. Her feminism develops out of a paradigm shift in which the “man-part” of ourselves understands the incompleteness of categorical systems. The shift allows the


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“woman-part” to offer her voice, a perspective that, like Jamesian notions of democratic mobile relationality, highlights radical individual difference in the ongoing passing moment (*The Telling* 47). Human unity for Riding is founded on this radical individuality in which there is no totalizing memory or self, but a connection to the past through, in Jamesian terms, aggregates strung together, creating wholeness without the possibility of a hierarchical or transcendental outside position. The unity cannot be felt, according to Riding, if we live in systems that override difference and categorically rank and divide—encouraging competiveness and acrimony in society. However, the unity—a deep connection to other human beings—can be felt if we use language to acknowledge radical difference in the immediacy of the moment, thereby linking past to the present in the chain of thinking and existing that led to the current moment.

While Riding primarily expresses her notion of democratic relationality in philosophic discussions meant to engage and effect change in the world, Loy addresses social and political concerns. For instance, Loy’s idea of “Psycho-Democracy” is an alternative to the polarized thinking she understood to be the cause of World War I. The Jamesian lens exposes how she uses mobile relationality to underline a way of life, in which individuals take part in a process of constructive debate and creative exchange as a way to alleviate the tendency for polarized conflict. She wants to rethink the phenomenon that occurs when nations rigidly hang on to their points of view and allow disagreement to escalate in a defense and justification for international war. Loy’s redefinition of conflict is evident in her poetics in which she confronts the reader both ideationally and linguistically. This conflict produces a performative that places readers in a position to be
self-reflexive, critical and creative thinkers who must be awake to the passing moment and its democratizing relational movement through time.

Both Riding and Loy critique the first wave suffrage movement—Riding for its systematicity, Loy for its singular attention to legal issues relating to women. ³ Nevertheless, the Jamesian lens illuminates how Loy is crucially concerned with social issues concerning women. For instance, Loy understands the female body laboring in childbirth to be representative of the creative conflict necessary to undo binaries and polarization. She, thereby, redefines “maternity” as an “intellectual complex” (Janet Lyon) that can liberate patriarchal society from its conceptualizing and polarizing inclinations. The four poets under discussion through their challenge of Logos provide for a democratic, ethical way of life that in various ways contests hierarchies of gender that constrained them as writers and thinkers. The differences in their expression of this ethical way of life can be seen in how: 1) Dickinson puts into question hierarchies but does not offer alternatives, 2) Stein implies that her resistance to binaries has consequences in defining a new equitable paradigm, while disregarding the socio-political, and 3) Riding and Loy directly relate their mobile relationality to a concern for alterity, explicitly articulating new world views.

The dissertation’s attention on the reader is unquestionably influenced by reader response theories. Their emphasis on the text and the notion of reading as a subjective performance has informed the close readings. However, reader response theories have tended to undermine their focus on the individual by reducing the multiple potentialities a

³ Loy’s argument with first wave was that it overlooked the deep-seated, internalized issues underlying gender norms.
reader brings to the interpretive process to overriding (academic) traditions. For instance, Stanley Fish’s understanding of “interpretive communities” presumes the reader to be a literary critic, creating, in Elizabeth Meese’s words, “a strong insider-outsider dynamic, a gender-based literary tribalism that comes into play as a means of control” (7). One of the issues that reader response theories grappled with was the problem of uncontainable individual perception in relation to the contextual world. The poets under consideration offer a solution to the question of linguistic freedom versus context that can be read through Jamesian notions of mobile relationality in which, as Stein underscores, individual response in relation to (con)text creates a repetition with a difference. The reader both continually applies and unsettles conventions of language as new impressions alter meaning, creating a mobile form in the interaction between text and interpretation. In this moving form, the reader’s ability to think beyond the limits of convention is—unlike the effect of Fish’s “interpretive communities”—encouraged and sustained.

Furthermore, the dissertation is indebted to theories of deconstruction. The focus on language and its irreducible nature as well as Derrida’s discussions on binary systems and the uncontainability of the book have been integral in the development of my ideas. However, deconstruction has tended to stress the iterative nature of language at the expense of explaining how that iterability relates to bodies in the world. Criticism influenced by deconstruction easily reverts to the idea that since language cannot be pinned down it cannot contend with real-world temporal and social structures. What the

4 See Julianna Spahr, Everybody’s Autonomy, 13.

5 For discussions on deconstruction and its alienation from issues relating to the body, see Leslie Wahl Rabine, “A Feminist Politics of Non-Identity,” Adrianna Cavarero, For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression, 213.
poets add to theories of deconstruction is an elaboration on and praxis that demonstrates the link between the iterability of language and the iterable nature of subjectivity. The poets’ texts that foreground language’s irreducibility provide readers awareness and practice in dealing with the uncontainable nature of reality without an overreliance on systems that, while providing an organizational function, establish hierarchies and produce frameworks for social inequities.

Dickinson, for instance, in her poetics of discord, addresses the nexus between the uncontainable nature of language and subjectivity in her challenge of Aristotelian notions of the lyric. In particular, she resists the idea of solace and connection in the lyric’s tradition, and further cultivates an awareness of one’s existential aloneness in making individual choices particular to the relational and contextual engagement. She draws attention to the necessary loss and pain in detaching from systems in order to break the illusion of one’s connection to a solid sense of reality. She points to the initial moment of the transitional process—the rupture needed to undo the deep yoke of engrained practices that underlie the normative. Stein’s poetics of the exaggerated chiasma, creates a push/pull movement in which moments of syntactical clarity affirm reading norms pushing one referentially outside the text in the meaning making process. This is then sharply reversed as habits of reading are dislodged pulling the reader into the material aspects of language. In this chiasmic movement readers have no linguistic foothold but are provided a way to navigate without resorting to routine through a playful trust in chance and randomness. Stein provides a way of dealing with difference that reinforces one’s capacity to be in the moment of constant change rather than dependent on overarching institutions.
In her poetics of collision, Loy highlights the moment of conflict when the old comes into contact with the new in the transitional process. Through her confrontational tactics that challenge the reader both linguistically and ideationally, she stresses the importance of a healthy or generative “competition” that spurs new thinking particular to the new historical moment in time. Loy, like Stein, offers a practice that reinforces a way to be in the constantly changing, unpredictable moment without resorting to ranking systems. However, unlike Stein’s emphasis on chance and randomness, Loy stresses the value of fruitful auto-critique and debate. Riding, through her poetics of dissociation, identifies a process of engagement with and detachment from systems of language as the site in which the material world can access the spiritual. In *The Telling*, in its refusal to end (e.g.: rather than concluding, she trails off with a series of afterthoughts), she demonstrates the connectivity in reading as one enfolds and enlarges the writing, adding to and altering it and its previous reading. In this way, she provides readers an experiential sense of unity produced by the disruption of norms and underscores how radical individuality is a condition necessary for unity. Riding brings the four poets full circle in their poetics of constructive conflict—from Dickinson’s emphasis on the necessary break from the illusion of connection alluded to in systems of language to Stein and Loy who provide ways to be active and engaged in the moment of constant change to Riding who underlines unity via irreducible difference.

In this way Dickinson, Stein, Loy, and Riding move beyond James in their praxes that develop one’s ability to recognize the limitations of entrenched patterns underlying social constructs and one’s capacity to actively think beyond those systems. The poets contribute to third wave feminism in that they demonstrate how language’s
uncontainability can provide a scene of agency as subjects are put in a position to think and act without an over-determined dependency on normativity. However, the Modernist’s poets under discussion highlighted an identification with the feminine—clearly apparent in Loy and Riding and evident but less pronounced in Stein—could be perceived of as essentialism in second wave terms, thereby presenting a problem for third-wave thought. For instance, the link to the feminine can be seen in Loy’s emphasis on the maternal; Riding’s “history of human existence” in which she encourages a transition from an era of man to an era of woman; and Stein’s notion of writing as “romance” that makes subtle connections to the feminine through associations with love, intimacy, and the romance novel. Nevertheless, their identification with the feminine is distinct from second wave notions of essentialism that are based on categorical distinctions such as “women’s writing” and a “women’s cannon.” Rather, in the case of Stein and Riding, their feminism has to do with promoting a new paradigm based on qualities of the feminine that underline mobile relationality: fluidity, unity, and immersion in the particulars of the moment. This paradigm, in resistance to hierarchical systems, offers alternatives to the classifying tendencies of the second wave. In the case of Loy, as Janet Lyon points out, her identification with the female body becomes an intellectual model promoting her idea of creative conflict that can undo the binaries that the second wave perpetuated. While the Modernist poets identify with the feminine in diverse ways, they anticipated third waves’ critique of second wave essentialism and offer remediating possibilities regarding the issue of exclusion embedded in categorical determinants.
The distinctions between Dickinson and the modernist poets under discussion can be traced, in part, to the gender constraints the poets had to manage. While Dickinson navigated nineteenth-century ideologies of domesticity, Stein, Loy, and Riding negotiated gender imbalances in the male avant-garde—specifically egoist notions that understood artistic genius to be exclusively male. I argue that the female modernist poets employed an egoist stance which can be seen in Stein’s enduring notions of herself as a leading artistic genius, Loy’s position as a vanguardist, shocking bourgeois women on issues of gender and sex, and Riding’s aristocratic attitude in regard to educating the “plain reader.” However, their positions are distinct from the male avant-garde in that the egoist stance is placed in opposition to their desire for inclusion in the male world of publication and artistic circles. Their exclusion from male institutions motivates them to conceptually undo the mind/body binary that made recognition problematic. This underlying opposition in their egoist stance contributes to their interest in identity and is further reinforced by the intellectual atmosphere of the early twentieth century. During this period, Henri Bergson’s ideas of time and perception in relation to the human subject—particularly his concept of “la durée,” or psychological time—stimulated substantial public interest and were highly influential. He lectured weekly to large audiences and his ideas had a significant impact on many writers, artists, and thinkers, including James.6 While Stein has a direct link to James, as his student at Radcliffe, I suggest that Loy and Riding were exposed to ideas similar to Jamesian notions of consciousness that were circulating in fin de siècle artistic and intellectual communities. The Jamesian lens illuminates how the poets, familiar with these ideas of perception, time, and

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6 See Mark Antliff, p 3-4.
consciousness, were able to both aligned themselves with the fragmentary or unstable poetics associated to the high modernist aesthetic as well as critique the hierarchical practices of their avant-garde counterparts which made publication and recognition, at best, difficult.

However, despite these feminist concerns, their egoist ideas distinguished them from early twentieth-century feminism. As mentioned previously, Stein dismissed contemporaneous feminism and Loy and Riding questioned first waves’ notion that women should become more man-like as a solution to gender discrepancy. (Riding, whose career extends through second wave feminism, also criticizes that later movement for reinforcing categorical distinctions between male and female.) In their repudiation of systematicity in both male modernism and early feminism, the poets challenge the theoretical underpinnings established in literary studies. For instance, they put into question easy gender divides that have been foundational to Modernist Studies. Their refusal to be classified, due to their complicated relation to both the avant-garde and feminism, begins to undo the polarizing gender assumptions that designate male as egoist and female as inclusive. Andreas Huyssen’s influential book, for example, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* argues that the avant-garde formed a series of divides: high modernism and mass culture, individual and mass democracy, and male and female. He argues that the male modernist expressed hostility toward mass culture and democracy and aligned them with the feminine. His emphasis

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7 I argue that Stein’s disregard for early feminism, as with Riding and Loy, had to do with her critique of systems and overriding conceptual thinking. She, unlike Riding and Loy, chooses to ignore the movement rather than engage in a debate.
on the patriarchal and misogynist tendencies of Modernism is significant for feminism and influential to the second wave; however, the divides do not account for possibilities between the binaries, such as the modernist poets under discussion who are female and egoist. As Rachael Potter and Jane Malcolm also argue, the poets offer alternatives to reading Modernism that are not tied to polarizing gender traditions.8

The poets’ ideas that develop from a distrust of binaries provide ameliorative possibilities in regard to the disputes between second and third wave feminism. Second wave thinking—that focused on the body as stable and highlighted the importance of a fixed narrative ‘I’—has been put into question since Elizabeth Spelman’s Inessential Woman (1988) which pointed to the iniquity involved in defining and stabilizing “woman.”9 A much debated concern revolves around the issue of political agency—and the assumption that political unification requires solidifying the identity of the oppressed group.10 Pragmatist feminists have entered the conversation with a critique of second wave theories that presume a fixed reality and have conceived of a feminist theory based on multiple subject positions.11 For instance, Shannon Sullivan in Living Across and

9 Spelman critiques the tendency in second wave feminism to take privileged woman’s experience (i.e.: white, middle-class) as the norm.
Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism argues (via pragmatist philosopher John Dewey) that identity is in flux as it transacts—being changed and changing the world. What Sullivan underlines in Dewey’s pragmatism as a remediating factor for hegemonic concepts of gender is his idea of youth and the ability to maintain fluidity in the formation of habits. Education is of primary importance in the sense that it is a site in which the young can be encouraged to “form the habit of questioning, rethinking, and rebodying their own and their cultures’ gender habits” (104). With this understanding of routine the “chronologically old can remain young” (105).

Erin Tarver in “Particulars, Practices and Pragmatic Feminism: Breaking the Rules and Rulings with William James” also highlights pragmatism’s emphasis on habituated practices, arguing against second wave essentialism and its appeal “to masculine or feminine ‘natures’ which [is]…politically problematic in their exclusion of those who are not so easily classifiable” (278). She stresses how James’s understanding of the habitual is valuable to feminism in that it sheds light on the powerful effect routines have on reinforcing repressive gender roles as well as a site of freedom, if new habits are developed. Both Sullivan and Tarver bring Butler into the discussion with the pragmatist thinkers, stating that Dewey and James (respectively) help to elucidate her notion of “performativity” which has been misconstrued to refer to the idea of a


12 She points to Dewey’s idea that “the relationship between self and society is [not] solely the society’s ability to mold the self.” Rather there is a continual interplay as habits are “continually… being made and remade in their transaction with their surroundings” (95).
sovereign subject acting willfully as an actress/actor would in a performance. The 
misinterpretation misses Butler’s inquiry into "genealogy”—her examination of the 
processes by which an individual assumes her position as a subject—and profoundly 
underestimates the deeply entrenched nature of habituated patterns (Tarver 278/ Sullivan 70).

Sullivan continues her comparison of Dewey and Butler in regard to habituated 
practices. For instance, she understands Butler to comprehend the “political promise of 
the performative” as residing in the “possibility for the speech act to take on non-ordinary 
meaning, to function in contexts where it has not belonged.” This confounding of 
normative meaning is excessive in that it “exceeds the normal expectations of what 
bodily habits might mean” (103). Sullivan links Dewey’s idea of the “plasticity of self” in 
contextual change to Butler’s performative; however, she critiques Butler for the 
ambiguity in her use of the word “excess” because it suggests that there is an outside that 
“stands apart from social performatives.” Furthermore, she feels that Butler “says so little 
about the confounding of contexts” (103). Her turn to Dewey then is a move to clarify the 
vagueness she perceives surrounding Butler’s explanation concerning the disruption of 
norms in the performative. She is interested in Dewey’s “account of how the efficacy of 
imperfect performances and habits might be combated through the interplay of habit and 
environment” (103). In other words, Sullivan is interested in finding a way to resist the 
way “imperfect performances” effect the habituated. In this way, she circumvents 
considering how “imperfect performances” viewed as an unsettling of the normative 
might be of value to feminist issues relating to the body. Instead she wants to reaffirm
and return to a focus on the continued application of habituated patterns.\textsuperscript{13} As Tarver and Sullivan point out, the role of habit is significant for both pragmatist philosophers and worthy of exploration in its implications and valid contribution to feminist concerns. However, I draw attention to the ways in which Jamesian pragmatism articulates the role of disruption in relation to routine. In this light, I link Butler’s notion of “imperfect performance” as the “political promise of the performative” to James’s idea that the self (consisting of the “I” and “me”) operates through a process in which the “I,” situated in the passing moment, continually makes different (or makes imperfect) the habituated patterns reinforced by the “me.” I suggest that embracing Butler’s notion of destabilization in relation to James further illuminates remediating possibilities to the debate regarding subjectivity and political agency.

Second wave notions that equate stable reality with political unification are located within a paradigm of categorical systems. The stabilization sets up an “exclusionary principle”\textsuperscript{14} in that there are only two options provided in the binary (right

\textsuperscript{13} While the idea of disruption is embedded in Sullivan’s Dewedian approach (e.g.: the idea of implementing habits that encourage questioning and rethinking gender) my line of inquiry focuses on the ramifications of dealing with unsettling routine in relation to established norms.

\textsuperscript{14} The term is Butler’s. She states, [w]hen the category is understood as representing a set of values or dispositions, it becomes normative in character, and, hence exclusionary in principle. This move has created a problem…namely, that a variety of women from various cultural positions have refused to recognize themselves as “women” in the terms articulated by feminist theory” because they fall outside the category. In other words, naming and the classification process becomes problematic when one takes into consideration the “intersections of gender with race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality and other currents which contribute to the formation of cultural (non) identity” (325).
versus wrong/good versus bad). Unity in this system can only function through an "us" versus “them” dynamic. In other words, determining unity ("us") in categorical systems will necessarily result in creating a category of “them,” thereby, confirming an inherent binary mechanism in the notion of stable identity that cannot be reconciled. However, “unity” in reference to the fluid and relational sense of identity involving the ongoing destabilization of habituated patterns provides a union of self and other in an exchange not overly dependent on previously established patterns. In this relational paradigm difference (multiplicity of subject positions) is fundamental to unity, rather than something that needs to be contained through systematicity. The connectivity in unsettling systems can be seen in what Stein and Riding, in particular, understand to be true communication in the reader’s active engagement—not passive acceptance of reading norms. The communication is true because the reader is participating in a way that is not constrained by overriding systems that tend to think for us. The moment of agency—the thinking that is available without determinate systems (Butler’s political promise of the performative)—is a unifying element because it allows one to genuinely be in dialog. This is distinct from “speaking” through communicative systems that perpetuate the hierarchies and distance one from the immediacy of the embodied communication. Unity in reference to a fluid notion of identity, in this sense, does not attempt to enclose truth, but acknowledges that any current (political or other) communication or decision will necessarily need to be revised in the future. Constructive debate and self-reflexivity, as Loy highlights, are encouraged as valuable practices that allow individuals and communities to productively engage in the mobile relations through time. The practice encourages a fundamental curiosity in the moment of change,
conflict, and difference, rather than apprehension and a demand for defensive and exclusive measures. In this paradigm, as Riding points out, the past is inextricably connected to the present and valued as an integral stepping stone from which present and future are based and reworked. For example, in debates between second and third waves, this relation to the past helps to reinforce the unity between the two feminist movements—that is, the invaluable contributions made by second wave that are necessarily being reconsidered and revised. In this relational logic multiple subject positions do not prevent agency or unity, in fact, individual difference is the key to unity. Firstly, the relational logic allows for a unity through true communication, where the exchange is not impeded by systems. Second, since change, difference, and ongoing debate are recognized as the basis of reality it becomes easier to appreciate and acknowledge (see our connection to) the historical events and the people who contributed to our present moment. The movement of relational logic offers an alternative to categorical “unity,” evident in second wave thinking that perceives of difference as problematic and something that must be controlled through systematic ranking.

The poets under discussion add to Tarver’s and Sullivan’s pragmatist ideas in that the poets, in various ways, underscore the value of dislocating routine as the new is allowed to form in the transitional process. This provides possibilities for multiple subject positions as well as unification through ongoing relational engagement, renegotiation and rethinking. While Tarver’s and Sullivan’s emphasis on forming new habits is crucial and part this project, their focus overlooks the ramifications of an investigation into the fertile discomfort produced by dislodging habitual patterns and systems. Through an emphasis on the interruption of systems, readers learn about the underlying dynamics or micro-
mechanisms of hierarchical systems that are the root of gender inequities and are provided the micro-mechanisms involved in sustaining a democratic relation to the world. The practice promotes a citizenry that can resist the complacency required in heteronormativity as well as hegemonic political systems. Readers develop the capacity to think actively, as habituated practices are made different through relational engagement, rather than passively accepting established norms. The poets’ complicated relation to Modernism and feminism has tended to produce portrayals of them as unforgiving characters, for instance: Stein’s quick judgment of her contemporaries, Loy’s acerbic and sarcastic wit, and the finality of Riding’s renunciation of poetry. However, their ideas and democratic praxes based on non-duality foster an ethics of tolerance in that difference—rather than viewed as suspect and something that must be contained and defended against—is embraced and comprehended as the condition for unity and agency in the world.

The first chapter, “The Poetics of Discord: Beginnings by Way of Endings in Dickinson’s Loophole of Retreat,” links James to Emerson through their ideas of the subject and mobile relationality, and establishes the latter’s influence on Dickinson. Applying Branka Arsic’s discussion of discord in On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson, I underscore how Emerson works against conventional notions of manners (habituated practices that support the illusion of fixed reality) to create a new understanding that resists the idea of stable truth. I relate this Emersonian dynamic to the way in which Dickinson contests traditional notions of the lyric—challenging the idea of connection and solace—and, in the process, puts into question stable reality and identity. Dickinson
takes advantage of an inherent contradiction in Aristotelian notions of the lyric.\textsuperscript{15} For instance, the lyric both gestures toward readers (private thoughts of speaker overheard in soliloquy)—opening the text to readerly interpretation—and conversely makes claims of mimetic truth, which place expectations of fixity on the text. Dickinson reveals this fault line running through the lyric by evoking a desire for closure through maintaining aspects of the conventional lyric while at the same time refusing completion. My intervention in Dickinson criticism is situated between what Fred White calls the “battle lines” between readings that uphold Aristotelian notions of the lyric and readings that decenter, emphasizing discontinuities and limitlessness. While I ultimately demonstrate interruption in Dickinson’s work, I argue that the potential for limitlessness comes from her oppositional play with laws of the lyric form. Dickinson’s poetry on a surface reading seems to be more conservative than the work of her Modernist descendants—in its relatively narrower gap between language and norms of reading. However, her poetry is no less radical in praxis. Dickinson accomplishes this through eliciting desire by advancing toward expectations of rhyme/metric harmony and representational clarity. The reader is so cued to anticipate completion that any failure to complete that promise is acutely felt, waking the reader out of patterns of reading. Despite Dickinson’s narrower gap between language and reading norms, her poetry demands the reader’s participation and self-reflexivity, opening the text to multiple meanings and an “insurrectionary” reading (Butler).

Furthermore, the sense of the unmet promise becomes a way in which Dickinson provides the reader with an experience of the ideas manifested in her poems. As I discuss in a reading of “There is a certain slant of light” (Fr 320) Dickinson speaks to the pain and

\textsuperscript{15} See Sharon Cameron: \textit{Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre}, 19.
loss imposed by systems that confine the individual. This idea is then replicated in the reader’s sense of disappointment as Dickinson intensifies and unsettles the possibility for completion. Dickinson highlights that one must disconnect with the illusion of solace, that traditional notions of the lyric purport, in order to be in the immediate and fleeting moment where a vital connection to the world is possible.

The second chapter, “Language and Democracy: Meaning Making as Existing in the Work of Gertrude Stein,” rethinks assumptions in literary studies that perceive Stein’s work to be hermetic and disconnected from concerns related to the body. I compare Stein’s ideas of identity and writing to Jamesian subjectivity by drawing connections between James’s notion of the self, consisting of the “me” and the “I,” and Stein’s notion of “human nature” and the “human mind” (respectively). In “The Self” (Briefer Course) James identifies the “me” as the part of the self that is dependent on the habitual and is continually made different through the “I”—the part situated in the passing moment—who places the habits of the “me” in relation to particulars in the contextual moment. Stein models this notion of subjectivity in The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind. She associates “human nature” with the habitual and “the human mind” with the aspect of the self that places those habituated patterns in relational engagement in the passing moment. She adapts James’s notion of identity and relates it her understanding of writing—what she calls “romance.” For Stein, “romance” is the ongoing movement between the reader’s ability to read (to apply habits of communicative systems) and the reader’s inability to read (to think without a dependency on routine, or referential memory, in the relational, passing moment).
Judith Butler’s discussion of the ambivalent drag act in *Bodies that Matter* is useful in understanding how Stein uses James to rethink notions of gender. Butler posits that there is always a chiasmic relation between an ability and inability to read the terms involved in the construction of identity. One cannot escape societal, imposed norms; however, “strict obedience” to those norms is impossible because human beings—with individual particularities who are affected by environmental stimuli—necessarily repeat with a difference (124). Both Stein and Butler draw attention to the insurrectional moment available in the ambivalence created by the inherent failure in reading (language or gender). Becoming aware of the impossibility of repeating exactly (as is assumed in ideas of referentiality and gender norms) opens a space not determined by automatic routine. This allows one momentary choices that have the potential to rework entrenched patterns. I argue that Stein uses this chiasmic relation between an ability/ inability to read to, at least theoretically, open possibilities for her talents as a leader and artist. In this process she reassesses and offers alternatives to the hierarchies of male modernism that strained her ambitions to be a well-known writer. The tension between her egotist stance—her desire to be seen as a leading thinker and writer—and early-twentieth century gender norms that severely limited woman professionally provided her motivation to redefine the terms that equate “genius” with the masculine. In a close reading of “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” I demonstrate how she adapts James’s critique of overriding systems in order to both explain her writing process (as a way to cultivate audience members) as well as to conceptually undo hierarchical gender constructs that reserved “genius” as a status applicable only to men.
The third chapter, “Why Not Mama, Dada?: Mina Loy’s (R)evolutionary Politics and Poetics of Labor,” suggests that reading Loy through the lens of Jamesian pragmatism offers a way to understand the inextricable link between her textual practices and her political, gender informed, stance. While others have acknowledged Loy’s politically-based focus, I argue that a significant aspect of her gender critique is centered on a performative and its influence on the reader.16 The performative unsettles expected social norms, requiring the reader to think in ways not overly determined by the status quo. I apply Rachal Blau DuPlessis’s understanding of Loy’s “radical identity of sexual mother” and Janet Lyon’s reading of “Parturition” (1914) to draw connections between this embodied female poetics and Jamesian pragmatism which is, fundamentally, a philosophy of embodied experience.17 While DuPlessis and Lyon focus on Loy’s early work in relation to the Futurists, I expand their ideas to include Loy’s later text, “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” (c. 1925), in relation to the American Dada movement. The particular element in “Parturition” (1914) that Loy sustains in her later work is her notion of conflict. As Lyon posits, Loy refers to the body of the woman in labor as a site in which pain and the will’s struggle against it produces a contest between mind and body.


In “International Psycho-Democracy” (1919) Loy also articulates a definition of conflict that is generative. She advocates for a paradigm based on a transitional movement in which the use of conflict on a moment to moment basis is the source of renewal (“beneficent spontaneities”). In reference to World War I, Loy registers her dismay at conceptual thinking in its encouragement of polarization, which can easily escalate a difference of opinion to international war. She wants to highlight her mobile and generative understanding of discord as a way to sustain political peace through its recourse to construction rather than destruction.

This generative notion of conflict is evident in her dealings with the American Dada movement. The polarized representations of gender within the movement in the early parts of the twentieth century (early 1920’s) were played out between Marcel Duchamp’s intellectual Dada and the Baroness Elsa von Freitag-Loringhoven's embodied Dada or “physical manifestos” (use of her body as material for art).\(^\text{18}\) Loy applies her translation of conflict as a source of regeneration by placing Duchamp’s intellectual Dada in opposition with the Baroness’ embodied Dada to create a poetics in which writing and reading (activities of the mind) become physically engaged through readers’ performance and participation. The embodied poetics employs her constructive notion of conflict in that she confronts the reader both linguistically and ideationally—on an ongoing basis as one reads her text—challenging socially ingrained ideas in order to encourage self-reflexivity in the reader and agency in the world. In this way, Loy challenges the assumption that political content is accessible only through referential or narrative language. Her work demonstrates that consideration of the text—its syntactic and

\(^{18}\) See Susan Dunn, *Opposed Aesthetics*, 149.
narrative disruption and sensate elements—can deepen and further an understanding of the social and ethical issues addressed in her poems.

The final chapter, “The Poetics of Dissociation: Difference and Unity in Laura (Riding) Jackson’s Secular Spiritualism,” argue that the methodological lens based on Jamesian pragmatism provides a way to understand the nexus of language and gender in Riding as well as helps to ascertain a consistency between her early and late work. While the tendency is to perceive her renunciation of poetry as a move toward a transparent use of prose, I argue that her prose unsettles systems of language and is part of her critique of gender systems. Her feminism, distinct from first and second waves’ dependence on categorical systems calls for a philosophical shift in consciousness in which qualities she understands as masculine give way to qualities she associates to the feminine. In “The Word ‘Woman’” (circa 1934) I identify her ideas that resemble Jamesian notions of substantive and transitive states through which she articulates a philosophical history of human existence. She feels that human existence has been in an era of man—in which overriding systems dominate thinking (substantive states)—and is the process of changing to an era of woman—in which the ability to perceive difference in the immediacy of the passing moment (transitive states) is cultivated. A crucial element Riding reinforces in the era of woman is a notion of unity that connects the present to the past. Comparable to James’s idea of “Oneness,” based on the accumulation of aggregates rather than overriding notions of categorical sameness, Riding understands difference (a subject’s radically individual engagement in the moment) to be the factor that links individuals to the evolution of individual acts throughout history. She wants readers to
become cognizant of the movement toward the era of woman that emphasizes unity through radical difference and stresses the importance of furthering that progression.

Susan Schultz in reference to Riding’s renunciation of poetry posits that her withdrawal from poetry indicates a shift from identification with the masculine to the feminine. Schultz suggests that Riding’s intellectually rigorous poems drew her into the circle of the Fugitives, putting pressure on her to live up to their notion of the poet as male.¹⁹ However after her renunciation, she rejected the male poet imposition and identified with the feminine, which ultimately silenced her (76-77). I agree with Schultz’s assessment that Riding identified with the masculine definition of the Fugitive poet early in her career. However, I suggest that after her renunciation she relates with the feminism she underscores in “The Word ‘Woman.’” Rather than being silenced, she is provided voice and agency to further develop and refine her ideas that conceptually undo systems and advocate for an ontology based on non-dual principles. Instead of the biting critiques of her early criticism that highlighted the problems with her contemporaries use of systematicity, her later work, *The Telling* (what she calls “her evangel”), stresses the remediating value in departing from systems and coming to value embodiment and immersion in the immediacy of the moment. She understands this non-dual immersion in the immediacy of the moment to be the key to her secular spiritualism in that it can relieve society of competition and contention, or in her words, “diffused greed” and “garrulous sociality” (6).

¹⁹ For example, Susan Schultz states, “Riding may have been the Fugitives’ darling precisely because she seemed to them to provide an exception to Ransom’s rule: her poetry is difficult and obscure only to the extent that it is abstract and intellectually rigorous. According to Deborah Baker, Allen Tate told Riding that she would save the world form the Edna St. Vincent Millays” (50).
In a close reading of *The Telling* I demonstrate how Riding creates an experience of “telling” by subverting the essay form—calling both on reader’s ability to utilize expected norms and to think beyond habituated practices through a performative. This places the reader and text in the transitional movement in time that is crucial to the transitive paradigm the era of woman promises, creating the unity she underlines in “telling” between past and present. The reader’s embodied and immediate engagement with the text connects the reader to author and the long line of previous readings that influenced the author. What is generally conceived of as a break in Riding’s thinking—her shift from poetry to prose as a transparent use of language that, as Schultz’s posits, coincides with a move from identification with the masculine to the feminine in binary terms—is actually a re-articulation and reinvestment of her ideas that resisted binaries and systems. Through the disruption of reading patterns, readers experience Riding’s secular spiritualism in its unsettling of the hierarchal mechanisms foundational to gender norms that could not validate her as a philosopher and artist.
Chapter One

The Poetics of Discord: Beginnings by Way of Endings in Emily Dickinson’s Loophole of Retreat

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Immured the whole of Life
Within a magic Prison
We reprimand the Happiness
That too competes with Heaven (Fr1675)

Martha Dickinson Bianchi in *Emily Dickinson Face to Face* recalls an incident in which she was sent to the guest room “to sit quietly by [herself] as punishment—until [she] had regretted some trifling dereliction.” However, she enjoyed the room so much she “refused to come out when the ban was lifted.” When Bianchi told her aunt Emily of the episode, Dickinson, with “eyes sparkl[ing],” responded “joyously, ‘Matty, child, no one could ever punish a Dickinson by shutting her up alone.’” In another account Bianchi remembered her aunt standing on the stairs “looking down, one hand raised, thumb and forefinger closed on an imaginary key, [saying, as she made] a quick turn of the wrist, ‘It’s just a turn—and freedom, Matty!’”(65-66). This inversion of confinement as reference to freedom indicates a strategic move on Dickinson’s part that allowed her to manipulated nineteenth-century notions of gender through the use of a loophole (Sanchez-Eppler). By redefining the site of her locked room as an escape to a kind of

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20 Quoted in Sanchez-Eppler, p. 111
freedom, where she was provided psychic space to think and write, she transgresses the limitations of domesticity without leaving the domestic space of her home. Like the notion of the legal loophole, she evades the laws of gender through tactics that made it seem as if she were upholding the law.

The loophole dynamic is also apparent in her poems in the sense that on a surface reading they seem to comply with tenets associated with the lyric when, in fact, on a more in-depth reading, they subvert its laws. The methodology based on Jamesian subjectivity reveals this oppositional tension that informs her poetics and transgression of domesticity. I draw a correlation between James’ notion of the individual in which the self is in constant negotiation with perception (interiority) and the environment (exteriority) in the passing moment and Emerson’s notion of “manners”—which depicts the relationality or movement of self as interiority meets exteriority.  

I argue this link between Emerson and James is a way to understand a lineage connecting Dickinson to the Modernist poets under discussion. I suggest Dickinson’s confidence in the loophole dynamic in her life—as seen in Bianchi’s recollection—and her poetry were sustained and confirmed by Emersonian ideas that were in circulation by the late nineteenth century.  

Through Branka Arsic’s discussion of opposition in Emerson, I draw parallels between the ontological perspective and Dickinson’s use of the lyric. For instance,

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21 See Branka Arsic: On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson, 311.

22 Although Dickinson turned down an invitation to meet Emerson when he was invited to her brother’s house in 1857 as a guest, the refusal was not an indication of a disinterest in his ideas. Emily Fowler Ford, a friend of Dickinson indicated that Dickinson was absorbed in his essays in the mid-1840’s and Benjamin Newton, her father’s apprentice, gave her a copy of the 1847 Poems—in which she marked her favorites (Tufariello 175).
Emerson works against the conventional concept of manners (habituated practices that support the illusion of stable reality) to create a new understanding that challenges ideas of stable identity and reality. Likewise, Dickinson resists conventions of the lyric that underline harmony and mimetic truth and in the process challenges stable identity and reality. Dickinson exploits an inherent contradiction embedded in the lyric’s tradition. The contradiction is created by the oppositional tension between the lyric’s gesture toward readers (private thoughts of speaker overheard in soliloquy)—which invites and opens the text to readerly interpretation—versus the lyric’s claims of mimetic truth, which place expectations of fixity on the text. Dickinson exposes this incongruity by evoking a desire for closure through maintaining aspects of the traditional lyric while drawing attention to the impossibility of completion.

Dickinson’s poetics of discord, similar to the poetics of conflict in Stein, Loy, and Riding, encourages ingrained reading practices while at the same time unsettles those patterns, thereby opening semantic possibility, encouraging participation, imaginative input and thinking not bound by routine. However, Dickinson’s application of conflict is distinct from the other poets under discussion in that the gap she creates between her language and expectations of reading is considerably narrower. For instance, her poems initially seem to obey the lyric’s tenets in their short syllabic form, frequent rhyme patterns, as well as metrical patterns that aim to harmonize. Furthermore, they predominately have an implied speaker and her use of the first person “I” is not uncommon. These elements that are consistent with the conventional lyric lead one to expect the rhyme/metric harmony and mimetic truth associated to the form. Because of these expectations, when the anticipated pattern is even slightly dislodged the dissonance
is registered, waking the reader out of routine, provoking readerly contribution and opening the text to multiple readings. This differs, for instance, from Stein’s radical methods that severely disrupt reading patterns necessary in systems of language.

 Dickinson, in the context of nineteenth-century poetry, remains more reserved than her twentieth-century descendants. Elizabeth Petrino in “Nineteenth-century American Women’s Poetry” identifies a group of women poets writing in the late nineteenth century who anticipated early twentieth-century aesthetics. For example, Helen Hunt Jackson, Lizette Wordworth Reese, and Dickinson are seen as moving away from “archaic language and communal values and toward a personal idiosyncratic view point.” This style “includes a more ambiguous, complex and less conventional view than that of the sentimental poets, with their reliance on religious and home life” (135-136). Petrino goes on to say that while Dickinson shares many of the characteristics of these poets who anticipated modern aesthetics, “she at the same time exceeds her contemporaries” (137). I suggest that the loophole dynamic—the use of the lyric to disrupt its tenets—enables her to both fit in with her contemporaries as well as provides her a way to exceed them. It is this subtle, yet radical, refusal of reading norms that is carried forward and extended in the Modernist poets under discussion in this project.

The unsettling of mimetic truth inherent in Aristotelian notions of the lyric, as Shira Wolosky posits, is self-conscious and part of Dickinson’s rethinking and challenge of metaphysical systems. She states, “[t]he linguistic self-consciousness implicit in Dickinson’s treatment of poetic forms thus emerges as an expression of her concern with metaphysical assumptions that promised to govern her world but came to seem inadequate” (xv). Her poems gesture toward a reconstruction or representation of the
world but instead of affirming, she questions that metaphysical truth. In her challenge of
traditional metaphysical sanctions, Dickinson “accuses the universe of evils and
contradictions she finds all too real”; however, she does not collapse linguistic structures
or go beyond her accusations (xiv). Unlike the Modernist poets, she does not envision a
new world; rather she exposes the failure of systems, their insufficiency in naming, and
inability to offer adequate ways of understanding identity. I argue that Dickinson is
drawn, in part, to challenge Metaphysical systems because they are foundational to the
mind/body binary that prevented her equal footing in the nineteenth-century world of
writers, thinkers, and artists.

Suzan Juhasz, Christianne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith in *Comedic Power in
Emily Dickinson* make reference to Dickinson’s use of the loophole in which elusive
measures provide for multiplicity, thereby allowing her freedom to express ideas without
baring herself to ridicule. They state, “[h]er poems consistently promise but do not
completely deliver, inviting our participation precisely because they will not reveal all. In
this way they protect her even as they present her” (23). In other words, Dickinson’s
poems that promise completion without “reveal[ing] all” hide ideas and emotions that
were not acceptable to nineteenth century gender codes of behavior while nonetheless
giving her the opportunity to express them. This dynamic is subversive in the sense that
“Dickinson critiques her subject as much as she embodies it” (6). However, while Juhasz,
Miller, and Smith speak to an oppositional loophole tension in Dickinson’s poetry in their
observations regarding how she uses tease and cartooning to make a poem that is as
“guarded as it is beckoning,” I want to stress a subversive dynamic that is evident and
ubiquitous throughout her poems and can be seen not only in her speakers who take on
exaggerated or cartoonish figures but also on an underlying structural level. This dynamic engages the reader in a performative exercise that, as Judith Butler suggests, is “insurrectionary” in the sense that one is thrown out of routine modes of behavior, providing an opportunity to think outside those conditioned and automatic responses. The unsettling of routine reading habits provides readers the opportunity to become practiced in active thinking and less complacent in the passive acceptance of entrenched norms. Despite the narrower gap between Dickinson’s language and expected habits of reading, her poems nonetheless provoke thinking beyond habituated patterns. The reader is led to anticipate lyric harmony and mimetic truth through the poem’s likeness to the lyric form, only to realize those ingrained expectations cannot be completed.

Susan Howe in *My Emily Dickinson* also takes note of the way Dickinson redefines the notion of confinement through her “self-imposed exile, indoors [which] emancipated her from all representations of calculated human order” (13). This emancipation allowed her to conduct “a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history” …and explore “the indefinite limits of written communication” (11-12). Howe understands Dickinson’s brilliance in “her ability to spin straw into gold.” She states, “her talent was synthetic; she used other writers, grasps straws from the bewildering raveling of Being wherever and whenever she could use them…Forcing, abbreviating, pushing, padding, subtracting, riddling, interrogating, rewriting, she pulled text from text” (28). For example in a discussion of “In many and reportless places” (Fr 1404), Howe posits,

“On this heath wrecked from Genesis nerve endings quicken…Narrative expanding, contracting dissolving…No hierarchy, no notion of polarity.
Perception of and object means loosing and losing it…No titles or numbers for poems. That would force order…Conventional punctuation was abolished not to add ‘soigne stitchery’ but to subtract arbitrary authority. Dashes drew liberty of interpretation inside the structure of each poem…Empirical domain of revolution and revaluation where words are in danger, dissolving... only Mutability certain.” (23)

I am in agreement with Howe’s assessment that highlights the way Dickinson’s poetry interrogates hierarchical orders and foregrounds uncertainty and unknowability through an emphasis on language’s discontinuity. However, I want to demonstrate the importance of acknowledging Dickinson’s use of the lyric form. Howe focuses on the ways in which Dickinson subverts conventions of language. I suggest that paying attention to the tension between her compliance and subversion of language and the lyric illuminates the dynamic processes between text and reader from which her poems cause “nerve endings [to] quicken.” This exploration reveals how she expands, contracts, and dissolves narrative, making “only Mutability certain.” While I understand Dickinson’s poetics to resist and question the systems by which patriarchy functions, I reassess Howe’s idea that Dickinson’s exile, indoors, freed her “from all representations of human order.” Instead I suggest that Dickinson uses aspects of human order, such as domesticity and the lyric and places them in constructive conflict to create something new. As she applies the concept of domesticity to redefine what it means to be confined to the home in order to create an intellectual and artistic space in which she is free to work, she similarly uses traditions of the lyric to unsettle mimetic truth and notions of stable reality in order to conceptually undo binaries associated to the mind/body split that prevented her equal status. In other
words, Dickinson’s use of convention plays an important part in her investigations into “patriarchal authority” and the “indefinite limits of written communication” (11-12).

Sharon Cameron in *Choosing Not Choosing* raises this issue regarding the tension between the way Dickinson employs as well as questions the limitations of language. Cameron points to the body of criticism that is centered on Dickinson’s “ellipses [and] canceled connections” which are reflected, for instance, in comments by Geoffrey Hartman (“revoked…referentiality”), Jay Leyda (“the omitted center”), Robert Weisbuch (scenelessness), as well as her own earlier work. She goes on to comment that the methodologies that resort to chronological development as a way to discuss the poems are challenged due to Dickinson’s resistance to representational clarity, which in turn has resulted in the arbitrary thematic and formal grouping of the poems as well as evaluative assessments that aim to determine successful poems in contrast to those that are not (3-4). It is as if, Cameron states, “what Dickinson has to teach us were that there is no way to comprehend the alien except by the most critically reductive strategies of categorization and comparison” (4n). The systemized response to the perceived open ended nature of Dickinson’s poems identifies a missing element in critical approaches to her poetry. Cameron suggests that examining the role of the variant (or alternative words) in the fascicles, offers a way of understanding how discontinuity and limitlessness are created through the variants’ oppositional capacity to both limit and expand meaning. She explains, “[i]n Dickinson’s fascicles…variants indicate both the desire for limit and the difficulty in enforcing it. The difficulty in enforcing limit to the poems turns into a kind of limitlessness for….it is impossible to say where the text ends because the variants extend the text’s identity in ways that make it seem potentially limitless”(6). Cameron
wants to underline that the process involved in creating limitlessness in Dickinson has to do with the way the variants are used to narrow meaning. Cameron stresses the issue of limit—which she implies is overlooked in Hartman, Leyda, Weisbuch—not as a way to support methodologies that aim for closure through identifying thematic or formal unity, but to better understand how the use of restriction becomes part of the process in producing the illimitable in Dickinson. I relate Cameron’s observations regarding the variants’ oppositional capacity to Dickinson’s application and resistance to Aristotelian notions of the lyric—that is, her gesture toward formal unity and her refusal to reinforce the illusion of completion that is suggested in mimetic and harmonic truth.

My intervention in Dickinson criticism is situated between what Fred White calls the “battle lines” between readings that uphold traditionally-based notions of the lyric and readings that decenter, emphasizing discontinuities and limitlessness (170). While I ultimately demonstrate discontinuities in Dickinson’s work, I stress that the potential for limitlessness comes from her oppositional play with laws associated to the lyric form—as she both encourages and disrupts one’s anticipation for completion. Furthermore, as Wolosky argues, Dickinson’s challenge of linguistic conventions becomes apparent thematically in her critique of “metaphysical sanctions for causality, teleology, and axiology…The possible collapse of such categories is a theme in many of Dickinson’s poems, which present the world as it would appear without them” (xv). I discuss how Dickinson accomplishes this in “There’s a certain slant of light” (Fr 320), where she refers to the pain and loss inflicted by systems and the restrictions they place on the individual. In the poem Dickinson presents a world in which systems are challenged and through the affect and effect of her unmet linguistic promise, she provides the reader with
an experience of the ideas manifested in her poems. Her ideas are reproduced physically in the reader’s sense of disappointment as heightened expectations are refused.

**Emerson and Dickinson**

Branka Arsic, in *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson*, illuminates a connection between ancient Stoicism and Emersonian Transcendentalism that is linked to the Stoic grammarians’ understanding of the optative mood. For the Stoic grammarians and logicians, the optative mood, indicated through the power of the if/then construction, is a wish or desire “predicated on the hypothetical,” distinguishing it from conventional definitions, which understand the optative as any verb that expresses a wish or desire. The hypothetical desire or wish transforms the stability implied in the modal verbal expression of “I will” or “I can” to the instability of “If one only could or would.” The power of the hypothetical if/then syllogism (e.g.: if it is day, then it is light) for the Stoics lies not in the analytical power to stabilize or form constatives (e.g.: it is day, it is light), but in the “power to comprehend relation.” The “if” requires a sense of the implied and the ability to relate one term to the other. Furthermore, that relationality underlying the optative “if” accounts for an ontology that does not fix subjects into concepts of “being,” but understands them to be in continual relation (with others, ideas, and objects). The optative instead accounts for a “way of being” (297-98). This notion of the optative mood—found in the Christian mystics’ as well as Anne Hutchinson’s thinking and language—had a significant influence on Emerson. Anne Hutchinson’s version of the optative or “modal logic” stems from the Stoics use of the hypothetical if/then construction and is based on intensive adjectives (more or less than/as clear as) that lack
a connection to nouns—that is, she detaches the modifier from a specific object. In this way, Hutchinson’s thoughts become “fragmented by refusing fixed signification” (302). The ambiguities produced opens up a field of relational possibilities. Her thoughts, rather than naming, are “purely relational modes…hers is not so much the thinking of a traveler, but traveling itself, which refutes positioning, what the Stoics called ‘being on the way’” (302). Arsic suggests that Emerson applies Hutchinson’s way of thinking, which functions less on the classical hypothetical syllogism and more on a praxis based on the relational logic underlying the Stoics’ thinking. In Arsic’s discussion of the connections between the ancient Stoics and the Christian mystics, she argues that the latters’ version of the relational logic, as exemplified by Boehme and Eckhart, is predicated on the optative mood, and so differs from the Stoics in their understanding of rhetoric. While the Stoics felt the force of words was heightened by agreement or concord, mystics felt the force of words was heightened by discord. Both version of the optative, Hutchinson’s (in which thinking becomes traveling itself) and the mystics’ (in which discord is the underlining power of words) were influences that had considerable impact on Emerson (307).

These influences are particularly apparent in Emerson’s notion of “manners.” For example, he challenges the etymological and conventional meanings of the term. Rather than referring to customs that stabilize the notion of identity and from which subjects develop habituated behavior, conforming to social rules of conduct, Emerson defines manners as the “power of unsettling” identity. Emerson, Arsic states, “suggests that manners occur in the moment when form breaks under the pressure of the nonfigural—‘the laws of behavior yield to the energy of the individual’” (304). In other words,
manners, in the conventional sense—which work to stabilize identity, placing external social matrixes on subjects, creating a socially identifiable personhood—are dislodged by the “energy” of the subject, or that which is indefinable, non-conceptual (the “non-personalize[d]”) in an individual. Conventional manners are embraced by individuals; however, because there are always aspects of human beings that cannot be identified or contained (“energy of the individual”), the manners embraced are incessantly disrupted. This process of disruption involving an interaction with a conventional use of manners and the individual is what Emerson wants to emphasize and refers to as “manners.” By reversing conventional associations with manners as law enforcers and claiming them to be “law-breaking,” Emerson’s “utterance does what manners do: it introduces an opposite or unusual meaning that deforms the accepted one, putting the meaning of the word in discord with itself, thus itself becoming a ‘manner’ of speaking.” In this way, Emerson “enables us to abandon the habitual”—to go (or travel) beyond social matrixes that establish personhood through habituated practice. Furthermore, this manneristic dynamic is also revealed in Emerson’s use of language in which he “forces an accepted signification to yield a new one,” cultivating a praxis that “allows meanings to interfere with each other, turning the text into a patchwork of shifting relations.” Emerson does this insistently through contradiction and opposition, performing an “art of discord” (305, 306, 307). For Emerson, limit and limitlessness are inextricably connected through an oppositional tension in that the unsettling of limits, conventional meanings or habituated patterns, provides for endless new relations and meanings.

Dickinson incorporates this oppositional tension between limit and limitlessness through mining the contradictions inherent in the lyric. Conventional definitions depict
the lyric as: 1) a brief poem that has melodic and metric harmony, 2) an utterance that is an overheard soliloquy, and 3) “a fervent but structured expression of private thoughts and emotions by a single speaker in the first person” (Bedford Glossary of Literary Terms 194). These definitions stem from Aristotelian notions of “poetry as the imitation of an action” and John Stuart Mills’ idea that the action referred to is speech overheard in soliloquy. In these terms, poetic utterance creates a fiction that upholds an “illusion that someone is really talking” (Cameron, Lyric Time 19). The illusion that the lyric is the voice of an actual person being heard by a reader suggests that a vital component of the genre is an assumed connection with the reader. This perspective regarding the reader differs in novels and plays, both of which contend with multiple characters and produce fictional time/space parameters for context. This encloses the fictional world and distances the viewer and reader, making them outside observers. Acknowledgement of the viewer and/or reader is diminished in that they are expected to temporarily suspend their time/space reality, giving themselves over to the characters’ temporality (Lyric Time 22). Conventional notions of the lyric, on the other hand, suggest an inclusive relation to the reader in the claim to overheard soliloquy.

Furthermore, the lyric demands readers’ input in that the usual brevity of the genre makes it difficult at best to depict a seemingly complete fictional context, requiring the reader to make assumptions in regard to time and space in relation to any “story” implied. In this way, the lyric by definition elicits and requires reader participation, inviting and opening the text to movement and excess through multiple interpretations. However, Aristotelian notions that aim for mimetic or representational truth are also placing expectations of contextual closure on the poem, leading one to assume that the

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23 Also see Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics and Poetry, p. 714
time/space coordinates of a particular action can be confirmed. Dickinson brings to the fore this contradiction or fault line running through the lyric and gestures toward the “law-breaking” (breaking laws of closure) potential inherent in all lyric poems. In this way, she treats the lyric in a way similar to how Emerson treats manners. Dickinson, instead of reinforcing the stabilizing impulse of the lyric (illusion of mimetic truth), she draws readers to the text’s instability challenging habituated practices and evoking the relational and momentary response between reader and text. Likewise, Emerson, rather than reinforcing the stabilizing aspects of manners, draws attention to habits as they are dislodged in the relational moment through the “energy” of the individual. In this way, resembling Emerson’s notion of manners, Dickinson in her poetics of discord produces a praxis that “allows meanings to interfere with each other,” encouraging the reader to perceive of multiple meanings and their relations. Rather than working to reduce meaning to a fixed or single connotation, she creates an experience that provides a felt sense of “abandoning the habitual” and access to multiplicity through the disruption of routine patterns established by language systems.

Take for example the first five lines in “There’s a certain slant of light” (Fr 320):

There’s a certain Slant of light
Winter Afternoons-
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes-

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -
The word “slant,” with the first and common meaning “to take a diagonal course of direction” leads one to understand the phrase “slant of light” as a line of light in a diagonal relation to, say, the horizon. However, as one continues to read lines 2 and 3 “Winter Afternoon/ That oppresses…” the second meaning of “slant” becomes apparent (to present in accordance to a line of thinking, particular interest, or topic). It is an atmospheric light that has an oppressive feel. In the first line, without a title or context to orient the reader, one assumes a meaning for the line; however by the third line one must readjust—go from a visual understanding of “slant” (diagonal line) to an abstracted understanding of the word (a line of thought). By the end of the stanza one realizes another meaning inferred by “slant,” that is, indirection—the light cannot be named directly. Dickinson demonstrates language’s inability to represent or “imitate action” in the world by alluding to three distinct meanings of “slant,” exposing the problematic nature of language’s communicative promise. She indicates that naming is inadequate in that new contexts alter a word’s meaning. She suggests that since change is at the core of action in the world, systems of language that fix time and experience must ultimately fail in their claims of representational truth. While the poem initially gives the impression of narrative consistency in its statements about the light, in a closer reading she challenges the mechanisms of mimetic truth.

One of the ways that Dickinson gives the impression of narrative consistency while subtly reversing the constancy has to do with the absence of any attempt on her part to contextualize the poem. The absence stems from the lack of title as well as any sense of place (although she seems to be describing a scene), clue to a topic of concern, or summary indication of an emotional state. The first stanza in poem 320 (Fr) holds
There’s a certain slant of light [during] winter afternoons that oppresses like the heft of cathedral tunes. However, the lack of context brings to the fore the possible meanings implied in “Slant of light,” unsettling the authoritative position of author in relation to reader, encouraging the reader’s active participation. The inversion, in this instance, comes from evoking normative expectations through syntactical clarity that promise mimetic truth, while making it difficult to reduce or narrow meaning. To put it in Emerson’s terms, in his understanding of manners, like an individual’s learned social customs (conventional use of manners), habituated reading patterns must yield “to the energy of the individual.” Dickinson’s text is a praxis that encourages the individual reader to let go of habituated practices and to participate in a relational logic by making simultaneous links between multiple meanings associated to “slant.” In this way, she refuses referential clarity and promotes a perspective in which multiplicity is experienced through an oppositional tension.

Another example of Dickinson’s use of opposition is evident in the tension between the prominently positioned end words in lines 1 and 3, “light” and “Heft.” The words are structurally pulled together through the off rhyme, calling on conventional expectations of melodic harmony. Yet, at the same time, they are pulled apart as meanings of “light” (illumination, light weight, inconsequential), resist meanings of “Heft” (Heaviness, importance, influence, burden). The customs of rhyme related to the lyric as a way to unify or harmonize work against the oppositional meaning in “light” and “Heft.” The sound relation pulls them together and their meanings push them apart, producing a field of relations that is dynamic as habituated patterns associated to the lyric pull one into the “light”/”Heft” opposition. This demands complex thinking on the
reader’s part and encourages reflection that is not based on reducing connotations to singular truth—as one might be inclined to do if reading the words horizontally in their individual lines. Rather meaning is created in a field of relations as the end-line words resonate multiple meanings.

The line break from “Heft” in line 3 to the following line “Of Cathedral Tunes” has a similar oppositional tension in its disruption of normative associations to ecclesiastic song. The simile, “like the Heft/ Of Cathedral Tunes,” disrupts normative assumptions relating to religious song as joyful, laudatory, and devotional. The word “like” that signals a joining of two words or ideas in “like the Heft” is disrupted by the line break in that the only one part of the comparison is established. This gives the reader a moment to pause before the turn to the following line, offering a moment to contemplate the various meanings of “Heft” in relation to “light” placed directly above in line 1. Without the line break after “Heft” and the oppositional pull of “light” as the end word in line 1, one might understand “Heft of Cathedral Tunes” as the “importance of Cathedral Tunes” which would reinforce traditional ecclesiastic concepts. However, the oppositional pull of the end-line words, “light”/“Heft,” encourages one to explore alternate meanings, which in turn deform normative associations and introduces possibilities such as “the weight or burden of Cathedral Tunes.” Likewise the modifier “Hurt” in first line of the second stanza in relation to “Heavenly” resists conventional notions of heaven as a haven protected from pain. The alliteration of the “h” sound in “Heft” (line 3), and “Heavenly Hurt” (line 5) work to unify, encouraging the expected melodic harmony associated to the lyric, pulling the words together. Yet the words semantic relation in the modifiers, “Heft” (heavy, burdensome) and “Hurt,” jar
significantly against “Heavenly” dislodging habitual associations requiring the reader to contemplate traditional concepts of Heavenly (important/ free of pain/ pleasant) in relation to opposing understandings of the word (painful/heavy/burdensome). Again, while the first few lines of “There’s a certain slant of light” initially seem to conform to expectations associated to the lyric with its narrative statements and harmonic unity, in a closer reading Dickinson uses opposition to challenge habituated patterns of thinking and reading the lyric.

In this way, the reader is encouraged to apply the Stoic/Emersonian relational logic that requires one to move beyond the habitual, self-reflexively observing one’s routine associations in contrast to association evoked by Dickinson’s oppositional tactics. Through her oppositional poetics, Dickinson’s poems are “vehicles of leaving” in the sense that they put the reader in a position to think independently of entrenched habituated patterns that tend to think for us. She provides a praxis that offers alternatives to ways of knowing and being that are bound to ingrained patterns in their perpetuation of an automatic responses. Her poems, then, rather than represent action, as is assumed in traditional notions of the lyric, provide for the movement of experience evident in Emerson’s understanding of identity. As Arsic states, for Emerson identity “occur[s] in the moment when form breaks under the pressure of the nonfigural—[when] ‘the laws of behavior yield to the energy of the individual’” (304). For Dickinson, a similar movement occurs when the laws of the lyric yield to the contingent and unpredictable responses of the individual reader.

The way in which Dickinson’s oppositional poetics differs from the use of constructive conflict evident in the Modernist poets under discussion can be compared to
the way in which she dealt with nineteenth century gender constraints. Dickinson criticism since the late 1980’s—responding to previous scholarship that perceived Dickinson to be a victim of her situation—has reevaluated the claims of her powerlessness and revealed strategies that allowed her to negotiate and challenge social norms.\textsuperscript{24} For instance, Karen Sanchez-Eppler suggests that Dickinson created a “loophole of retreat” in which she attained, although provisionally, liberation through confinement by disappearing into plain sight. Her close proximity to home, on one hand, corresponded with nineteenth century notions of subjectivity that relegated women to domesticity; however, on the other hand, she redefines the space of her locked room as an escape to a kind of freedom.\textsuperscript{25} This enables her to transgress gender boundaries, providing her the time and space to create, think, and at least conceptually resist the system she seemed to be supporting. Dickinson, Sanchez-Eppler suggests, takes advantage of her legal status as a nineteenth century woman limited to domesticity by literalizing what it means to be domestic, thereby exploiting a kind of legal loophole. Dickinson is seen as having ingenuity, strategically manipulating her historical situation that severely restricted her as a female artist. Through the use of the loophole she created a psychological, intellectual, and artistic space that allowed her relief from laws defining nineteenth century gender constructs that deterred women from artistic or philosophical


\textsuperscript{25} See Sanchez-Eppler, “At Home in the Body: The Internal Politics of Emily Dickinson’s Poetry” (105-31).
endeavors. I concur that Dickinson took advantage of a loophole strategy, subverting the law she seemed to be upholding, and further employed the strategy in her poetry. Like the legal loophole she creates an opposition in which limit is utilized as an opening to multiplicity. This strategy along with her adaptation of Emerson’s oppositional use of “manners”—both as a critique of stable notions of subjectivity as well as an “art of discord” (Arsic)—provides her the framework to contest artistic and social norms. Her poetics of discord resists Aristotelian notions of mimetic truth, putting into question the idea that naming and identity are fixed, challenging Western metaphysics and its dependency systems and categories, while avoiding a direct critique.

Susan Howe points to this connection between language and the social in Dickinson; for instance she states that Dickinson, who “exploded habits of standard human intercourse… conducted a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? What inner articulation releases the coils and complications of sayings assertion?…[Dickinson] penetrates the indefinite limits of written communication” (11-12). In other words, Howe suggest that Dickinson reveals the micro-mechanisms of hierarchical orders in patriarchy as they are manifest in language, making the fundamental habits of communication in daily life a political and social phenomenon. Howe continues by criticizing Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s understanding of gender in Dickinson that reductively ties the poet to woman’s poetry through, for example, likening her poems to the art of sewing in which her dashes mimic stitchery. She states that the first labor for Dickinson “was to sweep away the pernicious idea of poetry as embroidery for women” (17). Furthermore,
Gilbert and Gubar overlook Dickinson’s assessment of gender in their refusal to investigate her language. She states, “For these two feminist scholars a writer may conceal or confess all, if she does it in logical syntax…” Dickinson [instead] “sings the sound of the imagination as learner and founder, sings of liberation into an order beyond gender…” (13).

Howe underscores that to create a category for women writers produces a binary that falsely reflects differences in gender. While gender affects expression, to regulate it through categorical determinants suggests a sense of property. “What I put into words is no longer my possession. Possibility has opened. The future will forget, erase, or recollect and deconstruct every poem. There is a mystic separation between poetic vision and ordinary living. The conditions of poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology” (13). However, Howe in this last statement comes close to forming another binary in which the imaginative world of poetry is seen as existing outside “each life” creating a separation between “poetic vision” and “ordinary living.” By examining the reader’s role through Dickinson’s Emersonian stance helps to articulate how categories and systems are human constructs—illusions created in an attempt to stabilize the world—not reality. In this light, what Dickinson validates through her use of Emerson is that individual perception and the imaginative—as it engages the world—is reality. The perception and ‘other’ are in constant transitional movement as interiority meets exteriority, continually revising and reassessing as mind meets things in the world. The power in Dickinson’s undoing of “logical syntax” (Howe) is in her redefinition of reality as the world of social norms to an understanding of reality as the movement of consciousness. In this paradigm, structures of the world such as gender and
language are not understood as overriding determinates that categorically sort and rank the phenomenal world, nor are those worldly structures separate from thinking and the imaginative (or “poetic vision”). Rather perception and imagination involve worldly constructs through relational engagement in a transitional moment in time. Dickinson demonstrates how patriarchal authority in grammar and connotation can be dislodged by unsettling habituated patterns in language systems, demanding and cultivating one’s ability to think without the crutch of routine practices. This is significant to gender because gender norms are contingent on entrenched habits of behavior. A praxis that encourages a continual reassessment of automatic and routine norms is crucial to feminist ideas. Dickinson “sings of liberation into an order beyond gender” or beyond the restrictive constructs of gender norms. However, counter to Howe’s implication, the “beyond” is not disengaged from the world (13). It is inextricable absorbed in the richness and potentialities of the world—beyond the limiting constructs established by hierarchical patterns of existence.

As a nineteenth century female subject regulated to the limits of domesticity, the intellectual life would not have been readily available to her. Making an argument, especially a well-informed philosophical one, would not have been received well. She applies Emersonian Transcendentalism to side steps gender constrains, providing her the opportunity to critique and address ontological issues without actually presenting a formal or direct argument. Through falling short of closure, she underlines the failure of systems and undermines the lyric’s major intents, that is, assumptions of mimetic truth that confirm stabilized notions of reality and identity and contributed to the hierarchical frameworks which made equal status impossible for her.
The Poetics of Discord

Dickinson’s poetics of discord elicits a desire for closure, luring the reader into reading through habits of reading while failing to deliver, exposing the impossibility of fixity. This dynamic is demonstrated in Dickinson in the way she comes close, sometimes incrementally, to adhering to laws of the lyric. Her poetics diverges from Stein, Loy, Riding who radically challenge both representational clarity and traditional notions of the lyric—that is—the gap between their language and reading norms is substantially larger than is seen in Dickinson. Nonetheless, despite the relative closeness to laws of the lyric, Dickinson’s resistance to closure and fixity is acutely registered, as the history of her criticism suggests. Early criticism tried to “fix” the poems through “minor” editorial edits—wanting to collapse the gap between her language and poetic norms—while later criticism revealed her “omitted center” (Jay Leda). As Judy Jo Small indicates, early twentieth-century criticism criticized the way Dickinson’s otherwise brilliant lyric poems held back from a sense of closure. For instance, Charles Anderson was pleased with her “provocative first lines” but disappointed with her endings: “not one [poem] in ten fulfills the brilliant promise of the opening words” (70). Philip Larkin states, “too often the poem expires in a teased-out and breathless obscurity” (367). Richard Chase complained that Dickinson was lacking in her understanding of a poem as a “finished and formal object of art” (192). Small argues that the “irresolution critics have called structural weaknesses can be redefined as a strength when one comes to recognize its role in a poetics based on the principle ‘Suspense – does not conclude’ (Fr 775).” Her poetics demonstrated her “own aesthetic principles of instability and elusiveness and “interest in a more fluid and
dynamic art” (174). Early criticism found fault in the dissonance between her close proximity to expectations of the lyric and her structural deviations, while later criticism had the aesthetic background to comprehend her poetics. I suggest the obvious—that Dickinson’s use of and departure from the lyric that results in a comparatively closer adherence to laws of reading the lyric than her twentieth-century descendants has to do with her historical position as a nineteenth-century woman with considerably less opportunities. Her resistance and challenge through the oppositional tension opens a gap, but does not blatantly force “the weak link in the fence of regulation” associated to laws of reading as evident in early modernist poets under discussion (Spahr 289). This allows Dickinson the advantage of the “loophole of retreat” in which one can both hide as well as critique. Nonetheless, I suggest that the oppositional tactic in her poetics of discord—that can be understood as more conservative—is not any less radical in its openness to multiplicity and an insurrectional reading in its challenge of habituated norms.

Her poetics works as the phenomenon in a magnetic field in which oppositely charged poles of two magnets are drawn toward one another through an electromagnetic force. The closer the magnets are pulled together (without colliding) the greater the force of energy. Dickinson does this through eliciting desire by building or intensifying expectations for closure. The reader is so cued to anticipate completion that any failure to complete that promise is acutely felt, waking the reader out of habituated patterns of reading. In other words, the narrower gap between her language and expected norms in Dickinson’s case is not an indication of an attempt to close the gap in an effort to communicate transparently. Instead she plays with establishing patterns so that when the
pattern is even slightly unsettled the disruption of norms is distinctly felt. Take, for
instance, “I felt a cleaving in my mind” (Fr 867):

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind -
As if my Brain had split -
I tried to match it - Seam by Sean -
But could not make them fit

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before -
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
Like Balls - opon a Floor

The first stanza sets up the expected musical rhyme/rhythm harmony associated to the
lyric. The meter is predominately iambic and the syllabic pattern is an even 8/6/8/6. The
rhyme scheme strengths the sense of unity with the full rhyme of split/fit in lines 2 and 4.
These elements provide the first stanza with the traditional song-like cadence of the lyric.
The second stanza continues the cadence produced by a similar rhyme/rhythm pattern;
however, in the last line Dickinson holds back from completion. The anticipation of
wholeness initiated by establishing a steady rhyme/rhythm cadence makes the ear and
body lean into the sound and movement produced by the musical structure in prospect of
completion. However, something goes flat in the last line. The tight rhyme of split/fit
(accompanied by the rhyme with “it” in line 3—which in the manuscript is placed as an
end-line word, heightening the “i/t” sound in the rhyme sequence) creates an expectation
for a similarly tight or full rhyme sequence in the second stanza. However, Dickinson
undermines the expectation with the end-line words “before”/ “a Floor” in lines 6 and 8. She could have, for instance, chosen “the Floor” (pronounced “thee” rather than “thә”) which would have contributed to a full sense of harmony in uniting the long “е” sound in “before” and “the” in “the Floor.” The “before”/ “a Floor” rhyme sounds flat because of the previous rhyme sequence in the first stanza that established an unambiguously tight sound/rhythm harmonic. In an attempt to continue the sense of unity established in the first stanza the ear wants to make “Floor” into a two syllable unit in order to match “before”; however, the “a” in “a Floor” resists the completion, undermining the strict sound/rhythm pattern recognized previously in the poem. (In the manuscript she further underlines the disjunction between “before” and “a Floor” by dropping “Floor” to the following line.) In this way she produces the desire for wholeness by, in this case, coming infinitesimal close to the satisfaction of harmonic unity, but stays shy of it just enough for the reader to register the disjunction.

One could overlook the dissonance in the end words “before”/ “a Floor”; however, if one is to engage in the work, the incompletion of a well-established pattern produces questions and encourages the reader to search for answers. Why would Dickinson, who is so adept at rhyme sequencing, choose incompletion at this particular point in the poem? What is the difference between “a” and “the” in relation to the poem? Is there a relation between meaning in the poem and the incompletion? In other words she appeals to the reader’s habituated reading practices associate to the lyric in coming minutely close to closure, eliciting a strong desire for completion, but holds back so that dissonance is felt. This provides opportunity for the reader to participate in the meaning making process. To use the analogy of the electromagnetic field, Dickinson plays with
attraction and resistance by pushing the poles (reader expectation and text) close together—to their maximum energy output. However she resists or opposes the poles’ drive to collide, keeping them at their maximum energy production (that is, she resists readers’ expectations that desire and work to collapse a text into normative reading habits). In other words even though the gap between her language and expectations of the lyric is narrow (compared to the other poets under discussion), her poems nonetheless open to multiplicity in that the familiar patterns heighten one’s desire for completion, making even small deviations from the pattern apparent. One experiences a felt sense that something is missing, creating the impetus to think and participate without passively relying on established reading routines.

Revising Solace

Dickinson, as Cameron points out, resists the idea of knowable identity by underlining loss—that 1) we can never be accurately seen, let alone labeled or identified because any attempt at verbal or written expression can never do justice to the constant evolution of consciousness, and 2) we can’t even know or identify ourselves because any acknowledgement of trace feelings and thoughts, stemming from experience, would be altered through language. In other words, she points to what we lose when we loosen our grip on systems—essentially the thing we most fundamentally thought we could know—ourselves (Cameron Lyric Time 54-55). These notions in regard to loss are evident ideationally in the content of her poems and experienced in her poetics of discord that heightens the desire for closure yet does not follow through, eliciting a sense of
disappointment in the reader. For example, in “I felt a cleaving in my mind” (Fr 867),26 the speaker struggles to place thought in a lineal sequence (“The thought behind, I strove to join/ Unto the thought before”), but she is unable to do so as the “sequence” (speakers attempts at organizing thought into a lineal system) disperses like balls on the floor (providing a chaotic uncontrolled image of balls bouncing randomly). The speaker describes a moment in which familiar routines do not work and perceives a loss of control. The poem both gestures toward the idea of uncertainty as well as provides a physical sense of groundlessness (as referred to in the previous close reading of poem 867 in which the disruption of sound/metric harmony is stressed).

In Dickinson’s emphasis on loss and the impossibility of stable, knowable identity, she resists conventions that claim the lyric to be a space of solace. Definitions of the lyric imply that the intimacy between speaker, as an actual person, and reader can break the bounds of solitude. Furthermore, the lyric carries with it the idea that in placing form on to a chaotic world, a speaker’s experience is thought to be externalized, positioning emotion outside where writer and reader can claim a perspective and therefore control over it. For example, Sharon Leiter argues that Dickinson’s poetry complies with the lyric’s tenets suggesting that connection (and resulting solace) between speaker and reader is based on mimetic truth. She states that Dickinson invites readers “to identify with her to ‘become her’… and by doing so, [readers] experience her triumph over disorder and confusion as [their] own. We experience her ordering of chaotic experience and passion into coherence as our own vicarious but real victory” (vi). Leiter implies that the process of reading in Dickinson comes from a submissive relation to the author. The reader observes the speaker’s ordering of experience into coherent

26 See pages 45-47
(representational) language and the described action becomes the actual action. Solace is achieved through the assumption that: 1) language can contain experience and 2) described action is real action. According to Leiter, the sense of isolation due to the uncertainty and chaos (“disorder and confusion”) is conquered through the writing/reading of language systems and the passive relation of the reader’s “vicarious” experience of the speaker’s described actions. While I agree with Leiter that Dickinson is invested in the lyric form, I suggest Dickinson does the reverse. Rather than taming uncertainty and chaos, she heightens it and rather than encouraging a passive “vicarious” experience, she elicits an active engagement from the reader. By refusing to follow through or complete expectations of the lyric, she strips the reader of the illusion that language can contain experience, provide solace, and protect one from uncertainty.

For instance, to go back to “There’s a certain slant of light” (Fr 320):

There’s a certain Slant of light,

Winter Afternoons –

That oppresses, like the Heft

Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –

We can find no scar,

But internal difference –

Where the meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
‘Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, ‘tis like the Distance
On the look of Death -

The poem initially seems to conform to traditional notions of the lyric as the expression of private thoughts and emotions by a single person, encouraging an anticipation of mimetic truth and solace. In the first stanza one can imagine the speaker peering out a window on a glooming day musing about the particular feel of light and shadow displayed across the landscape. In this sense the poem seems to conform to the lyric’s assertion that the private thoughts of a real speaker can be overheard as soliloquy. Additionally, Dickinson reinforces expectations for representational truth in that, like a well-organized four paragraph essay, she arranges the poem methodically. Each stanza provides a different perspective on her topic. The first stanza introduces the light, the second deals with what it does (gives a heavenly hurt), the third is concerned with what it doesn’t do (can’t be taught), and the fourth concludes by telling readers how it departs. However, by the second stanza, assumptions of mimetic truth—that underlie the idea of the lyric as the expression of a real person describing experience—are dislodged, contesting Leiter’s statement that understands representational description as the key to connection and solace. On the level of the sentence, lines 1-6 maintain a degree of
coherence. A paraphrase of the lines might be: In the winter there are afternoons in which a kind of oppressive light gives us a hurt that has no scar (a hurt that cannot heal or does not leave evidence). While “scar” is unusual and requires thought and effort on the reader’s part, representational clarity above the level of the word can be detected. Lines 1-6 make up a kind of introductory statement in which the reader might not fully understand the author’s idea, but is given the impression that clarification will follow.

Nonetheless, lines 7 and 8, “But internal difference/ Where the meanings, are” severs any clarity established in lines 1-6, dismantling the anticipation of descriptive consistency and the resulting connection with the speaker. The reader cannot proceed functioning under the assumption that there is a real person describing action and must participate actively in the meaning making process. Dickinson at this point brings to the fore and exposes the “weak link” in the laws of mimetic truth, refusing laws associated to representational and ideational transparency that expect a passive response from readers. She does this through evoking the desire for representational consistency—amplifying one’s desire for descriptive and ideational closure—by presenting a degree of coherence, then frustrating completion. The reader—in the call to participate—might add the following words to make sense of the disjunction between lines 6 and 7: “We can find no scar, / But [we can find] internal difference.” While this helps in syntactical clarity, the reader must continue to think and participate in order to make ideational sense.

Dickinson, through the oppositional tension, lures the reader in through the anticipation of mimetic truth in the first stanza, and then dislodges those expectations in the second. In this way, the reader’s habituated reading patterns in relation to the lyric are engaged, increasing the desire to experience a fulfillment of those expectations. When the
pattern is dislodged, the reader registers the dissonance and is put in the position to find meaning without passive dependence on reading routines. Opposition is created as one is drawn toward limit (mimetic truth and traditional notions of the lyric) and deterred from completion, opening the text to multiplicity. In this sense as Howe suggests Dickinson exposes the “indefinite limits of written communication.” However, it is through her use of the lyric form that enables her to create a performative that exposes the reader to the impossibility of mimetic truth and language’s iterability. Her use of the lyric then resists conventions that are disclosed in Leiter’s statement. Instead Dickinson, in her application of the lyric’s tenets, challenges rather than conforms to assumptions that presuppose representational clarity, stable identity, and solace from chaos and uncertainty.

For instance, one interpretation of the second stanza with the inclusion of the additional words in line 7 (“But [we can find] internal difference -”) might go something like this: The slant of light is reflective of a hurt from which we cannot heal and provides no evidence (no scar). The only thing we can find—the only evidence of this hurt—is internal difference when it (internal difference) is experienced in the external world where systems of language dominate (“Where the meanings, are”). In other words, the slant of light is indicative of an irresolvable pain that—while not producing evidence (can’t be seen or heard)—can be felt when our inner experience is subjugated to the world of social constructs and systems of language (“Where the meanings, are”). In this reading Dickinson reverses Leiter’s claim. Leiter suggests that Dickinson orders inner experience (“experience and passion”) to conform to systems of language, creating a space of solace in which systems help one to “triumph over the disorder and confusion.” In other words, the site of pain occurs when one senses the unlimited, uncontainable
nature of reality and the pain is resolved when that sense of uncontrollability is ordered through established reading and writing patterns. However, Dickinson, as revealed in poem 320 (Fr), suggests that the site of pain is produced when the uncontainable comes into contact with worldly structures such as language. Systems of language rather than promoting solace, create pain in that they alienate subjects from their constantly evolving inner experience—a dynamic process that exceeds language. Furthermore, the sense of loss she refers to in the poem is experienced in the reader’s sense of disappointment as Dickinson leads readers to anticipate the illusion of knowability while subverting that impulse.

This dynamic is also apparent in line 8, “Where the Meanings, are.” While the line is syntactically sound, engaging the reader in conventions of language, there is a curious use of punctuation in the placement of the comma between subject and verb. While rules of punctuation in regard to the comma are many times a question of style, the placement of a comma between subject and verb is unambivalently understood as incorrect. Normative reading patterns always assume an unfettered link between the subject and verb. The comma situated between the distinct parts of speech disrupts that assumption and encourages the reader to search for ways to unite the line, or make sense of her unusual use of punctuation. It is impossible to make the phrase before the comma work as a unit of meaning. The adverb “where” is left dangling without its object, leaving the reader with a notable sense of incompleteness. Likewise the “are,” in relation to the following line, does not offer any coherent sense (“None may teach it – Any”). The seemingly small or insignificant (a comma) mark in the line undermines a major law of punctuation and intensifies one’s desire to connect subject and verb—to unify where
Dickinson has unconventionally made a division. “Where the Meanings, are” as the last line in the second stanza is centrally positioned in the four stanza poem, underlining its importance and offering a symbolic reference to the ideas of identity she refers to in stanza two. In this instance, by separating the naming and action functions of a unit of meaning, she evokes one’s desire to connect naming and action as if to underline her critique of language systems that function through stabilization (removing action). She highlights the necessity of movement and action in the process of signification. In breaking a system’s laws she propels readers into action providing them the awareness of their autonomy and their active role in the meaning making process. Like Emerson’s notion of “manners” in which concepts and naming are always in flux in an interaction with the “energy of the individual” (unpredictable, non-conceptual aspects of individuals)—she highlights the inseparability between naming and the relational movement as readers participate in an ongoing engagement with the text (Arsic 304).

While Dickinson, as Howe suggests, foregrounds uncertainty and unknowability through an emphasis on language’s “indefinite limits,” she does this through a performative in which conventions of the lyric are employed yet incomplete, evoking the reader’s effort, thinking, and contribution. Furthermore, in this performative she undoes notions of stable identity presupposed in traditions of the lyric. The ramifications of this are significant in that she puts into question the categorical systems inherent in hierarchies that also apply to relate to gender. Like Emerson, she challenges Western Metaphysics and its dependency on systems thereby reassessing a paradigm that could not acknowledge her voice among nineteenth century male philosophers and writers. In her writing she enacts an Emersonian subjectivity in which worldly constructs (that is, manners or habituated
patterns that underlie both language and gender) break under or yield to the unpredictable and uncontainable movement of consciousness in the ongoing, relational engagement with the text.

Emersonian subjectivity, like James’s notions of the subject, is based on a relational logic that connects Dickinson to Stein, Loy, and Riding through their poetics of constructive conflict. Their poetics involve an oppositional dynamic associated to an ongoing assertion and disruption of the habitual in the transitional moment. While the Modernist poets utilized this understanding of consciousness to addressed issues in relation to gender, Dickinson puts into question Western Metaphysics, a paradigm that she came to see as deficient in governing the world she inhabited. She accuses Western thought of being inadequate, but does not offer alternatives. In this process, she highlights that in order to comprehend the ongoing, relational movement that underscores reality one must also feel the utter groundlessness that such freedom entails. She underscores the necessary process of letting go of familiar and comfortable preconceived ideas before new insights can emerge. As Dickinson concentrates on the loss in regard to our constantly evolving identities, the Modernist poets emphasize what is gained when the instability of identity is embraced. Stein, through her ideas of mobile relationality, reexamines and redefines the notion of “genius” as masculine, Loy rethinks and offers an alternative to the mind/body split in the American Dada Movement, and Riding develops a spirituality that is based on the feminine and the material ground of language. Dickinson’s use of the oppositional tension as a loophole to evade ridicule and exposé distinguishes her from the Modernist poets, who are keen on finding ways to express
their dissatisfaction with the duality and hierarchical mechanisms inherent in systems of
gender.
Chapter Two

Language and Democracy: Meaning Making as Existing in the Work of Gertrude Stein

“No matter how often what happened had happened any time any one told anything there was no repetition. This is what William James calls the Will to Live. If not nobody would live.”

—Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition”

In “Portraits and Repetition,” an essay in Lectures in America, written for her 1934 American tour, Stein speaks about how she came to understand the link between her writing and identity. She continues with the quote in the epigraph, explaining that the first time she had a sense of James’s idea that repetition is impossible (in any exacting manner) was as an adolescent when she moved from California to live with “a whole group of very lively little aunts” in Baltimore. These aunts evidently had many stories to tell, and since there were “ten and eleven” of them, the stories were repeated frequently (Stein Writings 1932-1946 289). However, in the retelling of those stories, Stein heard difference, making her realize that as human beings, we always, even slightly, alter what we see or hear. She recognized that one cannot repeat in any strict sense, and that to live entails an engagement in a process of ongoing repetition with a difference. At seventeen she had not yet made the connection between this idea and her concept of writing; however, the awareness played a crucial role—as she narrates in

27 Stein Writings 1932-1946, p. 289.
28 William James was Stein’s professor at Radcliffe from 1893-1897.
29 She states, “This was not yet the beginning of writing but it was the beginning of knowing what there was that made there be no repetition” (289).
“Portraits and Repetition” and “Poetry and Grammar”—in her developing conviction that writing, alive and present to reality, not a copy or representation, also functions through a continual repetition with a difference (or what she calls “insistence”). This leads her, with the help of James, to comprehend an inextricable connection between the dynamic processes of meaning making and human existence.

To claim that Stein’s writing is tied to subjects in the world puts into question the long line of criticism that understands her work to be hermetic, a-historical, and alienated from issues of the body. In particular, the notion of Stein’s embodied poetics resists the assumption that “experimental” or avant-garde writing dissipates subjectivity. This assertion is based, in part, on second-wave feminist notions that underscore the importance of a stable “I”—reinforced by referential language—as necessary for

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30 For example, Bob Perelman in The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky (1994) states, “Her freedom from the trammels of society also meant her exclusion from society… The rhyme of ‘they are alone to have what the own’ catches the isolation of the property owner at a deep level. But a noninstrumental writing will not…challenge such dominion, and will only exist as difference…in a life devoted to writing, such movement not only begins again and again, in each work and each sentence, it also repeatedly comes to an end” (168-169).

David Lodge in Modes of Modern Writing (1977) states of Tender Buttons, “[the work] is a feat of decreation: the familiar tired habits of ordinary discourse are shaken off by ‘jolting words and phases out of their expected contexts’ and this is certainly exhilarating, but the treatment is so drastic that it kills the patient” (154).

Michael Gold writing for The New Masses states in “Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot,” “[Marxists] see in the work of Gertrude Stein extreme symptoms of decay of the capitalist culture. They view her work as the complete attempt to annihilate all relations between the artist and the society in which he lives” (circa 1930).
political agency, and assumes that fragmentation in language cannot provide for the body’s physicality in the temporal world. \(^{31}\) Reading Stein through James offers an alternative to this polarized thinking that situates the stable body in opposition to linguistic freedom. Stein forges a middle ground that reveals her to be particularly useful to literary feminism and issues relating to the body. Part of what Stein rethinks in the period under discussion (1923-1935) is the notion of narrative, and that rethinking has to do with how conventions of identity (like conventions of writing) are yoked to habituated practices that supply us with a “language” from which we narrate ourselves. In *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1935) she identifies writing as “romance”—the play between the reader’s ability to read (to apply habits of communicative systems) and the reader’s inability to read (to think without a dependency on referential memory in the passing moment). Similarly, Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* posits that there is always a chiasmic relation between an ability and inability to read the terms involved in the construction of gender. One cannot escape societal, imposed norms; however, “strict obedience” to those norms is impossible because human beings—with individual particularities who are affected by environmental stimuli—necessarily repeat with a difference (124). Both Stein and Butler draw attention to the insurrectional moment available in the ambivalence created by the

\(^{31}\) For example, in “Our Bodies, Our Poems,” Jennifer Ashton critiques women writers in the innovative poetry community, arguing these writers contradict themselves by “redescrib[ing] the presence of a distinctive female experience or point of view as that of a distinctive female body” (228). She places second-wave feminists concerns in a polarized debate with post-structuralist notions, implying that the “theoretical avant-garde” has room only for the mental exercise of spinning new possibilities as contexts slip never taking hold in time, which, as the argument goes, cannot accommodate the body.
inherent failure in reading (language or constructions of gender). Becoming aware of the impossibility of repeating exactly (as is assumed in ideas of referentiality) opens a space not determined by automatic ingrained routine, allowing one choice and agency. In this sense, Stein offers a praxis that helps one to resist conventions, such as constructions of gender or sexuality that are based on habituated practices and rank certain subjects over others. She provides a valuable practice—one that is democratic in its undoing of hierarchical mechanisms. Her work promotes, even demands, a mind to be discerning of the habitual and to be able to respond to the world without a passive acceptance to normativity as truth.

Stein’s project is not without contradiction. Her concept of herself as an artistic leader and her aspiration to be recognized in bourgeois culture run in opposition to the notion of democracy. However, I suggest that the tension between her egotist stance and early-twentieth century gender norms that did not “read” her as a powerful literary presence provided her motivation to redefine the terms that constitute “genius” as masculine. In her desire to be taken seriously as one of the leading artists and thinkers of her time, she utilizes James’s critique of overriding conceptual thinking to both explain her approach to writing (in an effort to increase her audience) and to show readers how they are limited by hierarchical and habituated ways of writing, reading, and perceiving. In that process, in “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” she conceptually undoes gender constructs that define “genius” as a status applicable only to men.

Butler defines “insurrectionary speech” as the moment when the indeterminability of language throws one out of habituated behavior, providing an opportunity to think outside those conditioned responses, which in turn “produce[es] a scene of agency from [the linguistic] ambivalence” (Excitable Speech 163).
Juliana Spahr’s discussion of Stein in *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* has parallels to my reading. She posits that Stein’s textual disruption is democratic in its alignment with “immigrant and other nonstandard Englishes” and, further, reveals a new understanding of fragmentation that can cultivate tolerance and respect for difference (47-48). My version of the argument takes a philosophical perspective that investigates the gendered implications of Stein’s adoption of Jamesian pragmatism. Her choice, for instance, to use the term “romance” is significant in its female associations (intimacy, love, romance novel). However, rather than seeing her definition as an essentialist move (women’s writing), her feminism, like pragmatism’s overhaul of Western Metaphysics, undoes binary systems. The systematicity that James critiques—that has dominated Western culture since antiquity—has connotations of the masculine (conceptual, hierarchical, polarized, combative). Conversely, pragmatism’s emphasis on attentiveness to the passing moment in its embodied, detailed, and fluid nature has connotations of the feminine. Pragmatism and “romance,” then, foster a new democratic paradigm in which qualities of the feminine are accentuated and valued. Stein takes James a step further in that she goes beyond his theory of consciousness by applying his ideas to writing. In her focus on writing, she stresses the intimacy (“romance”) between text and reader thereby providing a praxis in which the precepts of pragmatism—embodiment, fluidity, and immersion in the immediate details of the world—are enacted and embodied through reader participation. Stein’s democratic praxis underscores the way fragmentation can assist in reassessing entrenched social norms and in undoing the hierarchical and binary mechanisms that encourage distrust and contention.
Stein, James, and Democratic Relationality

Stein’s connection to James lies in his understanding that consciousness is always on the move. Consciousness, for James, is centered on the idea that an embodied perceiver negotiates the relations among numerous stimuli in the passing moment. He discusses his resistance to theories of David Hume and George Berkeley that conceive of consciousness as capable of “hav[ing] no images but of perfectly definite things” (Briefer Course 150). James understands that everything is always in relation—nothing can exist in isolation. He goes on to explain that relationality is a product of the movement of time and states that while we see the same object from one moment to the next, we assume a permanent existence based on abstract ideas. It is “in our carelessness,” he states, “to suppose that our [overriding] ideas of them [objects] are the same.” It is our “habit of simply using our sensible impressions as stepping-stones to pass over to the recognition of the realities whose presence they reveal.” The “realities” that are overlooked are the subtleties of change created by changes of light, distance, and the effects of seeing or hearing something in relation to other objects or sounds that are presented in each new moment (142). In other words, we confuse our habit of abstraction and conceptualization (“our ideas”) with the reality of constant change from moment to moment as the environment changes and new thoughts and impressions affect perception. This habit of conceptualization establishes a hierarchical relation to the world in the sense that

33 In Psychology: A Briefer Course James posits that all information from the world has to be filtered through the nervous system. He discusses the fact that nerve centers are amply protected by the skull, membranes, and fluids—anything entering the brain must be synthesized by an embodied individual as feedback from the world travels in “currents” through the body in “nerve fibers” (15-16).
difference is categorically classified into overriding ideas that are prioritized over particulars in a moment of time. Alternatively, James’s notion of perception as functioning through mobile relationality establishes a democratic relation to the world in the sense that difference is not overlooked in a categorical paradigm but understood through the convergence of different relations or in a “ratio” of relations in a given moment. He states, “[w]hat appeals to our attention far more than the absolute quality of an impression is its ratio to whatever other impressions we may have at the same time” (James’s emphasis 142). For James, consciousness, through the impressions of an embodied perceiver, is relational, contingent, and democratic. It is based on difference to the point that there cannot be anything exceeding the constant, relational movement of consciousness. In this way, he critiques categorical and conceptual principles—which resort to hierarchical precepts in their propensity to classify and rank.

James’s ideas of embodied perception, time, and democratic relationality are echoed in Stein’s “Portraits and Repetition.” In the essay, she makes a distinction between the idea of repetition with a difference or “insistence” and “repetition” without difference, explaining that “insistence” accounts for the inevitable variations that occur when one repeats while “repetition” is based on habitual patterns, producing deadened and automatic responses. Insistence is something all living things do naturally. She states, insisting “is very like a frog hopping he cannot ever hop exactly the same distance or the same way of hopping at every hop. A bird’s singing is perhaps the nearest thing to repetition but if you listen they too vary their insistence. That is the human expression saying the same thing and in insisting we all insist varying the emphasising” [sic] (Stein Writings 1932 to 1946 288). In other words, language (“human expression”) is based on
“insistence” in the sense that there are limited letters and words used over and over in varying ways; however, “insistence” occurs even when the exact same phrase is repeated in that intonation, pitch, and the environmental impact on vocal cords will produce slight changes from one moment to the next. Or in Stein’s words, “…it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis” (288). Stein’s notion of “insistence” reflects James’s notion of reality in that she wants to underline the incessant difference that is the nature of life. Stein applies this idea to the process of making art in which there is a continuous relation with time, allowing for difference and the vitality of both the artist and her subject (the subject of the portrait). “Insistence” is human perception (the artist’s seeing, hearing, thinking of subjects seeing hearing, thinking, and doing) engaged in the unfolding moment, while repetition, for Stein, is the reassertion of conventional tenets (habits) of art. An artist who repeats rather than insists relinquishes her moment to moment perceptions for overriding (hierarchical) concepts that are used to stabilize traditional art forms, which in turn deadens them and art. In other words, like James’s idea that what appeals to our attention is the “ratio” of other impressions in a moment of time (rather than an absolute overriding sense of an object), insistence is alive in that it is produced by a perceiver who is awake to the subtle relational changes occurring on an ongoing basis.

These ideas are also present in “Composition as Explanation,” in which Stein discusses her notion of the “continuous present” and stresses the importance of artists “beginning again and again” rather than blindly following conventional standards for art (Stein Writings 1903-1932 525). Stein believes that traditional aesthetic codes create the illusion of fixity in that the artist, rather than responding to the continual changes in
perception and environment, repeats tradition, creating similar work that reinforces a false sense of stability. In other words, for Stein, artists whose compositions repeat, rather than insist, carelessly mistake the conventions of art for art itself. This is in contrast with the artist whose composition pays attention to the relations in a continual movement through time. For Stein, the latter artist produces art that cannot be identical with what came before and is democratic because it does not prioritize unquestioned overriding tenets of art over the artist’s attentiveness to change and context. In this sense, Stein’s position on art and history affirms James’s concept of embodied perception and democratic relationality through her ideas regarding the artist’s constant reengagement (“beginning again and again”) as a way to avoid the illusory and deadening effects of habituated patterns inherent in historically established codes of art.

Another possible influence on Stein can also be seen in James’s consideration of word experiments as a way to highlight the illusory nature of conceptual thinking.34 In his

34 As Jonathan Levin states, “James proceeds to recommend a word experiment which it is hard to imagine Gertrude Stein having been able to resist:

This is probably the reason why, if we look at an isolated printed word and repeat it long enough, it ends by assuming an entirely unnatural aspect. Let the reader try this with any word on this page. He will soon begin to wonder if it can possibly be the word he has been using all his life with that meaning. It stares at him from the paper like a glass eye, with no speculation in it. Its body is indeed there, but its soul is fled. It is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity. We never before attended to it in this way, but habitually got it clad with its meaning the moment we caught sight of it, and rapidly passed from it to the other words of the phrase. We apprehended it, in short, with a cloud of associates, and thus perceiving it, we felt it quite otherwise than as we feel it now divested and alone (PP 2: 726-27)” (151).
Briefer Course he discusses how the rupture of normative expectations of language can momentarily dislodge the hold habituated reading patterns have on readers, and thus, potentially provide one an awareness of the movement (rather than illusion of stability) of consciousness. He states that “words in every language have [been] contracted by long association” to affinities or “fringes” that lead us through agreed upon terms (“mutual repugnance or affinity”) to conclusions, supplying a “feeling of harmony or discord, of a right or wrong direction in the thought.” For instance, “if an unusually foreign word be introduced, if the grammar trip, or if a term from an incongruous vocabulary suddenly appear…the sentence detonates as it were, we receive a shock from the incongruity, and the drowsy assent is gone” (153). In other words, language is a contract between a group of people who have decided on symbolic combinations or terms that are arbitrarily associated to things and concepts in the world; thusly, reading becomes a habit which produces a “feeling of harmony” creating a situation in which predetermined abstracted terms are substituted for and override the particulars in the passing moment. Consequently, when the agreed upon contract is broken we are startled out of (or woken up) our complacent attachment to structures that think for us. We are caught off guard and left to negotiate the rupture of what we thought was real, leading one to realize that habits falsely represent the world and hide the interminable flux that is reality.\(^{35}\) The

\(^{35}\) “The specious present,” James states, “stands permanent, like the rainbow on the waterfall, with its own quality unchanged by the events that stream thought it.” In other words, even though the present is in constant flux as one moment fades in and out “and each of them [each moment] changing its time-coefficient from ‘not yet’ or ‘not quite yet,’ to ‘just gone,’ or ‘gone’ as it passes by,” we focus on the false present, or—as in James’s waterfall analogy—the rainbow as if it were stable, rather than the process of moving water particles hitting sunlight as they travel downstream (Briefer Course 250).
value of shock for James is that it breaks us out of our sense of truth as conceptual and stable and presents us with the uncontainable, embodied, and irreducible, movement of reality.

However, while Stein adopts James’s ideas of embodied perception and democratic relationality, and was, most likely, influenced by James’s word experiments, there remains a fundamental discrepancy between Stein and her former professor on the issue of aesthetics. As Jonathan Levin discusses, James’s “deep-seated skepticism regarding formulas to organize and classify experience” contributed to a suspicion of forms associated to the aesthetic. Art, for James, was aligned with experience to the degree that art ostensibly becomes an impossibility in that he understood form—a necessary element in the artistic endeavor—to destroy art.36 Art is for James “almost absolutely…the antithesis of the formulaic and abstract” (68). While Stein agrees that stabilized form destroys or deadens art, as she articulates in “Composition as Explanation,” she bypasses James’s dilemma that stems from a belief that art, like life, cannot be contained. She develops a theory of writing (adapted from his theory of thoughts) that involves the reader in a performative, and, further, provides for the uncontainability of art and life through a mobile form in which artist and reader begin again and again, creating and undoing form. Steven Meyer suggests that this shortsightedness in James came from the fact that he avoided the “Pandora’s box of self-reflexivity” in relation to the reader and, therefore, failed to take into consideration how the reader’s response might affect or have consequences on his philosophy—leaving “Stein to ponder the effect [of this] on his thought” (136). I concur that Stein’s primary

36 See: James, Essays, Comments, and Reviews, p. 489 and Levin p. 67-68.
point of departure from James is her consideration of the reader, and so suggest that this focus stems from her obsession with audience, especially in the latter part of the years between 1923 and 1935 when she experienced the fame she had previously longed for. 

I suggest that her desire to be recognized by readers drove her to think through the way in which communication (her connection to audience) was possible without falling back on systems of communication—systems she rejected in her writing. While she fundamentally relies on James to do this, her focus on the reader in a performative engagement with the text takes her work in a different direction and is the pivotal point that links her work to Butler’s notion of a gendered performativity (something I will address presently).

It was during the post-World War I years that Stein began to be recognized as a writer, partially due to the end of the war which opened up international exchange and contacts between writers and editors. Although she was pleased with the public acknowledgment, it put her in an awkward position in that in order to cultivate her newly acquired audience, she had to contend with the fact that the general public was not ready for her radical experimentations. Her growing popularity—that she wanted to encourage rather than deter—made it necessary for her to define what it means to communicate in relation to an audience. She is clear that she does not want to resort to methods that depend on systems of language and engage hierarchical based codes of writing; however,

37 Her frustration about her obscurity leading up to and during the war can be heard in her statement in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* where, in Toklas’ voice, she states, “Gertrude Stein was in those days a little bitter, all her unpublished manuscripts, and no hope of publication or serious recognition” (*Stein Writings 1903-1932* 853).
at the same time, she does not want to remain an obscure artist. In 1926 Edith Sitwell arranged a lecture at Cambridge, for which Stein wrote “Composition as Explanation.” This opportunity was the first time in her career as a writer that she had the pressure to write explicitly to communicate her ideas in a way that went against the performative nature of her writing. Stein refused the invitation at first, but Sitwell convinced her that accepting would do much to promote her work. The post-war years, then, bring to the fore a contradiction working in Stein. She is committed to a democratic project and she longs for recognition, or, as Juliana Spahr puts it, “bourgeois assimilation” (49). She claims the status of artistic genius (assuming her non-normative texts should be accessible to those who are accustomed to normative reading habits), in part, as an attempt to appropriate a position of power according to bourgeois social norms. However, early twentieth-century gender ideologies that could not confirm her genius status limited any substantial acknowledgement of the title. This motivates her to explain her democratic ideas that are centered on the undoing of habituated patterns. She wants both to educate readers on how to read her work (providing her the potential for a larger audience) and, as I demonstrate via “If I Told Him,” to dislodge habituated ideas of gender that determine “genius” as masculine.

The pressure to explain her poetics, at this point in her life, pushes her to: 1) articulate a way that narration can “mean names without naming them,” or to mean without falling back on the hierarchal standards inherent in communicative systems, and 2) make clear how habituated patterns associated to systems of language relate to subjects

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38 See Ulla E. Dydo, p. 77-81.

functioning in the world of time and space. In *The Geographical History of America: or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1935), Stein’s interest in human subjects in regard to her theory of writing becomes particularly apparent. She first adopts James’s ideas on subjectivity in his essay “The Self” (*Briefer Course*), applying his notion of the “me” and the “I” to establish her ideas of human nature and the human mind (respectively). Stein then shifts from James by applying writing to his theory of self, coming to understand writing and reading as an ongoing interaction between human nature’s need for habits and human mind’s ability to think beyond routine. Structurally, the two texts (GHA and “The Self”) run along parallel tracks. James discusses the elements of the self, starting with the “me,” and then going on to the “I”; however, by the end of the essay, he admits that in actuality the self is neither the “me” nor the “I” but the thoughts between, in the passing moment—“the thoughts,” he states, “themselves are the thinkers” (191). Likewise, Stein discusses the particulars of human nature and the particulars of the human mind; furthermore, toward the end she states that writing (what she refers to as “romance”) is neither human nature nor human mind but between the two (GHA 165).

In “The Self” James posits that the “me” is concerned with the material aspects of life, such as the body, clothes, family, home, property, and wealth (*Briefer Course* 160). The “I,” on the other hand, is the part of the self that is conscious and is located at the crest of the wave “the passing state of consciousness.” The “I” thinks as it negotiates the ratio of impressions of things in space and aspects of the “me” as they converge in the particular moment in time. The particular fragment of the “me” (recent or distant past) is one of the aggregates that the “I” of the moment uses. The memories of the “me” create
an intimacy to the “I” that perceives sameness; however, the sameness is not complete. The new impressions of the moment are added to the aggregate which changes the whole continuous transitional flux of the “me” of then and the “me” of now. James clearly points out that the sense of sameness or wholeness in terms of a definitive subject is not to be “treated as a sort of metaphysical or absolute Unity in which all differences are overwhelmed” (180). The “I” is conscious only in the single pulse of the stream, as it traverses new stimuli in the new moment. In other words, the “I” does not have memory. It uses fragments of memory supplied by the “me” as aggregates in a moment of time, integrating those fragments with stimuli from the environment in the present moment. In other words, while the “I” incorporates memory from aspects of the “me,” it has no overall or overriding perspective.

The parallels between James’s “me” and “I” and Stein’s human nature and human mind are evident in her statement, “the human mind will know that there is no use in being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man.” In contrast, “[h]uman nature can not know that there is no use in being a little boy if he is to grow up to be a man” (GHA 51). The human mind, like the Jamesian “I,” who resides in the single pulse of the stream—in passing consciousness—is not concerned with memory, the thing that connects the boy to the man. Therefore, if memory is not taken into consideration, then whether the boy becomes a man or the man was a boy is not relevant—or of any use to the human mind (I). However, human nature, like the Jamesian “me,” is completely consumed with memory. It “is what any human being will do” (68). It is our animal nature, our sense of survival [“[a] dog does not know what the human mind is” (59)]. She goes on to explain the difference between human nature and human mind in relation to
geography in reference to an experience of flying in a plane in 1935. She states, “because the human mind knows what it knows and knowing what it knows it has nothing to do with seeing what it remembers, remember how the country looked as we passed over it, it made designs big designs like human nature draws them because it knows them without ever having seen them from above” (55). In other words, because the experience of flying in a plane was so new at this point in history, human nature had no memories to attach to what it saw. Therefore, it saw what the human mind (I) would see—designs or things without memory (human mind would see designs because it has no memory with which to attribute the shapes of say, farmland bordered by forests and urban areas). Stein continues to explain that if human nature were to climb to a high place on land it would perceive of danger because human nature (me) would have the memory of falling and being hurt (55-56). The human mind does not perceive danger because danger is predicated on memory, a fearful experience in the past. Alternatively, human nature, like James’s “me,” is concerned with self-preservation; therefore, fear, memory, and danger are central matters in regards to survival. However, since flying in a plane is a new experience, there is no memory for human nature to cling to and thusly human nature (me) acts like the human mind (I)—that is, human nature draws the country seen from above like big designs “because it knows them without ever having seen them from above” (55).

Stein begins to diverge from James when she incorporates writing into his idea of the self. She states, “whether or whether not the human mind could exist if there had been no human speech this I do not know but this I do know that the human mind is not the same thing as human speech. Has one anything to do with the other is writing a different
thing, oh yes and this is so exciting so satisfying so tender that it makes everything
everything writing has nothing to do with human speech with human nature and therefore
and therefore it has something to do with the human mind” (68-69). In this statement
“human speech,” for Stein, refers to communicative systems and thusly falls in the realm
of human nature in that it is part of our need for survival. She suggests that her notion of
writing does not have to do with human nature’s memory and survival-based needs and
therefore has to do with the human mind, the aspect of the self that resides in the passing
moment where there is no memory. Thusly, the exciting thing about writing versus
human speech (communicative systems) is that writing “writes what is.” She explains:
“[t]he human mind can write what it is because what it is is all that it is and as it is all that
it is all it can do is to write” (97). Communicative systems rely on memory. We see
symbols on a page and those symbols refer us outside to something in the world.
Reference’s sole purpose is to engage our memories as we attach the symbols to things
that human nature (me) remembers. Thusly, “the human mind can [only] write what it is” because it has no memory with which to associate symbols to things in the world.
What is important and exciting about writing (writing as opposed to communicative
systems) is in “[h]ow looking at it does not make it different from what it looks like” [it
cannot use language referentially] (70). We see the word as it is, not what it represents;
therefore, “writing makes everything everything”; this is opposed to communicative
systems which create duality, prioritizing reality over the copy (69). Her notion of writing
becomes part of things in the world in which there is no distinction between writing and
object. Writing that “writes what it is” (rather than a writing that represents) is produced
by way of an embodied perceiver who engages the human mind’s ability to stay present
to the moment, beginning again and again, as opposed to resorting to representational memory. Writing in this sense is about subject formation as much as it has to do with writing and reading. Her term for this kind of writing, at this point in her career, is “romance” which is “between human nature and human mind but has nothing to do with either” (165).

Up to this moment in the text she has identified parts of the self that are aligned with human nature (survival instincts) and parts that are aligned with the human mind (ability to think outside habituated practices in the passing moment). In particular she has demonstrated how human nature relies on communicative systems and how the human mind relates well with “romance” in the sense that, like the Jamesian “I,” the human mind is situated in the moment where consciousness focuses on relations in the ongoing passing moment, without a dependency on memory. However, she now wants to make it clear that “romance,” despite the fact that it resides in the space between human nature and human mind, differs considerably from both. “Romance” differs from the human mind in the sense that “[t]he human mind has to say what anything is now.” “Romance [however] is to be there there where they are. Not described as that to that but to be that not described as that” (165). The human mind is now, romance is to be there. The human mind, like James’s “I,” is in the passing moment—a space that is so fleeting (“is now”) it is impossible to grasp. We might be able to draw our attention to it momentarily, but it would be impossible to contain in anyway. “Romance” then differs from the human mind because it involves writing, which is concrete and material (it is something that exists after the moment has passed) giving it a tangible in-the-world component. Nevertheless, she wants to underscore that although there is a concrete in-the-world connection, it is not
anchored to duality and hierarchical systems. “Romance” in this way also differs from human nature—it does not fall into representational modes of communicative systems which describe “that to that” (representational symbol to an object in the world), creating duality, but is instead “to be that not described as that” (my emphasis).

It is at this point that Stein distinguishes herself from James. Unlike James’s focus on thoughts that are ephemeral, transitional and unpredictable, Stein’s focus on writing is tangible and concrete, transitional and unpredictable. “Romance” is in the moment the way that James’s notion of thoughts is in the passing moment; however, “romance” enters the world (is there) whereas thoughts stay in the is now of the transitory moment. “Romance” as being that (“to be that not described as that”) is a writing that is vitally embodied—in fact, in Jamesian terms, it is the movement of life itself—functioning in a dynamic not reliant on duality or hierarchical principles. Furthermore, “romance” or writing that highlights the ongoing movement between the part of one’s self that tends toward survival-base codes and the part that can think beyond systems becomes, for Stein, the mechanism that creates repetition with a difference. The human mind—due to its lack of memory in the passing moment—is always making different human nature’s repetition of habituated patterns through mobile relationality. In The Geographical History of America Stein fully comes to understand what she had a glimpse of when she moved in with her aunts in Baltimore: how repetition with a difference is fundamental to both writing and subjectivity. Again, while this notion is modeled after James’s notion of the “me” and “I,” “romance” diverges from James in its performance in the world as an art that is inseparable from human existence. Stein, through “romance,” resolves James’s distrust of “the formulaic and abstract” by putting form into motion—that is, placing
systems of language between the ongoing interaction of human nature and human mind (Levin 68). This is crucial to her poetics in which she exaggerates and encourages the chiasmic movement between a reader’s dependence and independence from systems of communication.

“Romance,” as a site in which writing and subjectivity come together in a democratic praxis, takes Stein’s personal interest in readers—as audience members who will promote her as a public figure—to a more altruistic level. She wants to inform readers about the human mind not because it is necessarily better than human nature, but because we as human beings (at the turn of the last century, and I would add, at the turn of the recent century) tend to relate more to our human natures which focus on survival instincts, prioritizing and polarizing the world between an “us” and a “them.” To practice “romance,” then, helps one to balance human nature and the human mind. While it would be impossible to rid ourselves of human nature (the fact that we have bodies requires a concern for survival mechanisms and an awareness of self versus other), an overreliance on human nature can escalate to extreme greed and an overly protected desire to rank self over other in a binary system. This aspect of Stein’s poetics has enormous consequences for subjects in the world and reveals her “powerful insight into the workings of heteronormative patriarchy.”

Her poetics sets the groundwork for approaches in dealing with current feminist concerns, that is, in particular, how individuals—despite human nature’s need for duality due to bodies in time and space—can practice and reinforce a non-dual democratic relation to the world.

Incomplete Completion or The Linguistic Drag Act

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The chiasmic movement of “romance”—that evokes human nature’s dependency on referentiality and the habitual, and then reverses that impulse, encouraging human mind’s capability to think independently of routine—has parallels to Judith Butler’s notion of gender as functioning in a chiasmic dynamic. For example, in Butler’s discussion of Jenny Livingston’s film, *Paris is Burning*,\(^{41}\) she makes reference to the repetition performed by ballroom drag queens in the film that, in hetero-normative terms, is seen as an aberration of a “real” and natural femininity. Butler refuses this idea and suggests that the drag queens exaggerate a repetition consistent in all gender formation. In this way, she posits that subjectivity in general is an ambivalent drag performance. She states in a summary paragraph:

> The temporal structure of such a subject is chiasmic in this sense: in the place of a substantial or self-determining “subject,” this juncture of discursive demands is something like a “crossroads”…There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the “we” cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. It is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed. (*Bodies that Matter* 124)

\(^{41}\) The 1990 documentary that chronicles the “ball culture” in Manhattan through the African American and Latino gay and transgender community in the mid- to late-1980’s.
Thusly, like Stein, Butler understands subjectivity as functioning in an ongoing sense of time (“temporal structure”) in which there is always a repetition with a difference. The subject repeats in the “demand to resignify…the terms which constitute the ‘we’”; however, there is always difference because the demand cannot “be followed in strict obedience.” For Butler, the value of exaggerating the chiasmic movement (as the ballroom drag queens exemplify)—or widening the gap (going outside the culture’s permissible range) between an expected code of gender and one’s particular repetition—is the shock effect. The drag queen, for instance, with a five o’clock shadow, performing a 1950s Marilyn Monroe image of femininity, dislodges hetero-normative gender expectations. This creates, in hetero-normative terms, a polarization between a “right” and “wrong” gender choice. The shock wakes one up to the fact that habits (expected norms) of gender categorically override individual difference and function through hierarchical systems that prioritize and rank. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that in overriding difference and creating a “right” over “wrong” polarization reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is natural, originary, and stable—one fits into the masculine or feminine construction or one does not. This disguises the fact that repetition with an individual difference is the basis for all gender. For example, in hetero-normative terms, despite the individual difference depicted in repetitions of femininity in Barbara Bush, Terri Gross, and Lady Ga Ga, all three fall within a permissible range of hetero-normative femininity in which difference is overlooked and sameness assumed.

42 There are some transgendered subjects in the film whose repetition of femininity is complete to the extent that they can “pass” in normative terms. The exaggerated repetition refers to repetitions that cannot “pass.”
Butler considers the drag performance of all gender to be ambivalent because the
nexus (“the non-space of cultural collision”) of the chiasmus—the space in which one
repeats with a difference—is always uncertain due to the unpredictability of how an
individual will alter the repetition. She suggests that an awareness of this uncertainty has
potent political ramifications in that it provides a space in which agency is possible. One
can, on a moment to moment basis, in the temporal structure, rework “the very terms by
which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed.” For Butler, constructions of
masculinity and femininity always function as an ambivalent drag act in a resignification
and failure (repetition with a difference). However, hetero-normativity hides the
repetition with a difference through categorical systems, thereby, concealing its penchant
for inequality in a veil of normalcy. The exaggerated ambivalent drag act of the drag
queens is significant because it exposes the privileging paradigm underscored in hetero-
normativity, encouraging awareness and offering a way to resist and rework conventions
of gender. With this awareness, Butler implies, all gender repetitions can be seen and
utilized in an act of agency rather than a blind repetition of ingrained hetero-normative
patterns.

Through the disruption of normative language codes, Stein engages a chiasmic
dynamic similar to that of the ballroom drag queens. Like systems of gender that override
individual difference through categorical distinctions, rules of language override
difference in a categorical systems that produces a polarized right/wrong duality between
“sense” (truth as representation) over “non-sense” (false in its failure to represent).”
Stein, like the drag queens, dislodges normative codes by going outside the permissible
range of what constitutes “sense,” and in doing so, wakes one up to the fact that all
meaning production is a repetition with individual difference. She undoes the assumption that codes of reading and writing produce stable (correct or true) meaning, unaffected by readers, and instead, demonstrates that all meaning whether in her writing or newspaper prose is subject to reader interpretation (or repetition with a difference). Stein’s exaggerated linguistic drag act widens the gap between an expected code of language and her particular repetition and, in turn, has the potential to jolt the reader out of complacent routine. In doing so, Stein underscores the fact that reading and writing patterns: 1) are habits and not truth, not an accurate representation of the world, and 2) work to override individual difference (interpretation) and function through hierarchical systems that prioritize and rank.

Butler suggests in her discussion of *Paris is Burning* that the exaggerated drag act provides a way to resist hierarchical patterns and supports perceptions of gender that go beyond the inequities embedded in the normative. Likewise, Stein’s exaggerated linguistic drag act makes available a reading practice from which one can cultivate the ability to resist hierarchical patterns, strengthening one’s capacity to think beyond the normative. Through the praxis of Stein’s linguistic drag act, one develops a relationship with ingrained routine in which one has input. Rather than being dominated by habituated practice as is the tendency of human nature, one has the potential to foster a mind that is balanced between human nature and human mind—a mind that is active and discerning of the habitual without passive acceptance to hierarchical systems. This praxis can help one to be practiced at identifying the mechanisms from which systems disguise inequality as well as experienced at making moment to moment choices that work to undermine that
injustice. In this way, reading Stein alongside Butler facilitates in comprehending the performative and gendered dimensions involved in her poetics.

In “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” (*Stein Writings: 1903-1932* 506-508), Stein sets up the exaggerated linguistic drag act by creating an element of shock in which expected codes of language are significantly undermined. The title leads the reader to assume that what follows will be about the man, Picasso, promising to give us a complete picture of him. However, based on codes of narration, that expectation at the most basic level is not fulfilled. The subtitle, for instance, “A Completed Portrait of Picasso,” would lead one to assume that some kind of description of the man, his features, clothing, actions, and/or artistic concerns will ensue. However, not only do we not get the description the “portrait” promises, the artist’s name is never mentioned (aside from the title) in the text. In addition, normative grammar and syntax are radically unsettled. Consider lines 1-8:

If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.

Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would

would he like it.

If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would

he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he

like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if

Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he

like it would he like it if I told him. (506)

Tell him what? What is the “it” that the “he” might like? What is the antecedent for “him”? In the first line one might assume that the antecedent is Picasso (since it
immediately follows the title); however, the mention of “Napoleon” in the second line confuses the problem of the antecedent and leaves the reader with more questions. The relation between “Picasso” in the title and “Napoleon” in the second line raises the possibility that Stein is comparing Picasso with Napoleon. This assumption comes not from determinate linkages but through the close proximity of the two names, encouraging the reader to find associations between the two men. In this sense, Stein gives readers something to relate to in the world, a signifier from which something outside the text can be attached (tendency of human nature), but she does not fill in a narrative leading the reader through a description. Readers are left to relate the names of the two men on their own, eliciting human mind’s capacity to think without the reading habits required by human nature. Like the drag queens in Livingston’s film who, through the element of shock, unsettle habitual practices that create an illusion of normalcy, Stein engages the reader through the element of shock, dislodging habituated patterns that create the illusion of stable truth. The reader is offered the opportunity to think without an over-determined dependency on routine. While one engages those patterns (human nature cannot exist without them, or in Butler’s terms “the demand to resignify…cannot be summarily refused”), the patterns are continually undermined, demanding the reader to make connections and participate in the meaning making process. This encourages thinking that is not overwhelmed by automatic responses, which, in turn, resort to hierarchical mechanisms.

 Appropriately lines 1-8 mimic the chiasmic dynamic that “romance” encourages between human nature and human mind. For instance, in line 1, the phrase that begins the sentence “If I told him” is transposed and placed at the end of the following sentence
while the phrase that ends the first sentence “would he like it” is place in the beginning of the second sentence. The chiasmus depicts the process of reading in Stein’s portrait in which one searches for referential meaning through the words and phrases that gesture outside the text or have some syntactical clarity (human nature’s survival instinct that depends on systems of communication). However, the referential treatment of the word or phrase is reversed almost immediately in the subsequent lines as reading patterns are challenged. Stein lures the reader into the meaning making process by providing bits of information, promising connections outside the text; however, instead of following through with referential clarity, narrowing meaning as is grammatically expected, she continually reverses any referential indicators directing the reader back into the text. Or, in Ulla Dydo words, “[h]er texts simultaneously pull us toward the compositional center and push us out into the world.”43 In this chiasmic dynamic in which referentiality is intimated then undermined, the meaning making process is heightened rather than diminished in the plethora of possibilities it opens up to reader participation. The kind of thinking this dynamic makes available differs from thinking produced by the unquestioned reading of normative patterns in that the reader is active in the production of meaning. For example, as mentioned previously, placing “Picasso” in the title, leads

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43 Dydo in the Language that Rises states that “[r]eadinStein becomes both a centripetal, compositional task and a centrifugal, referential task, the two in constant, creative opposition. The references ask us to attend to the world while the composition asks us to attend to the design. Her texts simultaneously pull us toward the compositional center and push us out into the world” (19).

Similarly, in Everybody’s Autonomy Spahr underlines how Stein involves readers in “repetitive disruptions” as well as continually encourages a “return to words,” thereby engaging readers in “continual acts of representation” (47).
one to expect that there will be a portrait of the man; however, that assumption is undermined, and, instead of a description or an introduction to the artist, lines 2-8 repeat “Napoleon” seven times. Referentiality is utilized in placing “Picasso” in the title, and then reversed in the text’s unfulfilled expectation. Once one contends with the non-normative nature of the text, possibilities for meaning making emerge, and the reader is encouraged to think in a way that is not determined by stock patterns that dull the mind’s ability to think independently. For instance, relating the zealous French ruler, who had ambitions to dominate the world, to Picasso hints at the artist’s position as a prominent leader in the art world. And in the following lines, the repetition of “kings” in “Exactly as as kings” (line 13), Exactitude as kings” (line 15), and “Exactly or as kings” (line 17), offers the possibility that Stein wanted to underscore the male power associated with the two men. The introduction of “queens” in line 18 (“Shutters shut and open so do queens”) in relation to “kings” in the previous section works to engage the reader in a referential treatment of the portrait. “[K]ings” and “queens” provide for two of the four common nouns presented in the text up to this point, and are the only common nouns referring to humans beings, urging one to link them to the proper noun “Napoleon.” “Napoleon,” “kings,” and “queens” are predominately surrounded by seemingly unrelated pronouns, adverbs, verbs, and conjunctions making the common and proper nouns stand out in their naming function, clearly and directly pointing outside the text. Secondly, the addition of “queens” to the series of “kings” (x3) opens up a new line of reference, that is, gender (506).

However, the next section (lines 18-22) does not follow through, but rather undermines any confirmation of stock patterns that might tie “queens” to “kings”:
“Shutters shut and open so do queens. Shutters shut and/ shutters and so shutters shut and shutters and so and so shut- /ters and so shutters shut and so shutters shut and shutters and/ so. And so shutters shut and so and also” (506). Yet, meaning making is not delimited. For instance, one is led to contemplate if Stein in reference to “queens” in line 18 (“Shutters shut and open so do queens”) is referring to herself as the female version of a significant and powerful literary genius. However, taking the following lines into consideration (23-26), “kings” and “queens” is more appropriately linked to her critique of representational writing: “Exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact as a resemblance, exactly as resembling, exactly/ resembling, exactly in resemblance exactly a resemblance, ex-/actly and resemblance. For this is so. Because” (506). If “shutters” is to be read as shutters of a camera that shut then open quickly to create a photo which is, as the section suggests, an “exact resemblance,” then comparing the shutter apparatus that produces exact resemblances to queens infers that “queens”—women who take a position lower in status to kings (and by extension is a reference to women’s lower status in relation to men generally)—can only make replicas, can only mimic. It infers that they do not have the power as kings (or genius) to make something really new, that is, a resemblance with a difference or an “active repeating” (line 27: “Now actively repeat at all, now actively repeat…”). Shutters on a camera take part in a process that produces replicas, that is, they repeat without a difference as artists who mimic traditional modes of art and therefore produce deadened art or work of lesser quality than artists who can repeat with a difference (506). Line 18 implies that the inferior act of repetition without a difference, as created by shutters on a camera, is synonymous to the inferior position of queens in relation to kings, or artist who mimic
tradition (queens) and geniuses (kings) who are able to insist. While it might be tempting to associate “queens” as a reference to Stein in relation to “kings” (Napoleon and Picasso), lines 23-26 indicate that she is relating herself to “kings” in her ability to create superior art (alive in its insistence), rather than inferior (representational art that becomes deadened or stale in its avoidance of the momentary stimuli). In her linguistic drag act that unsettles expected codes of language, Stein, in this instance, is also unsettling codes of gender that understand “genius” as a reference to the masculine. In her associations to writing (“exact resemblance” versus “active repeating”) she aligns to herself with the “kings” who can insist or “actively repeat.” She opens a gendered space in which, as Butler states, one can rework the “terms which constitute the ‘we’” (Bodies that Matter 124).

This self-conscious gendered revision of genius along with her linguistic performance can also be seen in her subtle reference to Einstein. One of the ways Stein exaggerates the chiasmic movement between the reader’s dependency on and independence from ingrain routine is by highlighting the material aspects of language. Consider lines 81-106, which lack any immediate referential clues but rhythmically call to mind the rhythm of a train (508). This invocation of a train along with the five repetitions of “trains” in lines 65-69 (507) leads one to wonder if Stein is evoking Einstein’s thought experiment as she does in ”Portraits and Repetition.” She states, “[b]ut the strange thing about the realization of existence is that like a train moving there is no real realization of it moving if it does not move against something” (Stein Writings 1932-1946 287). This parallels Einstein’s thought experiment in which he conceives of a hypothetical situation in which a train passes over a railway track that has just been hit by
lightning. The lightning hits the track at the midway point between the engine and caboose as the train moves forward. He postulates that the light from the lightning would reach the conductor in the caboose at a faster rate than the engineer because of the forward movement of the train. Einstein’s objective was to prove that time is relational not absolute, that is, time (as in this example) is contingent on one’s relation to the point where lightning hit the track. The invocation of the train, for instance, can be felt in the following lines: “One. / I land. / Two. / I land. / Three. / The land. / Three/ The land./ Three./ The land./ Three/ Two I land./ Two/ I land./ One/ I land. /Two/ I land./ As a so./ They cannot./ A note./ They cannot/ A float./ They cannot./ They dote./ They cannot”(508).

The short, one to three syllable phrases that have what seem to be inappropriate punctuation defy any normative approach to reading—nor do they lead to a clear connection to Picasso or Napoleon. Once one deals with the shock of severe syntactical rupture, recognizing one’s dependency on certain very limiting patterns of reading, a non-syntactical pattern emerges in rhythm. The alteration of one to two syllables in lines 81-89 create a da-dada rhythm which, when repeated consecutively, mimics the rhythm of an old steam train as its metal wheels roll over welds in the track. The following lines 99-106 increase to an alternation between two and three syllable lines which create the rhythm similar to a train as it speeds up. While Einstein’s and Stein’s ideas refer to disparate contexts, she would have liked him because 1) his scientific premise of reality had parallels to James’ notion of relationality and 2) by 1923, the year she wrote “If I Told Him,” he had a reputation as a genius for his 1905 ground breaking papers.

The suggestion of a third male genius [Picasso (artistic), Napoleon (military), Einstein (scientific)], four including Stein (literary), draws one’s attention to lines 58-61:
“He he he he and he and he and he and he and he and/ and as and as he and as he and he and
he. He is and as he is, and as/ he is and he is, he is and as he and he and as he is and he
and/ he and and he and he”(507). On the one hand, Stein is playing with our dependency
on stock patterns that underlie referentiality (human nature). The use of the “he,” the
male pronoun, leads one to attach it to the previously referenced males in the text
(Picasso and Napoleon). Furthermore, the repetition of the four “he’s” before the first
“and” in line 58 suggest that other “he’s” may be involved (in my reading, Einstein and
Stein). However, on the other hand, reference is also fundamentally reversed. The more
one looks at the passage a visual pattern is produced by the height of the H, h, and d as
well as the relative shorter sized letters e, a, and n. One is pulled in the space of
“romance,” between human nature’s tendency to make “he” referential—the antecedent
in naming a male subject—and human mind’s ability to think and see beyond referential
memory—enabling human mind to see designs. The reader is encouraged to see the text
as part of a visual design that emphasizes the “h”/“e” in its democratic potential. The
push/pull dynamic—between pushing the reader outside the text in a referential treatment
of “he” in its relation to Picasso and Napoleon as well as kings as literary geniuses and
pulling the reader into the text (visual pattern) that demands thinking beyond the
referential—allows for a more pliable understanding of genius that is not necessarily tied
to maleness. She puts into question reading patterns that associate the word “he” to a
male subject outside the text by demonstrating that the “he” can produce meanings not
tied to entrenched norms. She, thusly, provides herself room to maneuver her genius
status, challenging social constructs that equate positions of power to masculinity.
Furthermore, this chiasmic push-pull between referentiality and materiality is evident in a sound pattern. It is difficult, compared to syntactically intact structures, to run one’s eyes over lines 58-61 quickly. If the reader attempts to slide the eyes ahead, it is easy to stumble and lose one’s place in the similarity of “he’s” and “and’s,” adding to the infectious humor of “he” repeated consecutively (creating a sound pattern similar to laughter). The passage demands the reader to slow down, to see, and to hear each word. One must take in the full impact of each word—something we are not accustomed to in structures of grammar in which little words (e.g.: articles, conjunctions and prepositions) function as pointers for more important nouns, verbs, and modifiers. One’s struggle to read this passage humorously provides an experience of “romance” in which human nature’s dependency on hierarchical patterns is evoked (assuming little words will function as they are expected and lead one swiftly across the line to the more important portions of the sentence that will confirm referential clarity). This is then reversed by provoking the human mind in the text’s demand for our present focused attention on the individual word, which gives a sense of its sensate (sound design) qualities, freed from tiered systems.

The infectious humor in reading lines 58-61 as one repeats the “he” sound makes one wonder if Stein is laughing with glee at the possibilities available when entrenched patterns are unsettled and revised. Dislodging “he” from the determinate antecedent for a male subject, not only provides space for her personally—as an artist and thinker who had to contend with social constructs that made publication difficult and deterred her recognition as a significant artist—but also has implications for everyone. “Romance” is exciting because “anybody who can sit and write can he can listen to the human mind”
To not listen to the human mind means that one is left with human nature’s survival instincts which require stability and an attachment to conceptual, representational thinking—reinforcing old entrenched habits. Conversely, if one listens to the human mind, habitual patterns are available for revision as the human mind makes different human nature’s attempts at stabilization. The “he” section is a happy moment because everyone who reads her text is encouraged to use their human minds. This provides them the capacity to be discerning of calcified routine such as those associated to the gendering of “genius” and to make momentary choices that can forge new pathways.

Moreover, James’s definition of “genius” as meaning “little more than the faculty of perceiving in an unhabituated way” could explain the giddiness Stein seems to be expressing in the passage. It is a moment that demonstrates a democratization of “genius” on multiple levels. The “he” passage is 1) indicative of a self-conscious reference to herself as one of the geniuses (Picasso, Napoleon, literary kings, Einstein), reworking notions that associate the term to masculinity and 2) provides anyone who reads her passage the opportunity to “perceive[e] in an unhabituated way,” or to be a genius. Stein translates “genius” from the hierarchical mechanisms of language and social constructs that reserve the word for an elite group of males to a Jamesian pragmatist paradigm in which all subjects who are willing to pay attention to the human mind can become geniuses. Stein’s redefinition through Jamesian democracy, then, is the ability to be in the vitality of the passing moment where, as Butler points out, provides a

44 Quoted in Levin, p. 153. Also in *Principles of Psychology* (2:754)
space (“non-space of cultural collision”) in which one can undo norms, and offers the opportunity revise the terms that constitute the “we.”

Counter to criticism that understands her work to be a-historical and hermetic, Stein’s notion of “romance” and her translation of “genius” from a hierarchical to a pragmatist paradigm establish her vital concern with subjects in the world of time and space. She is a rich resource for literary feminism in that her performative has the capacity to foster a democratic citizenry, that is, citizens who can see through the illusion of normativity created by systems and respond in a way that comes from active thinking not tied to the ingrained routine. She discloses the mechanisms with which heteronormativity conceals inequities and provides an alternative, pointing the way to the mechanisms that reinforce a democratic repetition with a difference. Her work demonstrates how subjects, who must contend with the dualities inherent in the world, can function without an inflated dependency on binaries that forge an overly protected desire to rank self over other and to separate the world into “us” versus “them” dichotomies. Stein’s insistence is also ameliorative in regards to polarized debates such as the controversy between notions of stable body versus linguistic freedom in that she exposes the possibility of interdependence—that systems (stabilizing factors) are needed in order to be revise. Reading Stein through James and Butler demonstrates her disjunctive poetics to be relevant today regarding issues of subjectivity, difference, and equality. Her ideas and praxis prove to be useful in promoting notions of identity as fluid, contingent, and irreducible yet fundamentally connected to the world at the nexus of language and identity.
Chapter Three

Why Not Mama, Dada?: Mina Loy’s (R)evolutionary Politics and Poetics of Labor

“Most movements have a fixed concept towards which they advance, we move away from all fixed concepts in order to advance...Psycho-Democracy considers social institutions as structural forms in collective consciousness which are subject to the same evolitional transformation as collective consciousness itself, and that our social institutions of today will cause future generations to roar with laughter.”

When initially comparing the work of Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein, one would most likely be struck with distinctions rather than similarities. Loy’s writing is dense, studied, and relies on a meticulously thought out application of metaphor. Stein’s work, in contrast, utilizes a basic English vocabulary, has a playful quality, and depends on elements of chance and randomness. Despite these differences, I argue that they are linked in their underlying emphasis on a performative, embodied language that can be seen through a lens based on Jamesian notions of consciousness and reality. Stein’s connection to James, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, has to do with the chiasmic structure associated to her notion of insistence in which one, through a transitional process, repeats habituated patterns. However, because of the impossibility of repetition in any strict sense, one repeats with a difference (or insists). Stein draws our attention to the process of insistence by exaggerating the repetition to a degree that exceeds norms in both language and gender. She rigorously disrupts the normative in grammar as well as challenges notions of hetro-normativity. While Stein radically disrupts codes of language in order to make her point in regard to the relational

45 The Last Lunar Baedeker: Mina Loy, 278.
movement of life and art, Loy stays inside normative frames of reference, that is, referentiality has a stronger hold in her work and she stays within heterosexual norms. The emphasis of Stein’s insistence has the tendency to produce a playful quality as one is jolted out of routine and provided an array of new semantic possibilities. In contrast, Loy focuses on and underlines the importance of being aware of the discomfort involved in the process of insistence (repetition with a difference) at the moment when one’s habituated patterns collide against new modes of thinking that develop from a new moment in time. In this way, she underscores a space of continual confrontation between old habits and new thinking, or what she calls “competition”—a healthy use of conflict in its ongoing fueling of new ideas.

However, the fact that referentiality is more apparent in Loy’s work is not an indication that she complies, in any complete sense, with communicative systems. As Peter Quartermain posits, Loy both undermines the conventional English sentence as well as “seeks severely to control connotation” (85). In other words, while Loy disrupts and frustrates reading norms, thereby, creating the need for self-reflexivity and reader participation, she is also invested in directing the reading to specific semantic possibilities associated to a social-political critique. Rachael Potter in Modernism and Democracy: Literary Culture 1900-1930 also refers to Loy’s use of referentiality, stating, in a comparison to Stein, that her work dislodges expectations “less in a linguistic sense” and more with a focus on “the biological body” (178). I add a nuance to Potter’s claim. Loy does emphasize the biological body (both through her focus on maternity and her criticism of gender norms). However, her work also functions profoundly on the level of linguistic performance and reveals that paying attention to linguistic choices can affirm
the socio-political message referred to in the poem, making for a stronger impact on readers.

The effect of Loy’s poetry is studied and confrontational, requiring the reader to explore the source of discomfort and to face the challenge of dealing with unsatisfied expectations. Loy believes that this ability to deal creatively with the irritation of unmet entrenched patterns is particularly crucial for the modern world in which continual change is constant and unavoidable. She feels that the old Victorian paradigm fails because it attempts to reinforce and overly determine established constructs of gender, race, and class. This, according to Loy, in “International Psycho-Democracy” (1919), leads to moralistic and polarized ways of thinking and being, which can easily escalate into international turmoil, as witnessed in World War I. Loy echoes Stein’s notion of insistence—in which reading and writing are inextricably connected to the body and subjectivity—by highlighting a praxis that is not dependent on hierarchical patterns, requiring the reader’s immediate and embodied response. However, Loy extends Stein by challenging the reader ideationally as well as linguistically. Loy does this through an antagonistic stance, working to undermine a reader’s underlying belief system in regard to gender and class. In a close reading of “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,” I draw attention to the way in which the poem demands extreme concentration as lines are molded to relay multiple, yet purposeful relations. She carefully chooses words and tropes, applying their multiple meanings to further highlight her project. In this way, new perceptions arise from a sense of the “para-syntactic” a form of writing that “slows the reading down to intense observation” (Quartermain 76). The depth at which the reader
must be involved in the para-syntactic writing amplifies Loy’s confrontational approach as she puts into question ingrained social norms.

As others have mentioned, Loy’s gender critique was many times aimed at the conceptualizing tendencies of the male-Anglo avant-garde. For instance, she highlights the inconsistency in Futurists’ “revolutionary” ideas that reinforced conventional gender roles. She argues that to remain in conceptual thinking, that is, in this example, to exchange bourgeois ideas with revolutionary concepts without facing and challenging entrenched norms, one cannot promote change in any significant way. However, despite Loy’s resistance to egoist-based notions of the male avant-garde, she, like Stein, utilized male high-modernists’ ideas regarding the notion of artistic genius. Yet their positions as women striving to be recognized in a male world complicate their egoist stance. Loy’s interpretation of genius results in a vanguardism (in her extreme views intended to wake women up to the reality of their situation), while Stein’s results in a totalitarianism (in her attitude toward writers and artists who did not agree with her and/or questioned her authority). Nevertheless, their function as women “geniuses” significantly distinguishes them from their male counterparts and sheds light on their theories that involve constructive discord and the disruption of the habitual. Both authors are placed in a dynamic of conflict in the sense that their attraction to egoist ideas works in opposition to their desire for acceptance or inclusion in male artistic circles (Loy) and male world of publishing (Stein). I argue that this opposing dynamic in their lives is what differentiates them from their Anglo-male counterparts and is the driving force behind their interest in identity, time, and perception that underlie their understanding of repetition with a difference. This provides Loy and Stein a way to align themselves with the male high-
modernist in regard to linguistic fragmentation, while at the same time allows them to critique the conceptualizing and hierarchical inclinations of their male counterparts.

As a student of James, Stein’s understanding of insistence, as I demonstrate in chapter two, can be linked directly to his notion of the self in the transitional movement through time as he articulates in “The Self” (Briefer Course 165). While there is no explicit relation between Loy and James, I speculate that she would have been exposed to similar ideas of consciousness through an intellectual atmosphere that pervaded the early years of the twentieth century. Bryony Randall, in her discussion of Henri Bergson and James, comments on how the “two figures whose engagement with the question of temporality and, in particular, the origin of temporality within the human subject were highly influential in shaping the intellectual climate” of the 1920’s. She underlines Mark Antliff’s statement that “Henri Bergson was ‘arguably the most celebrated thinker of his day,’ and describes the enormous interest that Bergson’s theories aroused in his weekly lectures, drawing ‘an educated public so numerous that it spilled out of the lecture hall.’”

Furthermore, Loy could have been exposed to ideas of perception and temporality through Stein. As Carolyn Burke points out, Loy had read and was impressed with Stein as early as 1912. Burke goes on to note Loy’s remark regarding how Stein pressed the reader “close to the insistence of [her subjects] existence.” Burke, in particular, notes Loy’s interest in Stein’s emphasis on difference. She states, “[I]t was to the variation, the differences within sameness that [Loy] responded—‘the startling dissimilarity in the aesthetic denouement of our standardized biology’” (198). There is no evidence of Loy responding to James’s work per se; however, the underlying premise of his ideas were available through Bergson and the writers and artists who were attentive to the new

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47 See Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, 32
philosophies of the fin de siècle. The Jamesian lens becomes useful in depicting how Loy adds to Stein in her articulation and focus on difference as a way to resist the standardization of a subject’s “biology.” This is particularly apparent in her challenge of bourgeois woman on issues of sex and gender as well as her male contemporaries for their conceptual thinking and use of categorical systems in relation to the mind/body split.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis posits that Loy unsettled categorical distinctions in the mind/body binary through claiming a “radical identity of sexual mother” (DuPlessis 64). She places Loy in a matrix of arguments surrounding the early-twentieth century birth control movement as well as emphasizes her attraction and resistance to Futurism. Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” has strong Futurist leanings, in part due to its eugenicist implications. For example she states, “Every woman of superior intelligence should realize her race-responsibility by producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit degenerate members of her sex” (*Lost LB* 153). While the statement is alarming in light of both European fascism and aspects of the American early twentieth-century birth control movement, its vagueness, as Duplessis points out, makes it difficult to judge. Loy is unclear as to the terms of “superior” and “unfit,” and implies that the “degenerate” are mainstream women, who maintain the status quo (DuPlessis 63). However, Loy also resisted the misogynist tendencies of the Futurists and their understanding of maternity as the condition by which sons are produced to fight the revolution. At the same time, she rejects notions purported by the Social purity movement, a dominant voice in the birth control movement that upheld bourgeois notions of morality and saw childbirth as the only justification for the sexual act. Loy instead creates a radical notion of maternity that
involves intelligent women like herself, who can think beyond established bourgeois norms and, thusly, are able to play a leading role in leveling gender discrepancies through their role as mothers (DuPlessis 63). Janet Lyon elaborates on the idea of Loy’s maternal poetics in a reading of her poem “Parturition” (1914), stating that Loy “recasts maternity as an intellectual complex which converts the experience of the body into supersensate consciousness. Maternity is thusly not delimited to domesticity but a form of artistic transcendence. It is an act of what might be called, in an alternative lexicon, “genius’” (Lyon 387).

I base my argument on DuPlessis’ and Lyon’s notion of Loy’s female embodied poetics and link it to Jamesian pragmatism which is, fundamentally, a philosophy of embodied experience. While DuPlessis and Lyon focus on Loy’s early work in relation to the Futurists, I expand their ideas to include her later text, “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” (c. 1925), in relation to the American Dada movement. The particular element in Loy’s maternal poetics significant to her later work is her analogy of labor as the site of generative discord. In “International Psycho-Democracy” (1919) Loy also articulates a definition of struggle that is procreant. She advocates for a paradigm based on a transitional movement in which the use of conflict on a moment to moment basis is the source of renewal (“beneficent spontaneities”) (Last Lunar 278, 279). Loy’s reassessment of struggle responds and offers alternatives to the concept of conflict as understood in binary systems. In reference to World War I, she registers her dismay at the polarization caused by overriding conceptual thinking that can easily escalate a difference of opinion to international war. She wants to highlight her mobile and generative understanding of
discord as a way to deal with human difference in order to sustain political peace through its recourse to construction rather than destruction.

I demonstrate how Loy’s idea of “Psycho-Democracy” distinguishes her from Pound’s categorical dismissal of democratic ideas. Both modernists distrusted the rise of mass democracy at the turn of the last century; however, Loy provides new possibilities that become evident through the Jamesian methodological lens. The democratic alternative in “Psycho-Democracy” unsettles “fixed concepts” (imposed social structures that are assumed to be truth) through a transitional movement involving ongoing productive conflict. This allows for, according to Loy, constructive debate and the reassessment of social norms as a way to continually adjust old structures to accommodate the new historical moment in time. The systematic paradigm exhibited in the revolutionary vanguardism of, for instance, the Futurists (whose violent avant-garde rhetoric displaced the old with new fascist systems) as well as Pound (who categorically rejected democracy) is translated into an understanding of (r)evolutionary vanguardism.48 The (r)evolutionary vanguardism functions in a similar manner as Jamesian subjectivity, in which the subject is in a relational engagement with contexts in the ongoing transitional moment. This critique of systematicity that is tied to her notion of the maternal and generative conflict is also evoked in her involvement with the American Dada movement. For example, the polarized representations of gender within the movement in the first few years of the 1920’s were played out between Marcel Duchamp’s intellectual Dada and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's embodied

48 Also see Elisabeth Frost, “Mina Loy’s ‘Mongrel’ Poetics,” p. 154.
Dada or “physical manifestos.”49 Loy utilizes her translation of conflict as a source of regeneration by placing Duchamp’s intellectual Dada in opposition to the Baroness’ embodied Dada to create a poetics in which writing and reading (activities of the mind) become physically engaged through readers’ participation and performance. Moreover, Loy employs her notion of constructive conflict as a dynamic in her poetry, what I call her poetics of constructive collision, through challenging readers both linguistically and ideationally. She takes a confrontational stance, eliciting provocation by unsettling social norms associated with issues related to gender as well as by dislodging routines inherent in communicative systems.50

While DuPlessis and Lyon articulate and elaborate on the ideas evident in Loy’s poems regarding her maternal politics, I want to emphasize how her ideas of the maternal function in her poetics on the level of language in a performative. While others have addressed textuality in Loy, I stress that there is a fundamental and inextricable link between her political ideas and use of language that relates to her female Jamesian notion of embodied experience.51 In a close reading of “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” I

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The Baroness used her body as artistic material for her art. For instance, she was often seen wearing a bustle furnished with a taillight.

50 Peter Quartermain in “’The Tattle of Tongueplay’: Mina Loy’s Love Songs,” gestures to this double emphasis in Loy. He states, Loy denies “linearity and hierarchies of the sort found in the conventional English sentence” and “neutralize[s] the sense of a unifying central voice”; however, she also “seeks severely to control connotation” (81, 85).

51 See: Peter Quartermain, “’The Tattle of Tongueplay’: Mina Loy’s Love Songs,” Marjorie Perloff, “English As A ‘Second’ Language: Mina Loy’s Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,” Rachel Potter,
demonstrate how Loy employs her notion of generative conflict evident in “Parturition” and “International Psycho-Democracy” through an interruption of language norms while drawing attention to political concerns. Loy’s poetics of constructive collision, functioning both on the level of ideas and linguistic performance, resists the assumption that political content is accessible only through referential or narrative language. Her work demonstrates that an exploration into her use of syntactic and narrative disruption further highlights and heightens the ethical issues raised in her work. Reading Loy through Jamesian pragmatism offers a way to comprehend the indissoluble link between her textual practices and her political, gender informed, stance. Pragmatism’s notion of the movement of consciousness and its refusal of Western Metaphysic attachment to systematicity reveals how Loy: 1) unsettles the hierarchical tendencies of the male avant-garde, 2) thinks through issues affecting women and articulates possible solutions for a more equitable society, and 3) integrates her ideas of the maternal with an embodied praxis, providing readers practice in resisting hierarchical mechanisms fundamental to both language and gender.

**Individualism and Psycho-Democracy**

In 1917 Loy wrote “The Artist and the Public,” an essay that addressed the categorical and ranking systems inherent in traditional art. Instead of such systems, she called for art’s “democratically simple beginnings” (*Last Lunar* 285). The essay was written for the literary magazine the *Blind Man*, a single issue that consisted of a collection of essays compiled by the Arensberg circle during the Society of Independent

Artists Show. The contributors, artists who exhibited in the show, wanted to explain their position in regards to a controversy that dealt with the hierarchical stance of the conventional art world. The cover displayed a bourgeois looking gentleman being led by a seeing eye dog through the art exhibit—implying that a canine was better equipped than the upper classes in understanding the new art (Burke 231). The independents saw themselves as the mutt leading the bourgeoisie through an artistic revolution. They believed the revolution would undo preconceived notions of styles, motifs, and subjects as well as guide the uninitiated back to a more simple and basic approach to seeing—untainted by proscriptive systems. These concerns are echoed in Loy’s contribution to the magazine. For instance, she states, “[t]he only trouble with the Public is education.” The artist, in contrast, is uneducated and “sees IT for the first time; he can never see the same thing twice.” The public naturally knows the artificiality of imposed artistic values (“It is not concerned with curved Fawn’s legs and marline-twirled scarves of artistic imagination or with allegories of life with thorn-skewered eyes”). Furthermore, the public

52 A group of artists and writers founded by Walter and Louise Arensberg. The Arensbergs, beginning in 1912, bought numerous modernist paintings and opened their apartment as a salon to the avant-garde in New York City.

53 Two points of contention inflamed the debate. Duchamp, as the head of the hanging committee, announced that as a move toward democracy in the arts, all artists would be accepted. Additionally, the organization of artists’ works would be alphabetized to avoid hierarchical prioritizing based on traditional notions of European Art. The second debate concerned Duchamp’s own piece, Fountain, a signed urinal placed on a pedestal. This work was submitted to test the submission committee’s commitment to the Independents call for democracy. The committee failed Duchamp’s test in its refusal of the sculpture, however, a photograph of the ready-made by Alfred Stieglitz had a prominent place in the Blind Man (Burke 225-227).
“knew before the Futurists that life is jolly noise and a rush and sequence of ample reactions.” However, the public has “unnaturally acquired prejudice,” that is, education has blinded the public. For Loy, education—the habit of seeing through predetermined ideas of art, or a habit of seeing “the same thing twice”—demands an art that is only acknowledgeable by way of “diluted comparisons.” The educator wants to forget the “democratically simple beginnings” of art and instead “wallows in [a] grey stickiness” that has no defined beginning or end. In this polemic, Loy speaks as a vanguard artist who has the intention of leading the educated public back to its uneducated roots. Loy addresses the dangers of abstraction in a way that is comparable to Pound’s critique of inflated language and economics (Last Lunar 285). Her phrase “wallows in grey stickiness”—suggests a substance that prevents one from directly relating to an object—reflects Pound’s dictum “go in fear of abstraction” and his imagist tenet “direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective” (Literary Essays 4-5). The egoist notion of the individual for both artists is manifested through an emphasis on the importance of one’s attention to the particulars. Pound understood these ideas in art as relating to the individual in the world through his attack on capitalism—specifically usury in its inflationary aspect, which like loose flabby writing (an image similar to Loy’s phrase “grey stickiness” in its connotation to vague indirection), falsifies and betrays. Cutting the fat out of the market goes hand in hand with tightening up language. He understood inflation (soft money, that is, money that evades specificity) in its generalizing capacity and abstraction as a crime against society. In other words, for Pound, societal concerns and art were fundamentally intertwined. He understood economics functioning in history in the “damnable activity of bureaucracy in power (materially in the power in the
editorial offices, publishing houses etc.)” (*Literary Essays* 76). According to Pound, presses and publishing houses determine what books should be printed, and in this way, capitalism controls what kind of books end up in circulation. He felt capitalism was detrimental to literature and that one cannot discuss literature without including the influence of the economy—“It becomes at his point increasingly difficult,” he states, “to keep economic discussions out of the narrative” (86).

Loy also refers to the idea that economics and art are interconnected in her comments on what it means to be educated versus uneducated in “The Artist and the Public.” Education falsifies an individual’s direct response to the work of art and creates illusions that presuppose criteria on the work as a way to promote the approbation of certain styles, creating a category of “great art” in order to justify sales. Loy also exemplifies these egoist ideas of the individual in relation to economics through her concerns about gender. She understands there are psychological determinants created by larger social pressures that “educate” women into believing in illusions that commit them to second-class citizenry. These social constructs place an artificial value on women (e.g.: privileging of virginity—as a way to achieve the status of wealth through marriage54) that make them a commodity in an economic system that has no regard for the individual woman and her interests, or her concrete value. Loy’s solution to the “wallowing of grey stickiness” that dominates art—like Pound’s critique of abstractions and his notion of the direct treatment of the ‘thing’—is to find the “democratically simple beginnings” which cannot be abstracted or categorically systemized. However, Loy’s choice to articulate the importance of the particular through the phrase “democratically simple beginnings” is the

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54 Loy, *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, 269
point at which their arguments begin to diverge. Although both authors’ arguments revolve around a profound distrust of mass democracy, Pound doesn't articulate nuances between different kinds of democratic possibilities; he goes against his own philosophy of particularity by falling back on abstraction and conceptual thinking through generalization. References to democracy in Pound are for the most part dismissive and negative. For instance he states, “[The artist] has dabbled in democracy and he is now done with that folly.” Rather than considering democratic alternatives to mass democracy, he makes the assumption and insinuates that all forms of democracy are guilty of his accusations.

As Rachel Potter explains, many high modernists at the turn of the last century were “uneas[y] with new political mechanisms of democracy” (Potter 7). Debates about democracy were concerned with whether “liberal values would be undermined by modernity and mass democracy” (5-6). Artists and writers were questioning the way the government was evolving prior to World War I from a restricted democracy to a democracy based on a corporate mass media, which later, after the war, became firmly established. As Loy questions in 1921, “What happens to our belief in equality when the masses are ‘hypnotized’ by the power of a mass media controlled by warmongering capitalists?” (7). The controversy surrounding the Independent Artist Show was informed by these debates, which responded to the gradual shift in democracy from restricted to mass democracy. Loy and Pound were aligned in wanting to determine the importance of the individual and particularity in art in an era that seemed to increasingly deny the individual through corporate power and manipulation. They both articulate similar

arguments in regard to the dangers of abstraction and underline how those in power use abstraction to keep the public blind to the hierarchical imbalance. However, while Pound decides that democracy must be abandoned, Loy entertains alternatives and envisions new democratic possibilities that have aspects comparable to a pragmatist philosophy.

Loy’s critique of abstraction includes a psychological component to the issue of economic manipulation. For example, in “International Psycho-Democracy,” she explains that the minority in power control the disenfranchised majority through a “strategical” use of social ideas, translating them into ideals. Social ideals created by the minority are similar to that of plastic material from which the minority can manipulate the actions of the majority for the minorities benefit or “supremacy.” While the minority justify their decisions by insisting that everyone should sacrifice for the benefit of all, in actuality, the minority reap the benefits with the help of the unwitting majority who are not aware of the unethical maneuvering. Loy’s critique of mass democracy differs from Pound’s in that her assessment is driven by psychological underpinnings—a minority controls the majority by creating social ideals that form a subject’s psychological relation to the world. While these psychologically-based ideals seem to benefit the majority, they actually do service to the minority. For Loy, in a Jamesian-like fashion, articulates that

For instance she states, “Power is a secret society of the minority, whose hold on the majority lies in the esoteric or actual value of social ideas. This esoteric value is unrevealed to the majority, being: 1) The transmutability of the strategical ideas of the minority into social ideals for the majority. 2) The value of social ideals as a means of conserving the majority as a plastic psychic material with which Power molds the contours of its own supremacy. 3) The value of the exoteric or public representation of social ideals as limiting the unit for the advantage of a collectivity, while in reality insuring the advantage of the minority with the consent of the majority” (Loy, Last LB, 280).
the solution lies in a shift in “collective consciousness.” For example she asserts, "The Tediousness of Human Evolution is owing:// To the tendency of ideas to outlast their origin i.e.: The tendency of human/ institutions to outlast the psychological condition from which they arose./Psycho-Democracy considers social institutions as structural forms in collective consciousness which are subject to the same evolitional transformation as collective consciousness itself, and that our social institutions of today will cause future generations to roar with laughter" (Last Lunar 278). In other words, according to Loy, the problem with contemporaneous politics is the tendency to create overriding systems (“the tendency of ideas to outlast their origin”) that ignore shifts in consciousness influenced by historical pressures. Loy understands "evolitional transformation” as a way to propose a perpetual auto-critique of social institutions, rather than confirming institutions as fixed forms or ideals that subjects accept without question. “Evolitional transformation” is a process in which current psychological shifts are in constant interchange with those institutional ideals, creating something new as relations between existing social norms are put in tension with new ideas and contexts. These changes are so persistently evolving, according to Loy, that when we look back on history we will find previous relations uproariously humorous. Loy’s “evolitional transformation” then is similarly aligned with Jamesian ideas of consciousness and its continual relational engagement with contexts, conditions, and ideas in its movement through time.
Loy further refines this sense of mobile relationality by calling for a new and more productive way to deal with difference than resorting to the polarized tactics evident in World War I. 57 She states:

This thing called Life which seems to be the impact of luminous bodies, knocking sparks off one another in chaos, will be transformed through Psycho-Democratic evolution from war between good and evil i.e. (between beneficent and painful chance) to a competition between different kinds of good: (beneficent spontaneities). 58

Loy, in this quote, references World War I as an example in which a difference of opinion has been escalated to the point of polarized conflict between perceived notions of “good and evil.” What is particularly disturbing about this post-World War I awareness for Loy is how "men and women …wear out their organisms with no reward but the maintenance of those organisms, imperfectly functioning—[that is, men and women maintaining status-quo live dull lives, imperfect because that status quo demanded by social ideals cannot accommodate the particularities of the individual]—and …this social condition [is] safeguarded and preserved by the blowing up of other millions of human organisms…” (Last Lunar 279). The “Criminal Lunacy” of the good versus evil mentality of her current historical moment is caused by concretized ideas and institutions that do not change over time—that is, there is no accommodation for evolution in which

57 Loy began the first drafts of “International Psycho-Democracy” as newspapers reported on Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” that had been adopted by what was to be the League of Nations. Burke suggests that her text, with its fourteen headings, was inspired by Wilson’s plan “a time when imaginative remappings of the world seemed possible” (Burke 270).

58 Loy, The Last Lunar Baedeker, 279.
changes in consciousness play a role in adjusting social institutions to fit the new moment. The calcification of these ideas, she suggests, becomes so entrenched and polarizing that humans are willing to kill other humans in order to maintain the illusion that their ideas are right and anyone who disagrees is wrong. In this combative mentality—whether in embryonic form as an individual perspective or escalated to national and international relations—one (individual or nation) is always a victim to chance. When others are not in agreement, “painful chance” is created; when others happen to be in agreement, there is a sense of “beneficent chance.” This passive relation to the world—in which one accepts determined notions that categorically define right/wrong polarities without questioning or considering alternatives based on new temporal ideas and conditions—is, for Loy, the core of international turmoil. Psycho-Democracy, however, takes one out of polarized (right/wrong) concepts by using difference to create an active engagement that applies conflict as a constructive force in its fertile engagement with change and difference (“competition between different kinds of good”). Rather than using difference to reinforce polarized thinking which has—through its us/them mentality—led the world to war, Loy calls for the use of conflict on a moment by moment basis. This perspective has an underlying productive and generative dynamism that undermines systematicity and its predilection for polarization and the binary.

Loy’s translation of conflict from categorical systems to an understanding of struggle that has to do with an ongoing “evolutional,” active, and productive engagement with difference is linked to her early work in relation the maternal. As Janet Lyon discusses in a reading of “Parturition” (1914), Loy refers to the body of the woman in
labor as a site in which pain and the will’s struggle against it produces a contest between mind and body. The contest has constructive implications in its “conversion into heightened self-awareness” (Lyon 388-89). During labor, the body that experiences the immediacy of extreme pain challenges the will’s (mind) survival mechanism, which wants to bring the body back to stasis or a site safe from discomfort. The struggle is constructive because the body in the immediacy of the moment jolts the mind out of familiar zones of comfort thereby offering possibilities for new perspectives and “self-awareness.” The Jamesian lens can be used to comprehend Loy’s perception of generative conflict and the contest between mind and body. For example, in “The Self” James identifies two aspects of the self. One is the “me” who is concerned with elements of survival such as the material conditions of life—the body, clothes, family, home, property, and wealth. The other is the “I,” the part that is conscious and located at the crest of the wave in the “the passing state of consciousness.” The “I” negotiates impressions of things in the world incorporating a particular fragment of the “me” (recent past, distant past) as one of the aggregates in the relational moment. The memories of the “me” create an intimacy to the “I” who perceives sameness; however the sameness is not complete. The new impressions of the moment are added to the aggregate which changes the whole continuous and transitional flux of the “me” of then and the “me” of now. James is clear to point out that the sense of sameness is not to be “treated as a sort of metaphysical or absolute Unity in which all differences are overwhelmed” (180). The “I” is conscious only in the single pulse of the stream as it traverses new stimuli in the new

moment, integrating fragments of the "me" with stimuli from the environment in the passing moment.

For James, consciousness is a process in which the “I,” the aspect of the self that is in the immediate and embodied passing moment, disrupts (or contests) the “me’s” survival driven habits of protection by placing the “me” in relational contexts with other impressions in the passing moment. This runs parallel to the dynamic in Loy’s maternal poetics in which, the immediate and embodied response of an individual (body) contests the mind’s desire for stasis and the comfort of habituated familiarity. As discussed previously, she similarly refers to the struggle between mind and body as an alternative to conceptual thinking (mind) and its tendency to calcify ideas, creating stasis through habitual norms (or status quo). Furthermore, she encourages a continual reassessment of social norms (“social ideals”) or habits, in which the stasis of those norms is unsettled by the immediate and embodied response of an individual in a moment of time (Last Lunar 290).

Loy’s notion of “Psycho-Democracy” yokes her maternal poetics with an understanding of consciousness that is relational and mobile. She emphasizes the role of discord in this transitional process and stresses the powerful potentialities in creative conflict or “competition between different kinds of good.” Her idea is not to deny the destructive “belligerent” potential of human nature but to “establish a new social system for [its] utilization.” In other words, according to Loy, the point is not to rid ourselves of conflicts; rather she wants to develop our ability to use difference on an ongoing basis, enabling active thinking rather than a passive (either “painful change” or “beneficent change”), habituated relation to the world. According to Loy, this ability would provide
the conditions for real peace because engagement with difference and change would be a way of life. She felt that this practice of dealing actively with ongoing conflict would curb the hierarchical tendency to create dualities that can easily escalate to polarized extremes. From Loy’s post World War I perspective, she came to understand that a new relation to conflict was required in order to get the public out of a “hypnotic war lust” mentality (282). She felt that society needed to develop from a period of polarization to a period of “compound existence” in which difference, conflict, and change are acknowledged and practiced on a day to day moment to moment basis (276). Moreover, her redefinition of discord extends to her critique of male high modernist on issues of gender and can be seen as an underlying dynamic in her involvement with the Dada movement.

Dada, Gender, and Psycho-Democracy

In 1920, the year Loy returned from Mexico, the Dada movement that had been initiated in Europe during World War I was well-established in New York City (Burke 283). Loy would have been drawn to American Dada considering her disillusionment, at this point in her life, with Futurism’s fascination with war and her insights into human consciousness. While American Dada incorporated Marinetti’s words-in-freedom poetics, it denounced its glorification of war; and while Dada had a political agenda it “reacted less to war and political institutions and more to art and aesthetic institutions.”

Furthermore, the way in which Dada defied aesthetic institutions was similar to Loy’s attack on internalized (psychological) social pressures. For instance, the concept of the ready-made is designed as a revolutionary catalyst that propels the reader/viewer into

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self-reflexive change. Duchamp’s *Fountain* disputed perceptions of art and, if taken into consideration, humorously encouraged an investigation into one’s preconceived notions or internalization of cultural norms in relation to art. However, as Susan Dunn suggests, Loy resisted mainstream American Dada as exemplified in the highly conceptual work of Duchamp and Man Ray. She instead negotiated the “embodiments of Dada”—Arthur Cravan’s and Baroness Elsa von Fretag-Loringhoven's “physical manifestos” in order “to situate her own complex maneuverings within the Dada movement in terms of the mind/body split” (147). While Dunn highlights both Cravan’s and the Baroness’s influence on Loy’s understanding of embodiment in relation to art, for the purposes of this reading, I stress the Baroness’ impact on Loy in terms of their similar position as women artists.

It is unclear whether Loy and the Baroness actually met; however, it is unlikely they did not know of each other. The Baroness arrived in New York City in 1914 and became part of the Greenwich Village scene in 1918, playing a major role in the Dada circle. For instance, Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson, editors of *The Little Review*, wrote that the Baroness was “the first American dada…the only one living anywhere who dressed dada, loves dada, lives dada.”⁶¹ Both Loy and the Baroness were close friends with Djuna Barnes and both attended the Arensberg salon. In addition, both had poems published in the 1920 issue of the September-December issue of the *Little Review*. While the Baroness has historically received little credit for her contribution to Dada, by the time Loy returned to New York, the Baroness was reputed as the “mother” of Dada

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movement. The Baroness’s embodied ready-mades would have interested Loy in their commentary on women’s social roles, such as wearing a birdcage with a canary around her neck in order to make the connection between dress codes and imprisonment.

Similarly, to mock the corset and bustle the Baroness attached tea balls to her torso and wore a bustle with a taillight; and on another occasion, to signify women’s subservient role to men, she wore a coal scuttle as a hat. The Baroness radically disputed the separation of art and life. She promenaded half naked, decorated her face with postage stamps, painted her lips black, powered her face yellow, and was arrested so many times “she learned [how] to leap from patrol wagons with such agility that policemen let her go in admiration.” It was all art: her body as ready-made that she displayed in the street and public gatherings, her arrests, and her escapes (Sawelson-Gorse 445).

There are two reasons Loy would have been drawn to the Baroness: 1) they both challenged their male modernist counterparts on their use of binary frameworks, and 2) they focused their critique of gender norms on the body. As for the former, the Baroness questioned Duchamp and William Carlos Williams on the gulf between their “revolutionary work and conservative bourgeois life praxis” (Sawelson-Gorse 453). For Loy, it was a critique of male avant-gardists’ use of conceptualization and their categorical distinctions in relation to gender. As Lyon asserts, this critique can be seen in Loy’s disenchantment with Futurists and their sexual politics, in particular, their “taxonomical constructions” of the sexes. Loy instead highlighted the “deferred spaces between ‘woman’ and ‘man’ and so unhinge[d] Futurist certitude about the ontologically gendered foundations of avant-garde poetics” (Lyon 385). Furthermore, her criticism of male avant-gardists included her dissatisfaction with the way their “new revolutionary”

ideas created new systems that overrode the immediate moment. Take for instance, the last two stanzas of “Human Cylinders” a poem in which she metaphorically speaks about relationships between men and women, written during her affair with Giovanni Papini (c. 1915).  

Simplifications of men
In the enervating dusk
Your indistinctness
Serves me the core of the kernel of you
When in the frenzied reaching out of intellect to intellect
Leaning brow to brow communicative
Over the abyss of the potential
Concordance of respiration
Shames
Absence of corresponding between the verbal sensory
And reciprocity
Of conception
And expression
Where each extrudes beyond the tangible
One thin pale trail of speculation
From among us we have sent out

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64 See Burke, 182.
Into the enervating dusk
One little whining beast
Whose longing
Is to slink back to antediluvian burrow
And one elastic tentacle of intuition
To quiver among the stars

The impartiality of the absolute
Routs the polemic
Or which of us
Would not
Receiving the holy-ghost
Catch it and caging
Lose it
Or in the problematic
Destroy the Universe

With a solution

Referring to the “simplification of men,” who in “frenzied reaching out of intellect to intellect” miss out on the embodied, sensory particulars of the world in their “[a]bsence of corresponding between verbal sensory/ And reciprocity/ Of conception/ And expression.” This simplification of men, that uses “the impartiality of the absolute” (conceptual in the way it treats everything as if it were the same, rather than as individual particulars) leads to “[Routing] the polemic.” Then once the answer is received
(“Receiving the holy-ghost”), they “catch it and caging/ lose it/ or in the problematic/ destroy the Universe/ with a solution.” In this poem, Loy identifies the absolute—that is, the use of generalizing concepts—with the “simplification of men” and continues to suggest that the absolute might aid in determining or uncovering a controversy ("Routs the polemic"). The process might find a way to solve a problem; however, since a polemic—in its abstracted and polarized nature (as an aggressive attack of opinion on another)—cannot be in the world of movement, sensation, and change, the best it can do is freeze the solution in time (“catch it” and cage it). This suggests that the solution is lost (“Lose it”) to the embodied and sensational world of living entities. In this way, a polemic (a generalizing concept), used as an answer to a problem, will destroy (deaden) what it intends to solve—even when one approves of the solution, such as the new notions on art asserted by Marinetti, Pound, and Duchamp). Loy implies that concepts, no matter how worthy or intelligent, separate us from the physicality of the world. The “simplicity of men” or men who create conceptual solutions, destroy any chance of “correspond[ence]” with the real (embodied) world. According to Loy, their inability to get out of conceptual thinking exposes a contradiction in their art, in that their ideas (polemic)—that stress the democratic, individual particulars of the world—are reversed by their use of the absolute which is based on conceptual and hierarchical principles.

The second way that Loy and the Baroness are aligned (their critique of gender norms that focuses on the body) is apparent in Loy’s work as designer and crafts person. Between 1910 and 1930, she created fashion designs and made various hand crafted objects which included hats and lampshades. While these designs and crafts were not as extreme as the Baroness’s expression of Dada, they had a similar quirky ready-made
quality, in particular her lampshades that look like hats and hats that look like lamp shades.\textsuperscript{65} Furthermore, her fashion designs rejected the imprisoning styles of corsets, bustles, and petticoats that shaped women into molds, underscoring their role as reproducers by accentuating hips and bust. Moreover, as a fan of Isadora Duncan, she created clothing that liberated and gave expression to the vitality of women’s bodies. Loy also followed the lead of French designer Paul Poiret,\textsuperscript{66} whose designs neutralized woman’s curves, creating the long lean look of the flapper, deemphasizing the role of reproduction, suggesting that women have the potential for more than the nurturing of progeny. As Susan Dunn points out, Loy knew very well how fashion can both “control the body through regulating social convention” as well as “transform styles and, at least locally, subvert cultural regimes.”\textsuperscript{67}

However, what Loy may have found troublesome about the Baroness was her focus on the body in the context of early twentieth-century gender ideologies. Loy, whose beauty was a source of public comment, may have felt inclined to down-play attention to her physical appearance and emphasize her intellect in order to underline the fact that she had a sharp mind.\textsuperscript{68} In this sense, Loy was placed in a dilemma. She understood the importance of demonstrating the powerful way in which subjugation was perpetuated on


\textsuperscript{66} Marisa Januzzi in “Dada Through the Looking Glass, Or: Mina Loy’s Objective” suggests that it was the other way around—that Loy influenced Poiret. She quotes Stephen Haweis, “[Poiret’s] first creations were to me recognizable as Gudrun’s or Mina’s last year’s frocks” (Sawelnson-Gorse 591).


\textsuperscript{68} Dunn, Susan.”Opposed Aesthetics: Mina Loy, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde,” 147.
women through their bodies; however, as an artist negotiating a position in avant-garde circles, she may have felt the need to stress her intelligence. She needed approval in a community that would have easily dismissed her mind because of her body. The question she faced was how to get out of binary systems that divide and rank. As radical as the Baroness was—and despite her desire to eliminate the split between mind/body and art/life—she reinforced polarized gender ideologies that associate females with the body and males with the mind in her body performance art. I argue that the Jamesian lens provides a way to understand how Loy used constructive conflict to maneuver between Duchamp’s intellectual Dada and the Baroness’ physical expression of Dada. Loy takes the emphasis off the actual body of the human being and instead emphasizes mobile relationality, similar to a Jamesian understanding of embodied consciousness. This understanding, as mentioned previously, involves the unsettling of habituated norms in a process between the aspect of the mind that is tied to survival mechanisms (“me”) and the part that can access an immediate and embodied relation to the world (“I”).

DuPlessis and Lyon in their discussion of Loy’s maternal politics and poetics primarily draw attention to the ideas that are manifested in her poems. While my argument is based on their analysis I want to push their assessment slightly further to demonstrate how Loy’s political notions relating to gender not only function ideationally but work to performatively engage the reader in those ideas. The performative, as an embodied or physical component in language, is particularly apparent in Loy’s dealings with the Dada movement in which she places Duchamp’s intellectualism in opposition to the Baroness’ material Dada to help her think through ways in which writing can be embodied. She develops a theory of writing, not unlike Jamesian notions of
consciousness, that is based on the movement of the mind as it is thrown out of established patterns through a moment to moment and physical encounter with the text. In her use of language, she employs her idea of regenerative conflict through dislodging the hierarchies of language. The displacement of those norms has the capacity to produce a visceral response from the reader (shock, irritation, nervousness). The physicality of unsettling routine encourages the reader to wake up and think beyond a passive relation to the text—a relation that is maintained by reading practices necessary in communicative systems. Like her idea of labor as a site of generative discord, the reader’s sensible and immediate response to the text jolts one out of habitual and conceptual (mind) processes—the body, then, contests the mind’s habituated predilection to passively accept established patterns. Her performative enacts the constructive discord that she refers to in “Parturition” and encourages the kind of active thinking she underscores in “International Psycho-Democracy,” in which the habitual is continually placed in conflict with the new moment in time. She provides readers practice in dealing with difference without resorting to categories and systems that, as she suggests, are foundational to gender and social norms.

One of the ways Loy accomplishes this is by intensifying an intellectual encounter with the reader. She creates work that is cerebrally challenging to the point that no one can question the agility of her mind. She goes in the opposite direction as a writer such as Stein, who initially seems to go to the extremes of “non-sense.” Loy, instead, goes to extremes of “making sense”; for instance, she frequently uses sophisticated Latinate diction, demanding a high-level of dexterity in communication skills. This produces work that is accessible only by way of rigorous study, and most often her work is not
comprehensible without a dictionary. Sense making occurs in Loy through an extremely erudite language that initially obscures meaning in its difficulty and turns to sense making through readers’ exploration, imaginative input, and associative processes (similar to Stein’s writing that turns to sense making through readers’ imaginative input and associative processes). Loy demonstrates the inseparability between mind and body in her poetics of constructive collision. One’s mind is challenged through traditional intellectual avenues (language usage/ need to reference dictionary) yet those avenues are taken to such an extreme that easy access to meaning based on a passive adherence to reading norms is frustrated—creating an immediate and physical response from the reader. Loy, in her poetry, is concerned with communicating ideas; however, rather than falling back on communicative systems, she engages the reader in an active examination that involves discovery rather than an explication of her ideas. Loy’s generative use of discord is centered on a tension between the disruption of communicative systems and a desire for reference. As Peter Quartermain observes, while Loy denies “linearity and hierarchies of the sort found in the conventional English sentence” as well as “neutralize[s] the sense of a unifying central voice,” she nevertheless, “seeks severely to control connotation” (81, 85). The reader is left to unearth and survey within Loy’s ideational frame of reference that is often concerned with issues of gender and class.

In comparing Loy to Stein, Rachel Potter states that Loy’s writing “seems to trace ‘intellection back to the embryo,’ less in a linguistic sense and more in a literal focus on the ‘animal woman’ or the biological body” (178). I would add a nuance to Potter’s argument. While Loy does deal literally with the world in her interest in addressing issues of the body, her work operates profoundly on the level of linguistic performance. Her
ideas and performative are inextricably connected through: 1) an enactment of her ideas relating to generative conflict, 2) the tension between the disruption of communicative systems and her desire to “severely control connotation,” and 3) a confrontational stance toward the reader in which she puts into question ingrained social norms. In the following close reading of “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,” I demonstrate how Loy dislodges systems of language in her application of extremely sophisticated language and use of multiple meanings in a web of interconnections. The intensity and depth at which the reader must be involved in the writing—in the struggle to make meaning as easy access is displaced—amplifies her political critique and urges readers to question their ingrain social patterns. Her poetics that is based on the notion of labor (maternal) and conflict is reflected in her ideas regarding discord in an ongoing “evolutional” movement and enacted as readers are confronted and challenged to rethink their perceptions of the world.

Constructive Collision and “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose”

Written in the mid-nineteen twenties—after she had developed her ideas in conjunction with, and resistance to, both Futurism and Dada—“Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” is an example of how Loy dismantles normative reading expectations through confrontational tactics within frames of reference. For instance, Loy treats the issue of consciousness in the semi-autographical, long poem as a topic of concern as well as through a performative. On the one hand, the poem’s characters Exodus, the English Rose (also referred to as Alice or Ada), Ova, Esua Penfold, and Colossus—who are reminiscent (respectively) of her father, mother, herself, husband (Stephen Haweis), and lost lover (Arthur Craven)—might lead one to identify the action and events of a “story-
line” in the poem to Loy’s experience. However, Loy associates each character to a group of people, rather than treating any of them as a fully developed individual. For example, Exodus, an Hungarian Jew is representative of the Jewish immigrant; the English Rose, of middle-class English Protestant women, who abide by traditional values; and Ova, of the formation of consciousness in childhood. Esua Penfold and Colossus are representative of the split in artistic consciousness at the turn-of-the nineteenth century between traditional values that reflected Victorian aesthetics and its counter movements such as Futurism and Dada. In her resistance to make a clear personal link to the characters, she disrupts normative autobiographical expectations that assume a direct correlation between author and the events portrayed. She puts into question the possibility of a “true” depiction of someone’s life. One gets the sense that Loy is making fun of the urge to evoke connections between characters and author in the way her abstraction of familial-like characters are, as Marjorie Perloff suggests, cartoonish (143). Readers are provided information that point to similarities between the characters in the poem and people in her life. However, the comic strip caricatures suggest that concepts and systems (i.e.: language norms) cannot reproduce—they can only provide superficial abstracted indicators of a life. Thwarting the habit of connecting signs to real human beings in the semi-autographical poem evokes a response that has the potential to fashion new thinking about writing in relation to lived experience. In this way, Loy critiques the notion that writing can represent things in the world and offers a way in which writing can involve the world without depending on a conceptual treatment of language. Rather she highlights how writing can be embodied as the body (physicality of having one’s routine habits dislodge) contests or puts into conflict the mind’s attempts at applying
habituated reading patterns. This inspires active rather than passive engagement as readers participate in the meaning making process on an ongoing basis through the text.

A strategy that Loy consistently utilizes to set the field for her poetics of constructive collision is her use of the “para-syntactic,” a form of writing that “slows the reading down to intense observation” (Quartermain 76). Loy achieves this, as mentioned previously, through her choice of extremely sophisticated language. Additionally, Loy plays with multiple meanings creating a web of interconnections between words which engage one in a studied, precise analysis. In this way, Loy dislodges normative hierarchies of language while directing the reading to specific frames of semantic reference. Take, for example, lines 2 and 3, “quadrate Rose/paradox-Imperial,” from the first stanza in the section, “English Rose”:

    Early English everlasting
        quadrate Rose
        paradox-Imperial
    trimmed with some travestied flesh
    tinted with bloodless duties       dewed
    with Lipton’s tea
    and grimed with crack-packed
    herd-housing
    petalling
    the prim gilt
    penetraria
    of a luster-scioned
The meaning of “quadrate Rose” is not immediately clear and requires further investigation. The common meaning for “quadrate” is square; it also refers to the heraldic cross which expands into a square at the juncture of the arms (OED). One definition of “herald” is an officer with the status of an ambassador, and, specifically in England, it refers to an official in charge of genealogies. Loy disrupts easy access to meaning by placing an unusual modifier in relation to the noun. The unconventional use of “quadrate” as a modifier for the flower, rose (especially in contrast to the familiar associations of love and beauty), requires the reader to slow down and consider possible implications for the particular word choice. As one explores various definitions, Loy’s project becomes clearer, but not without concerted effort and participation. For instance, the reference to religion (cross), as well as an ambassador, comments on the British Empire’s imperialistic and religious conquests; and the reference to an official in charge of genealogies comments on the English obsession with class—that one is born into a status of privilege, or one is not. The references to square in “quadrate,” wittily disparage these English traits by implying they are boxed in, or limited in some way. Loy, like Stein, radically unsettles normative linguistic expectations; however, unlike Stein, she shapes or fashions connections by engaging readers in a slowing down process that invites readers’ participation in a search that follows along specific lines of reference. Like a craftsperson she cuts and snips meticulously controlling connotation through a process that frustrates easy access.

The following line, “paradox-Imperial,” urges readers to slow down in: 1) its reversal of the normative modifier and noun order, 2) the fact that the “I” is capitalized
when typically the first letter of the second word in a hyphenated phrase is written in lower case, and 3) her curious way of making the two seemingly incongruous words one. (Other odd word combinations in the passage are: “travestied flesh,” “bloodless duties dewed,” “cracked-packed,” “herd-housing,” “prim gilt penetralia,” “luster-scioned core-crown”). The fact that the “i” in “paradox-Imperial” is capitalized suggests that Loy is referring to the British Empire, inviting the reader to connect English imperialism to a paradoxical status, in which, on the one hand, the culture seems to breed a sense of superiority and arrogance, while on the other hand, in reality, by the late-nineteenth century, the Empire was losing its superior grip on its conquest. In addition, reading “Imperial” with a lower case “i” along with the connotation of the British Empire in the uppercase “i,” one detects a critique in the meaning of “imperial” as “imperious” or “urgent.” The British Empire (Imperial) is in the state of urgent (imperial) paradox—a state that is in need of immediate attention. Loy adroitly manipulates language guiding or fashioning the reading within predetermined associations or frames of thinking. In this sense, one could say that while Stein explodes normative linguistic expectations that take one outside normative codes of comprehension, Loy implodes normative linguistic expectations in that she pushes conventions of language to the opposite extreme. Her manipulations of language that prevent easy access and necessitate struggle on the part of the reader are the result of meticulously place phrases that require the skillful use of linguistic and communicative conventions. Her lexical choices are often derived from erudite, difficult language and uncommon word combinations along with purposeful application of multiple meanings, halting easy communicative access and requiring effort and participation from readers. In other words, her extreme application and control of
directives in language interrupts normative linguistic expectations to the point that routine patterns can no longer be relied on. The mind and body interact through a generative discord. Habituated norms relating to reading are dislodged, creating a physical and immediate response from readers that unsettles the aspect of the mind tied to survival mechanisms. This has the potential to develop awareness regarding the limitation of routine—urging self-reflexivity and active thinking. Like Loy’s notion of “Psycho-Democracy”—that fosters ongoing conflict and auto-critique as a way to adjust entrenched social norms that are no longer applicable to the new historical moment—readers are encouraged to think beyond the habits associated to linguistic norms that tend to think for them and actively respond from their moment in time.

The integration of subject matter along with the dismantling of routine reading habits can also be seen in the way Loy produces a linguistic experience that parallels the issue of gender she references. Take for instance, lines 2-4: “that within the year/rises/the caryatid of an idea” in the section “Ova Begins to Take Notice” (135). Loy plays with the double meaning associated with “fashion” (to mold, shape, or alter as well as referring to prevailing custom or style in dress) as a way to emphasize the subjugation of women through the body. “[C]aryatid” (a supporting column that has the form of a draped female figure) elicits the trope of fashion in both senses of the word. Ova, as the caryatid of an idea, is partial, only part of a larger framework of beams. She is enslaved, pressed between two horizontal structures; she carries the weight of the structures above her (social pressures); and she is carved in the shape of a woman with traditional Greek attire. Even in Ova’s early developmental state, in the first year of her life, she is contained, trapped by history and the habituated patterns of those before her. Lines 5-9,
“Two elongations of its will/arm-crave the curious glare/virile/behind unravelable wire” refer to both the caryatid image and a nineteenth-century corset. The child’s curious glare is virile, energetic, vigorous yet like the caryatid image is trapped within the intersecting web of horizontal and vertical beams that represent a long history (from antiquity). Furthermore, this sense of entrapment and reference to “unravelable wire” depicts the function of the nineteenth-century corset (typically made of wire), which is the expected attire required of her in years to come, extending her imprisonment dating back to antiquity into the distant future.

The choice of the word “virile” in line 8 of the section is significant in its associations to the masculine. The “curious glare,” which seems to refer to an impulse that is not contaminated by social structures (in its aliveness), is male-like, suggesting that those masculine traits inside the female body have the tendency to become confined and inaccessible. The critique Loy makes here in line 8 and 9 is heightened by her choice of line breaks, “the curious glare/virile/behind unravelable wire.” With “virile” occupying a line of its own, the reader is given the space to absorb the connotations associated with the word, i.e.: active, powerful, sexually potent, etc.; however, the following line, “behind unravelable wire,” undermines the sense of power and vitality in its association to entrapment. In this sense, the reader’s thoughts and expectations, like Ova’s curious glare, are circumscribed, reigned in. Loy expands her notion of how the destructive forces of social norms can be deadening to include the reader by creating a performative in which the reader experiences a similar dynamic through the structures of the text. In this sense, Loy contends with the mind/ body split that she saw as problematic in the Dada movement between the intellectualism of Duchamp and the physicality of the Baroness
by engaging the reader in the mental activity of understanding her ideas about the way subjects are trapped by social norms through a physical experience of entrapment.

In the following example, Loy’s performative relays ideas through challenging socially conditioned responses to the world. Take, for example, the beginning of the same section “Ova Begins to Take Notice”:

A faggot of instincts
that within the year
rises
the caryatid of an idea
Two elongations of its will
arm-crave
the curious glare
virile
behind unravelable wire (135-36)

The word “faggot” in the first line, “[a] faggot of instincts” refers to the consciousness of Ova in her first year of her life. The unusual use of the word “faggot” and its placement under the title and the word “Ova”—female reproductive cells or eggs, that is, the initial unformed beginnings of a human—coupled with its close sound relation to “maggot,” leads one to visualize the white, unformed, parasitic larvae of the housefly. While the image is not pleasant, it does capture an infant’s developmental state, both formless and dependent. Both words, “faggot” and the implied sound relation to “maggot,” work to dislodge expected social norms. The word “faggot,” referring to a bundle consisting of pieces of wrought iron to be shaped by rolling or hammering at high temperatures (OED)
is evocative of the image Loy portrays regarding the girl child’s defenselessness and malleable nature under the pressures of social constructs. Loy was also most likely familiar with the derogatory meaning of “faggot” as referring to homosexuality (the term “homosexual” was first seen in print in 1914\(^{69}\)). The term complements her gender critique in that it raises questions of gender concerning society’s intolerance and persecution of female characteristics manifesting in a man, as well as male characteristics manifesting in a female. Furthermore the sound relation to “maggot” resists conventional tropes for a child in that it interrupts expectations of mothering and nurturing. One is expected to perceive of a child as sweet and adoring and their helplessness conceived as tender, not worm-like and parasitic. Loy aims to unsettle readers through offensive measures as a way to jolt them out of socially conditioned habits. Her idea is that the discomfort will make readers aware of their conditioned responses and thusly provide an opportunity to envision new ways of seeing and being. Loy creates a tension between text and reader by purposely resisting ingrained modes of behavior (e.g.: mothers should perceive of children as adoring and sweet) in order to irritate and propel the reader out of a passive role as a way to encourage a reassessment of those values in relation to the individual in a particular historical moment in time.

Narrative disruption is another way Loy controls connotation while playing with linguistic discord, demanding readers’ effort and input. For example, note lines 70-103 in “Ova Begins to Take Notice.” The title of the section leaves the reader with the impression that an anecdote from the character’s early life will follow—that a story of Ova as she develops consciousness will ensue. Additionally, there are a number of lines that seem to build narrative consistency. For example: “So she is patient/ with the

temperate under-/tones of hostile bodies/that stand still”… “Nurse’s/ draperies are resigned//The mother draws near unnaturally/as if to assert her dignity/after some/outrage/that seems to rustle/among her draperies/drawn across her thigh/to bunch over her bustle// Jostled between revolving/ armored towers/ carrying high up on the top/two little spy holes” (138-9). One gets a sense that the child character, Ova, is overwhelmed by the mother and nurse figures. Yet readers are left to determine for themselves why the bodies are “hostile” and “still,” what is meant by “resigned” “draperies,” what makes the mother unnatural in her movements, and what the implication of “armored towers” might be in context of the domestic scene in which a young child becomes aware of her (middle class) surroundings. On the one hand, readers are lead to expect an anecdote of Ova in her early moments of consciousness; however, on the other hand, one is left with a very brief and unsatisfying sketch that produces more questions than answers. Readers are strung along by the potential for “a story line,” first through the title, and then the narrative-like syntax and rhythm; however, the only avenue available for a fuller understanding is through readers’ encounter with the text. In this instance, to use Ron Silliman’s terminology, Loy gestures to meaning at or higher than the level of the sentence; however, the gesture is not satisfied and meaning is limited to levels at the word or phrase.\footnote{Silliman, Ron. \textit{The New Sentence}. New York. Roof, 1989, 80-88.} Take, for example, the nurse in line 80 whose “draperies are resigned” to Ada’s “outrage.” The double meaning of the word “resigned” that is, to give over without contention and to sign up again, depicts the entrapment of those in service. The nurse must always defer—give up her will without resistance—to the mistress and master; however, if she wants to keep the job she must assert (sign on),
making decisions on some level in order to carry out her duties. The play on “resigned” also refers to the notion that fashion is a self-imposed prison or aid to self-liberation. One can either resign one’s self to the confining effects of clothes that perpetuate gender roles or re-sign (re-name) one’s self by fashioning clothes that counter those stereotypes.

Instead of completing the narrative expectation, Loy utilizes tropes of tailoring to involve the reader in an exploration of her ideas. For instance, the hostility Ova perceives as she is “Jostled/between revolving/armored towers” (the two corseted women) is elucidated through the character’s clothing. The mother’s outrage when asserting her dignity, rustles “among her draperies/drawn across her thighs/ to bunch over her bustle.” The stanza continues, “carrying/high up on the top/two little spy holes/eyeing/ and arms like signals/flapping and cuffing” (Last Lunar 139). This image evokes the notion of warfare between two countries—with the reference to towers and spies, who signal each other—connecting the tropes of clothing, bustles, and corsets (representing family institutions) directly to larger institutions of power such as the national and international political states she refers to in “International Psycho-Democracy.” This section echoes Loy’s point in the essay (through tropes of clothing) which stipulates that the roots of international turmoil reside in the psychological formation of individuals who are hypnotized into thinking that their only option is to perpetuate hierarchical, right/wrong, good/evil binaries, creating a war mentality (“a hypnotic war lust”71).

The portrayal of power Ova observes in the “armored towers” is nonetheless undermined by the sense of awkwardness in the two women, erect in their towers peeking out of two spy holes. The institutions of power represented by the clothing of the women

71 Loy, Mina. The Last Luna Baedeker: Mina Loy, 282.
suggest that the women are shaped by those institutions. However, no matter what level of society they represent, middle, or lower class, they are rendered powerless in their ineffectual “flapping and cuffing” (cuffing is significant in that it means both to fight and to tie the hands—the power suggested in “fight” is undermined by the action that prevents the use of one’s arms). The following stanza, lines 100-103, “the heavy upholstered/stuffing/of these/two women’s netherbodies,” confirms the powerlessness of women upholding the institutions of power in the reference to the yards (up to 12 yards per dress) of material women wore (“upholstered stuffing”). The word “netherbodies” accents the kind of living death in which the women function (139). In this section, Loy dangles narrative possibility yet does not let narrative or meaning above the level of the sentence cohere; instead she highlights tropes of fashion to lead the reader in a direction of discovery, requiring analysis of words and their multiple meanings within Loy’s frame of reference.

Reading Loy through James provides a way to understand how Loy conceives of an embodied poetics that is inseparable from the political. Her involves the reader in a constructive form of discord based on mobile relationality and encourages a praxis that helps one loosen the grip on conceptual, hierarchical mechanisms underlying both language and social norms. In this praxis mind and body are in an ongoing creative encounter as the physical experience of having established patterns dislodged challenges the aspect of the mind that is dependent on survival-based impulses (James’s “me”). The praxis strengthens the ability think beyond entrenched norms, providing a valuable practice that develops the capacity to become less complacent in the face of social norms. Through Loy’s performative, readers are urged, in a self-reflexive manner, to examine
their ingrained patterns, stereotypes, and prejudices—making them available to new awareness and patterns of behavior. The Jamesian lens offers a way to comprehend the indivisible link between her embodied female politics and aesthetics based on constructive collision. While linguistic challenge and reference to political concerns are typically seen as mutually exclusive, Loy demonstrates how fragmentation can enhance a political argument through its embodied (and thusly deeper) influence on readers. She undoes binary assumptions associated to the idea of “experimental” versus “political” poetry by demonstrating how the disruption of linguistic patterns can reinforce the ideas addressed and affect readers (bodies in the world) in a way that changes their understanding of themselves in relation to alterity, thereby providing new (r)evolutionary pathways of change in the material world.
Chapter Four

The Poetics of Dissociation: Difference and Unity in Laura (Riding) Jackson’s Secular Spiritualism

Much of Riding criticism has associated her notion of purity in language with a “radical dualism [between] self and society.”\(^72\) This dualism has been linked to the Fugitives and New Critics and their ahistoric tendencies; however, I demonstrate how her concept of purity in language resembles Jamesian non-duality in that she underscores the human faculty that allows one to perceive and contend with difference in an immediate, ongoing relation to the world. Her notion of purity is concerned with the “initial fact” of a reader’s experience of words much like, for instance, Stein’s interest in detaching “rose” from European notions of love in order to approach the word in a new historical moment in the “continuous present.”\(^73\) Rather than conceiving of the text as autonomous and divorced from human meaning, Riding is interested in emphasizing how—once we detangle, or “undress,” meanings from the categorical systems of social and communicative structures—language becomes available as a way to access a life lived without polarized and classifying orders.\(^74\) Furthermore, according to Riding, readers are provided a true experience of history in that their engagement with the text involves an


\(^73\) For “initial fact” see: *The Word Woman and Other Related Writings*, p. 36. For “continuous present” see *Stein Writings: 1903-1932*, p. 526.

\(^74\) Again, see: *The Word Woman and Other Related Writings*, p. 36.
ongoing—immediate and embodied—response to words in relation to readers’ contextual moment. In *The Telling* (what she calls her “evangel”) she articulates an approach to language that has a spiritual component in that she feels it will help remedy the “diffuse greed” that is “imparted from one to the other in garrulous sociality.” Rather than conceiving of the spiritual as transcendent and separate from the terrestrial, she advocates for an ethical way of life that undoes social binaries and, thus, dualities that perpetuate an “us” versus “them” mentality (6). Riding believes that the non-dual use of language is the “only means we have to keep faith with one another and with our common being” (Oldham 249). Her idea of language, then, reveals an understanding of reality not unlike Jamesian subjectivity, in which overriding categorical distinctions are dislodged in the passing moment through the perceiver’s perceptions of and relations to new stimuli in the new historical moment. Similar to the other poets under discussion, she understands that the disruption of language norms, or in her words, the “interruption of the reading way of things,” provides access to a space that is democratic in its resistance to categorical and ranking systems (*The Telling* 61).

While I draw correlations between Riding and the poets under discussion, there are also significant differences between the writers. For example, while Riding’s initial feeling toward Stein was one of respect and admiration, it wasn’t long before their distinct approaches to language became evident, putting a strain on the relationship. In 1927 Riding wrote a critical essay in *transition*, in which she applauded Stein’s “new barbarism.” Shortly after, she wrote Stein requesting something for the Seizin Press, a press she co-edited with Robert Graves. Stein, replied stating she appreciated the *transition* essay and was pleased that the press was publishing *Acquaintance with*
Description (Freidman 112). The two poets met at 27 rue de Fleurus, Stein’s home, in early 1928 and in 1929 Stein and Alice Toklas (Stein’s partner) invited Riding and Graves to their rented house, Bilignin, in Belley, France. Of their first meeting in Paris, Riding remembers an immediate “mutual-liking” and she found her stay in Bilignin pleasant (487/162). However, during this period, between 1927 and 1929, when their relationship seemed amiable, one can detect Riding’s ambivalence toward Stein’s work. Take, for instance, Riding’s tribute to Stein in Contemporaries and Snobs (1928), “No one but Miss Stein has been willing to be as ordinary as simple, as primitive, as stupid, as barbaric, as successful barbarism demands” (183). Although she assures the reader that “Nothing that has been said here should be understood as disrespectful to Gertrude Stein. What has been said has been said in praise and not contempt (194). Nevertheless, her choice to use words such as “stupid” and “simple” make one question the sincerity of the praise Riding offers. Correspondence between the two poets continued until July 1930 when Stein stopped writing.

Both during and after the years Riding and Stein were in communication, Riding consistently found fault with what she understood as Stein’s desire to empty words of linguistic meaning. For instance, in Contemporaries and Snobs she states, “Writing by always beginning again and again and again keeps everything different and everything the same…The words are self-pursuing tail-swallowing…” (193). Almost fifty years later, Riding states in “The Word-Play of Gertrude Stein,” “Gertrude Stein constructed sentences that were, in internal make-up not sentences: they did not make sense. The words were not allowed to carry out their meaning-functions” (241). This reading of Stein falls in line with much of the history of Stein criticism from Michael Gold to Bob
Perlman (see p. 72 in chapter two) and misreads much of Stein’s thinking about the processes of meaning making. As I have discussed previously, Stein was vitally interested in how meaning is produced and experimented with unsettling norms to evoke active, generative thinking in the reader. Riding may show a limitation in Stein’s radical experimentations that made no attempt to control connotation (something Loy also exposes). However, this lack of control does not have to do with stripping words of meaning. Rather the experiments were to demonstrate the plethora of semantic possibilities as patterns of sense making are unhinged—involving the reader in an active engagement with the meaning making process.

It is difficult to speculate why Riding would distort Stein’s ideas considering she closely read her work and they conversed about writing when they met and discussed in letters.\textsuperscript{75} One explanation might be that, as Elizabeth Friedmann highlights, many times reviewers were put off by Riding’s “strange poems” and “having nothing whatsoever to compare them to—except perhaps the equally incomprehensible work of Gertrude Stein”—made assumptions that both aligned and disregarded the work of the two poets.\textsuperscript{76} Noel

\textsuperscript{75} For instance, shortly before their first meeting at 27 rue de Fleurus, Riding sent Stein a copy of \textit{Anarchism is Not Enough} and highlighted “An Anonymous Book” and “Letter of Abdication.” She wanted to draw attention to the chapters that involved a discussion on narrative, something Stein was grappling with in \textit{Acquaintance with Description} (Friedmann 120).

\textsuperscript{76} John Gould Fletcher in \textit{The Criterion} claimed Riding to be derivative of Marianne Moore, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Graves, and Stein. (Friedmann 86).

Comments regarding difficulty in Riding ranged from the \textit{London Observer}: “Miss Riding obscures obscurity”; the \textit{Manchester Guardian} found her poems to be “a volume of pretentious mystifications”; and a reviewer in Scotland wrote, “Miss Riding’s distinction is that she makes verses which few others could write and fewer still can read” (Friedmann 154).
Coward, a playwright and friend of Riding, stated in a letter that “where Gertrude Stein meant nothing, [Riding] bettered her in meaning almost nothing” (154). This impulse to correlate Riding and Stein as poets who evacuate words of meaning may have been irritating to Riding for a couple of reasons. Stein, the older more established poet in the mid to late 1920’s, was perceived to be an influence on Riding—and Riding did not want to be perceived as a derivative of anyone. Another reason may have been that Riding sensed that her approach in challenging norms of language differed from Stein’s resistance to linguistic practices. Riding’s critique of Stein helped her to develop and articulate her distinct understanding of meaning making in a process of “dissociation.”

Stein was interested in the noun and its relational engagement with the reader. For instance, she states in “Poetry and Grammar,” “Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns” (327). Riding’s focus on naming had to do with a commitment to the “rootedness in language’s intrinsic meaning” (Bernstein 4). While these two perspectives on naming seem to be diametrically opposed, I reveal that Riding’s understanding of the rootedness of language that she comes to articulate in The Telling involves the reader in a relational engagement with words. Language, for Riding, calls on the reader’s capacity to reason—to comply with and enforce systems of language; however, she also recognizes that language evokes imagination—one’s ability to deal with the movement of meaning as contexts change in time. This combination of reason and imagination that is intrinsic to language is

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77 In light of John Gould Fletcher’s review in The Criterion that suggested that Riding was influenced by (among others) Stein and John Crow Ransom, Riding “hoped that Ransom would wish to set The Criterion straight about his ‘influence’ on her, but he did not want to enter into the fray” (Friedmann 87).
conducive to spiritual wholeness because it draws attention to the way in which language provides for radical individuality (the imaginative ability that allows one to deal with new meanings in contextual change), while at the same time provides a common ground in that all humans are capable of reason or the ability to use systems of language. This common ground or, “Being,” that all human beings have access to helps one to be conscious of a common identity with other selves and, thereby, works to unify and diminish the competitive, aggressive, “self-claiming” self (Oldham 252).

What Riding rejects in Stein, then, is a matter of degree rather than kind. Riding’s notion of the intrinsic rootedness of language is not referring to stable meaning—exceeding contextual change or human perception—but acknowledges the interplay between the structures of language and readerly engagement. Where she differs from Stein is in her demand for a careful balance between reason and imagination. In this light, she may have found Stein lacking in precision in her radical experiments with language. Riding felt an element of control was crucial in her world view. Lack of control, like “anarchism, [was] not enough.” As James Oldham puts it, Riding calls “on us to exercise self-discipline in our use of language and by asserting that language has a purpose…we should recognize, respect, and seek to fulfill, …‘the articulation of our humanness’” (249). While this difference in degree is significant and distinguishes Riding from Stein, I underline in the pages that follow how Riding’s theory of language links her to Stein through a relational dynamic involving reader and text. The methodological lens based on Jamesian pragmatism becomes useful in identifying Riding’s notion regarding the movement of consciousness and the importance of the reader’s “interruption” of habituated reading patterns (The Telling 61).
I realize that my use of the Jamesian framework to investigate Riding goes against her theoretical and philosophical position. Riding rejected James in his capacity as a scientist, who, like all scientist, according to Riding, strove for the “general revelation … of knowledge of the material universe.” She asserts, “[t]he so-called generalistic thinkers desert the real ground of thought dedicated to truth for so-called humanistic hybrid formed of scientificized philosophic speculation” (Under the Watch 67, emphasis original). In other words, scientists in their intellectual abstraction and generalized statements miss the truth of immediate, concrete presence—the “human story” that exceeds structures and systems. The “truth-telling professions,” that is, religion, philosophy, poetry, history, and science fall short because they cannot accommodate the fleeting, uncontainable, and irreducible in the human experience. However, despite Riding’s reservations about “truth-telling professions” I suggest, as in the case of Loy, she picks up on ideas of perception and temporality perpetuated by Henri Bergson—a philosopher that James works through—that were saturated in the intellectual atmosphere of the early twentieth century. Riding distrusts James’s profession, and therefore disregards his work, but nonetheless is exposed to comparable ideas that are circulating in the fin de siècle intellectual milieu.

Riding’s conception of writing is also distinct from the other poets under consideration in this project in that she understands the “synthetic” uses of language (image, rhythm, rhyme, sound, metaphor) to be incapable of provoking an immediate

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78 In Oldham words, Riding’s challenge of science and the empirical method has to do with “recognizing that the knowledge [science] gains is inadequate to explain the spirit within us that finds current knowledge insufficient and that quests after further knowledge” (257).
response from readers. In a biting critique of contemporary poetry in *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, she outlines her argument that synthetic qualities merely represent reality through interpretive systems, thereby, avoiding poetry’s potential to *be* truth. Riding’s notion of poetry not only resists a high modernist inclination to foreground the materiality of language, but further resists conventional notions of poetry in general in her desire to eliminate, for instance, elements such as rhyme and metaphor. Her rejection of new and traditional forms of poetry along with her spiritual approach as is evident in *The Telling* has again linked her to the New Critics and their isolation of the poem in a “quasi-religious, ontological sanctuary” (Lentricchia 6). While the extremity in her thinking personally isolates her from communities associated with writing, I suggest that her ideas, especially those that have connotations to the spiritual are profoundly secular and emphasize an individual’s connection to the world.

Tom Fisher points to a difficulty in understanding Riding’s relation to the New Critics. He states, “[i]ndeed, Riding’s interest in ‘autonomy’ parallels in significant ways the New Critics; yet her opposition to systematicity, critical authority, and formalism is quite contrary to New Critical values and practices” (5). Reading Riding through a Jamesian lens provides a way to come to terms with this apparent discrepancy in her work by offering a way to perceive of the individual that goes beyond the hierarchical

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79 As Lisa Samuels in the introduction to *Anarchism Is Not Enough* states, “Riding protests the conversion of the poetic event into the poem-urn, of poetic knowing into interpretative systems, and of the reader into a consumer in search of an aesthetic delivery system” (xviii-xix).

80 Again, Samuels: Riding’s “spiritual imperative” has “world-changing impulses [that] being with the individual and move to other individuals through the medium of human language acts” (xxxi, xxix).
paradigms of New Criticism. James’s ontology—as a subject’s relational engagement with time and context—furnishes an understanding of how she perceives of autonomous individuality. This subjectivity is not a construct of a dualistic paradigm but calls for both radical individuality (in one’s distinct momentary impulses and decision in the passing moment) and engagement in the world (in the constant relational encounter with “other”). Her notion of the individual then is part of her critique of New Critics’ systematicity. She resists (rather than supports) their notion of the individual—as a categorical entity in its sovereign and stable state, divorced from context—as well as their formalism and critical authority. In other words, like the other poets under discussion, she translates notions of the individual from a hierarchical to a paradigm not unlike Jamesian mobile relationality. While the Jamesian lens reveals how Stein, Loy, and Riding develop their theories on writing and the reader’s active engagement with the text, the lens also illuminates how Riding perceives of wholeness through James’s notion of the “one and the many.”

In a Jamesian-like manner, she stresses the idea that repeated habits connect subjects to the past while new actions and patterns of behavior change and add to the whole continual flux. Her radicalism comes not from advocating a dualism between self and society, but from encouraging non-duality through highlighting the way in which autonomous individual difference can be a unifying force as individuals in the passing, embodied moment engage in the world, adding to and changing the past.

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81 He states, “The world is one just so far as its parts hang together by any definite connexion. It is many just so far as any definite connexion fails to obtain. And finally it is growing more and more unified by those systems of connexion at least which human energy keeps framing as time goes on” (*Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* 76).
This non-dual radicalism is connected to her feminism that rejects first and second waves’ propensity to systemize. While she felt that equality between the sexes was crucial, she contested first wave’s emphasis on legal rights and its assumption that men and women are alike. However, she also questioned second wave essentialism—its categorical distinctions between the sexes. Instead, her feminism calls for a philosophical shift in consciousness in which qualities she identifies as masculine give way to qualities she associates with the feminine. In “The Word ‘Woman’” she articulates a history of human consciousness that has been in an era of man and is in the process of shifting to a much needed new period, that is, an era of woman. She is clear to point out that she is speaking philosophically, not referring to temporal man and woman, but to the history of habituated patterns associated to the word “woman.” The Jamesian lens exposes the way in which she makes distinctions between the paradigm related to the masculine and the paradigm associated to the feminine through characteristics not unlike Jamesian substantive and transitive states. Riding correlates the era of man with consciousness dependent on overriding systems (substantive states), and associates the era of woman with the ability of the mind to perceive difference in the immediacy of the passing moment (transitive states). These patterns influence current consciousness, but they can also be altered if subjects are aware of their fluctuating nature. She wants readers to become cognizant of the movement toward the era of woman and stresses the importance of furthering that progression.

Reading Riding through James offers a way to understand her critique of systems and provides the link between her ideas of gender and language as well as explains a consistency between her early work in which she understood poetry to be the “complete
virtue of word-use” and late work after she renounced poetry (Rational Meaning 448). Her resistance to categorical systems is evident in “The Word ‘Woman’” (circa 1934) and Anarchism Is Not Enough (1928)—a text in which she criticizes contemporary poets for their reliance on systems. This position helps Riding to formulate her ideas in her later work The Telling (1972). In The Telling her world view and notions about language merge and are articulated in the secular spiritualism based on a concrete and embodied relation between reader and text. The Jamesian lens reveals the consistency in Riding’s thought both prior to and after her renunciation and allows her to articulate the possibilities for a non-hierarchical paradigm grounded on human unity through “language acts” (Samuels). Riding’s move from poetry to prose is not a shift to prose as a transparent application involving systems of language. In her rejection of “synthetic” qualities of language before her renunciation, she wanted poetry to evoke participation from the reader. She wanted poetry to be “an incentive not to response but to initiative” (Anarchism Is Not Enough 114). In her post renunciation she continued to explore how language could incite initiative without the hierarchical systems and discourses prevalent in modernism that she saw contributing to the divisiveness in society. The constancy between Riding’s early and late work understands language to be the access point of a secular spiritualism that is based on the material ground of the reading-writing process through the reader’s ongoing, active and relational engagement with the text.

Riding’s feminism, similar to Loy’s and Stein’s, involves a contradiction. While there are aspects that are similar to Jamesian ideas of democratic relationality in her work, Riding plays the role of a genius, along with her male contemporaries, through her aspirations to educate the “plain reader.” This contradiction contributes both to her
difficult relation to contemporary poetry as well as her renunciation of poetry. As Susan Schultz points out, the Victorian essentialism evident in the Fugitives’ attitude to women “goes a long way toward showing the hostility of the environment in which Riding worked.” For example, John Crowe Ransom in one of his statements regarding poetry comments, “man distinguishes himself from woman by intellect, but he should keep it [the poem] feminized.”

This perspective polarizes the mind/body, male/female binaries and leaves no room for Riding in its, as Schultz puts it, “backhanded compliment of the feminine” (50). Riding was seen as an exception to Ransom’s idea of the “feminine.” He conceived of her intellectually rigorous poems as exemplifying his definition of poetry that credited male poets with superior minds. I speculate that Riding took advantage of this situation early in her career as a way to be taken seriously in the Anglo-male modernist world. However, the polarized divide between male/female and mind/body eventually became untenable to her as she pursued her ideas that resisted binaries.

Her renunciation had to do with giving up on the fight against contemporary poetry and the interpretative systems she understood it to perpetuate. Furthermore, it was a moment in which she attempted to relinquish her position as a female exception to Ransom’s essentialist idea (founded on categorical systems) of the (male) poet. Schultz makes a similar argument positing that Riding after her renunciation rejects the masculine

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83 For example, Susan Schultz states, “Riding may have been the Fugitives’ darling precisely because she seemed to them to provide an exception to Ransom’s rule: her poetry is difficult and obscure only to the extent that it is abstract and intellectually rigorous. According to Deborah Baker, Allen Tate told Riding that she would save the world form the Edna St. Vincent Millays” (50).

84 See Tom Fisher, p. 15
and identifies with the feminine, which ultimately silenced her (76-77). I am in agreement with Schultz’s assessment that Riding identified with the masculine definition of the Fugitive poet early in her career—which, furthermore, can be seen in her expression of “hard” modernism (“masculine and difficult”) in her aggressive stance toward her contemporaries in Anarchism Is Not Enough and Contemporaries and Snobs. However, I suggest that after her renunciation she identifies with her non-dual philosophy she underscores in “The ‘Word’ Woman.” Instead of identifying with the feminine in binary terms, as Schultz suggests—succumbing to the less-than position of the female, thereby depriving herself of voice—Riding is bolstered by her notion of the feminine that offers ameliorating solutions to dualisms and hierarchical ranking. Rather than being silenced, she is provided voice and agency to conceptually refine her ideas that underscore remediating possibilities for society. Rather than the aggressive and biting critiques in Anarchism Is Not Enough and Contemporaries and Snobs that focus on the problems of her contemporaries and their use of systematicity, The Telling stresses the ameliorative solutions available in departing from systems and coming to value qualities such as embodiment and immersion in the immediacy of the moment.

In her focus on the solution in The Telling she articulates the process of “telling” that unites one with the history of existence and an embodied, immediate communication with “other.” As mentioned previously, language mediates this “telling” through its demand for “reason” (one’s capacity to apply language system) and “imagination” (one’s ability to think independently of determinate systems and to deal with the flux of

85 See Jane Malcolm’s discussion of Riding’s position in relation to male modernism in “Hard Women, Hard Modernism: Gendering Modernist Difficulty.”
meaning as contexts and conditions change in time). Words for Riding, as James Oldham puts it, are “both the beginning and end of rationality” (254). Language’s liberating and spiritual force comes from both the reader’s ability to recognize habitual patterns and the ability to dissociate from routine. In a close reading of *The Telling*, I demonstrate how Riding creates an experience of “telling” by subverting the essay form. For instance, she avoids introductory statements that generalize and dictate what is to follow. Furthermore, she continues to write, listing additional concerns, after the essay’s “ending.” She calls on both the reader’s ability to utilize expected norms and to think beyond routine practices through a performative. This places the reader and text in a transitional movement in time, creating the unity she underlines in “telling” between past and present. The reader’s embodied and immediate engagement with the text connects her to author and the long line of previous readings that influenced author and text. What is generally conceived of as a break in Riding’s thinking—her shift from poetry to prose that, as Schultz’s posits, is also a distinct move from identification with the masculine to the feminine in binary terms—is actually a re-articulation and reinvestment of her ideas that echo notions of Jamesian consciousness in her resistance to binaries and systems.

**The Word “Woman,” and William James**

Riding’s suspicion of systems is evident in her perceptions of early and second-wave feminism. While both movements had varying agendas, Riding’s criticism consistently addressed the negative consequences of systematic paradigms. For instance, the first wave—which was dominated by the American Woman’s Suffrage Association (AWSA) in its drive for voting rights—promoted legal equality. The first wave point of view made the assumption that legal equality would solve gender inequities,
presupposing that women would or should become more man-like. As Susan Dunn suggests, notions of the modern career woman, popular in papers and the theater during the early part of the twentieth century, indicated that there was a pressure on women to mimic men in professions and commercial roles (*Mina Loy: Woman and Poet* 445). Riding endorses this idea in her statement, “It is true that modern man prides himself on behaving well to women, on treating them as equals; but modern thinking about woman is confined, by being based on notions of man-likeness of women” (“The Word Woman” 22). For Riding the idea that women should strive to be the same as men—“extracting concessions from men [to] improve their social standing”—as an indication of equality only exacerbated the gender problem. She felt women had something in particular to offer in the evolutionary movement of human existence and consciousness that would go unnoticed if women mimicked men (*The Word Woman* 4).

Riding’s doubts about the underlying systems of the first wave are carried over to her critique of the second wave feminism. For instance, when second wave scholars in the early seventies attempted to place Riding in a woman’s canon she—as Elizabeth Friedman and Alan J. Clark state—“resisted, assiduously maintaining that women writers should not be seen as constituting a separate professional category, nor should their work be treated as a separate subject of literary or artistic interest” (*The Word Woman* 3). Riding in “Bondage” (1972), referring to ideas in “The Word ‘Woman,’” underlines her understanding of the role of difference between men and women in relation to wholeness. For example, she states that:

> the climbing on the liberation-of-woman bandwagon, newly obscures what is wrong with the relations existing between men and women... and
produces a new degree of confusion in both... The true starting-point for effort directed by women towards the corrections of relations between men and women, women and men, is internal, by this I mean, in the area of self-understanding, and self-understanding, not in terms of a historical sense of social injustice, wrong imposed from without, but in terms of a universally oriented sense of lack in what they offer with their presences.

(193-4)

In other words, the focus on external understanding or “a historical sense of social injustices, wrong imposed from without” overshadows the interactions between man and woman in a meta-perspective (“universal oriented sense”). The meta-perspective reveals the potential unity underlying what men and women can learn about themselves and each other in light of their “lack” or their potential for growth through self-reflexivity. The self-understanding is key because what one learns illuminates the route to unity as well as freedom from categorical and hierarchical ways of perceiving the world. Riding’s dismissal of “self understanding in terms of a historical sense of social justice, wrong imposed from without” is not a suggestion to ignore the social injustices prevalent in the temporal world. Rather it is a call to expand one’s purview in order to get a larger perspective that can reveal how wholeness is possible through a dynamic engagement involving individuals in the contingency of time and change. Her concern is that without the growth potential available when subjects are aware of the differences between men and women in a “universal oriented sense,” subjects lose sight of their innate disposition for unity, which in turn contributes to inequitable relations and isolation. In other words, while the second wave took up the issue of difference—that woman should be valued for
their difference from men—they, according to Riding, failed to keep in mind, the important link between difference and wholeness. Second wave feminism, instead, fell back on categorical sameness, fostering an us/them dynamic consistent in systematic paradigms. The problem with the first wave’s approach was that it denied woman’s difference by sustaining preexisting systems and transferred the role of “man-likeness” on to woman. The problem with the second wave was that, while it took into consideration woman’s difference, it created divisiveness by producing categorical separations. This stabilization overlooks the unity available in “universally oriented sense.” Ridings’ emphasis on difference as a way to encourage wholeness in “The Word ‘Woman’” is the root of her feminism, which later contributes to her ideas of language and a secular spirituality in *The Telling*.

“The Word ‘Woman’” is an exploration into the meanings and interpretations of “woman” in which Riding discusses “the woman factor in the nature of human beings…and the structure of ‘life’ itself” (9). The structure of life is revealed through a historical account of human consciousness in which she refers to “impersonal” man and woman. Impersonal man and woman are not to be confused with temporal men and women. Rather they are seen as forces of thought that evolve through time in the “history of human existence” (13). She argues that the evolution of human consciousness is slowly beginning its transition to consciousness governed by impersonal woman’s power as a unifier. She does not want first wave notions of woman as “man-likeness” to confuse the necessary development of impersonal woman’s amalgamating potential. Riding believes that there are essential characteristics that temporal men and women inherit from impersonal man and woman. However, what she sees as problematic is the tendency to
fix those differences into habituated patterns that override the immediate dynamic relations between impersonal man and woman.

For example, in the first few sections of “The Word ‘Woman’” Riding links gender imbalance with language based habituated patterns specifically in relation to “woman.” For instance she states, “As for ‘Woman’ she is held to constitute merely certain differences from man which enlarge and assist in the development of his nature, his meanings. And so the word “woman” is included in the word ‘man’ and its meanings do no more than supplement and liberalize meanings of ‘man’” (20). In other words, “man” as the definition of “human” contains the word “woman.” However, she continues, “woman” resists any easy absorption “in the meanings with which man enlarges his nature. Man in giving the meaning of himself to everything [human] grows conscious of “something else to which meanings do not easily adhere.” According to Riding, that “something else” has two parts 1) God—a passive “subject of thought to which [man] makes his meanings adhere by force of will,” and 2) woman, who “assists him [i.e. man] practically (he does not know or care why) in his attempts to create identity between his own meanings and all other meanings.” Nevertheless, God is easier than woman to keep in man’s purview. God, an abstraction, can be placed under man’s will, while woman, a practical concrete presence is uncontrollable like the effects of weather. Man is able to dismiss woman as he does pleasant weather in the sense that as he takes “his pleasure that it is a fine day” for granted: he takes woman for granted when she acts in the way he expects. However, man resents any pressure which makes him think of “woman,” in the sense that he thinks of woman as “some mechanical extension
of himself” who becomes irritating when she, like the weather, inconveniences him by “behav[ing] with distinct personality” (22).

Riding continues to discuss the problematic nature of patriarchy through outlining numerous generalizations in which women’s distinctiveness evokes man’s irritation or worry that woman in her discrete individuality will threaten his superior position. In this way, Riding begins to build her argument that perception (“thought-processes”) or “initial facts of the human mind” underlie human experience (36). Riding wants to make it clear that she is not presenting new facts that support new ideas about women. Rather she wants to examine “man’s understanding of woman: definitions of and generalizations about woman…in order to work back through civilized tradition to woman as a set of basic facts, and, from these purified facts to form a principle, as against a conglomeration of meanings” (36). In other words, she feels that in the history of human consciousness there have been numerous interpretations and meanings of “woman” and those interpretations cloud the truth in the sense that they are based on man’s conceptualized ideas of woman, not woman as a concrete real presence (“initial fact”). While the above quote has overtones of Platonism in reference to terminology such as “purified facts” and

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86 For example, the generalization that “men are just like children” comes from the fact that men allow themselves to be called children, not because they feel like children, but because it is a way in which they can avoid answering to women when asked to give “coherent accounts of their thoughts and doings” because “they, like children, like to have their secrets…to feel important without having their self importance tested” (24-25). The generalization that women are difficult to please is produced by the “irritation…that women are not functioning on men’s terms” (24). The annoyance that man experiences in the examples she gives stems from feelings that he is “being confronted with thought-processes different from his own, and so he decides that it is not a thought-process but an irritating peculiarity of women” (24).
the allusion to first principles, Riding is actually resisting the notion of truth as exemplars of ideal or absolute reality and highlighting truth as “initial facts of the human mind.” She believes that our “instinct of difference”—the human capacity to comprehend individual difference—is the factor that will undermine impersonal man’s “universalizations” (conceptualizing) and reinforce woman’s strength as concrete real presence and unifier. Rather than depending solely on interpretations that rely on generalization, she wants to underscore an aspect of perception that is corresponds to William James’s understanding of transitive states in the movement of embodied consciousness. Take, for example, the following passage:

But working back from all notions, as they are interpretations of facts, in order to arrive at the initial facts of the human mind, we come to that level of consciousness not governed by habits of thought but by the first simple law of perception: the sense of difference. The true homogeneousness of man [human] lies in his common instinct of difference, not in the fabrication of thought which he imposes on his physical experience. The sense of difference derives from physical compulsion; its truths are as necessitous as the form, substance and character of man’s body: it is his given mind. Notions are habits in which man dresses his mind. We must, so to speak, undress man’s mind, in order to find out what actually happens in it beneath the layers of habitual thought” (36).

In other words, she is drawing attention to the fact that there are two kinds of thought processes in human consciousness, one that is governed by habits of thought ("notions")
and the other by our “sense of difference” which stems from an awareness of “initial facts of the human mind.”

A true sense of unity (“the true homogeneousness of man”) lies in the latter level of consciousness. This level of consciousness is governed by our “common instinct of difference” and is distinct from consciousness governed by concepts or “notions” (“fabrications of thought”) that produce untruths through generalization. Consciousness governed by notions is used by man, that is, “he imposes [it] on his physical experience” (for instance, categorical designations involved with gender, nationality, class, etc.). Through the imposition he creates a duality that not only separates, but is false (it is a “fabrication”) in the sense that it re-presents rather than presents experience itself. Conversely, the level of consciousness governed by “the sense of difference” derives from one’s physicality; it is part of physical experience. As she states in the above quote, the “sense of difference” is a drive so fundamental (“derives from physical compulsion”) that it cannot be separated from our biology—it (our sense of difference) is as necessary “as form, substance and character of man’s body: it [body] is his given mind.” Riding wants to stress that the tendency to perceive of consciousness as stable or governed by conceptual thought hides (“dress[es]”) the level of consciousness governed by “the sense of difference” in which mind and body are one (“[body] is his given mind”). In this embodied, non-dual perception, unity (our “true homogeneousness”) is the guiding principle in the sense that consciousness based on our common instinct of difference does not separate intellect from physicality. They are inseparable, creating a phenomenon in which the activity of the mind is physical experience in the world. This is in contrast to consciousness on the level of concepts which fundamentally relies on duality. It extracts
thought (mind) from lived, physical experience and artificially imposes those concepts that become habituated and override the irreducible, contingent, condition of experience. For Riding, “undressing” man’s mind of habituated thought processes refers to getting underneath the categorical, dualistic systems that produce hierarchies and isolation. The ameliorative potential lies in the unity possible when the aspect of consciousness governed by “the first simple law of perception: the sense of difference” is acknowledged.

Riding’s discussion of the two aspects of consciousness has similarities to James’s notion of substantive and transitive states. James identifies transitive states as “places of flight [that] are filled with thoughts of relations” and substantive states as seemingly stable and can hold “the mind for an indefinite time and contemplated without changing.” James suggests that our use of substantive states dominates consciousness and he wants to stress the value of becoming aware of transitive states. “It is in our carelessness,” he states, “to suppose that our ‘ideas’ [fixed] of them are the same” as the objects themselves (Briefer Course 142). We see an object and create an idea of it and carelessly forget to pay attention to the object as it is affected by distance, light, and mood. In other words, James, like Riding, wants to underscore that we have the tendency to override immediate presence (transitive parts) by using our habituated stabilizing impressions to hide the fact and inevitability of incessant transformation through time. Both Riding and James want to underline irreducible difference as the truth of reality. Riding wants to “work back from all notions” to “initial facts of the human mind” in order to find the truth of difference (“the first law of perception: the sense of difference”) which tends to be “beneath the layers of habituated thought.” Likewise, James is
interested in the “reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate [transitive states] into its proper place in our mental life” which requires exposing how habituated patterns dominate over the truth of reality as irreducible difference. This incessant change or engagement with difference is crucial for both Riding and James in regards to ideas of democracy and unity. The immediate present is fundamentally democratic in the sense that there is no overriding or monistic principle that preexists the contingency of the moment, working to control predetermined outcomes. The impressions are equal in value (no first principles) negotiated through an individual in the ever evolving passing moment in time, producing unpredictable outcomes that pertain to the new conditions of the immediate situation. There are no set values outside life organizing and ranking experience. Unity is fundamental to democratic relational difference in the sense that intellect and physicality are inseparable (“[body] is his given mind”). Unity or nonduality then is created through the self (mind/body) in a relational engagement with ‘other’ in time.

Using James’s notion of substantive and transitive states is becomes helpful in reading “The Word ‘Woman.’” In the text she articulates the development of human existence through an evolution of consciousness that she understands as evolving from an era of “impersonal” man to an era of “impersonal” woman. According to Riding, the era of man is anchored in consciousness governed by concepts (substantive) and the era of woman is consciousness governed by our sense of difference (transitive). In her account of the evolution of human consciousness, impersonal man (with his innate disposition to be derivative) and woman (with her innate disposition to unify) as aspects of a whole, learn about their own and each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Through “self-
understanding” they learn what is necessary to move through the evolutionary
progression from existence based on unity as a lie—as is seen in hierarchical categorical
sameness (era of man)— to existence based on unity as truth (era of woman) based on
democratic relationality. The following passage demonstrates similarities between
substantive states and impersonal man and transitive states and impersonal woman. In
this way begins to explain her wo(man) wor(l)d view through a depiction of woman as a
source from which man extricates himself—a development that introduces the concept of
naming. She states:

Man exists, indeed by reason of his perceptions, man is a derivative being.
Woman is a source—a source with all its derivatives. The derivatives have
no reality once they disconnect themselves from their source; the source
can be described only through its derivatives. But the description when it
obscures the distinction between source and derivatives become what
man’s civilized notioning has largely become: rationalization, description,
an interesting lie. (40)

Riding implies here that at one point in the history of consciousness all there was was
source, a mass of unknowability. Man as a derivative being, made human existence
possible by creating difference. By separating himself from the unified source, he created
the possibility of perception in the sense that there became a self and an ‘other’ from
which difference could be recognized and identified. Woman as a source, in contrast, is a
unifier. The source needs its derivatives in order to be described—“[f]or woman herself
does not of herself possess difference; only through man’s derivation of himself from her,
only through his difference” (41).
However, man’s use of difference is problematic in the sense that he confuses self-consciousness with self-importance. She states, “his own thought became to him the fact, and from his thought [conceptualization] he derived what was originally fact [and subsequently] translated it into a flattering description of himself” (40). In other words, while the difference man created was important in that without difference there can be no human existence, he also created a lie by denying difference (“obscuring the distinction between source and derivatives”). Furthermore, through the denial of the difference, he produced extensions of himself (categorical sameness) by believing “his own thought” as fact. In other words he carelessly assumed that his concepts of things were truth. Like James’s comment that warns against supposing are our ideas of things are things themselves, Riding points out that impersonal man mistakenly made generalizations and believed them to be true. Through man’s confusion, mistaking self-consciousness with self-importance, as well as confusing his constructions of the world with reality, he creates generalized perceptions (“rationalization[s],” “description[s],” and “interesting lie[s]”). Impersonal man in this way initiates the possibility for human existence but does it in a way that produces stabilizing concepts (or substantive states) that lie because they generalize (deny the individual difference) creating false sameness.

Woman’s contribution to the development of consciousness in human existence is to correct the lie that man has made from his derivation through the use of her strength as a unifier (source), and thusly teaching man to understand difference. Take, for instance, the following passage:

She [impersonal woman] applies herself so directly so immediately to these relations [between man and woman] that she cannot be said to think
or even perceive, in the same way man does. The result to her of these relations is not a set of opinions, or even a set of sensations; the result is at any moment the relations themselves. What we learn from an examination of woman herself is not anything in particular about her or about man, but the general state of the situation which is called “life” and which is the sum of the relations of man and woman. We learn from woman ‘how things are’ at the time of our inquiry. Man registers woman, but woman registers man and woman. (39-40)

Impersonal woman’s orientation runs parallel to James’s notion of transitive states in her direct involvement with the immediate relations between man and woman. She “applies herself to the relations themselves” not to fixed concepts but the relations in time (“the result is at any moment the relations themselves”). We learn from impersonal woman, in her registering of the relations between man and woman, about the “situation which is called ‘life,’” about “‘how things are’ at the time of our inquiry.” In her ability to apply herself “directly to immediate relations” between man and woman, she has an innate sense of the larger unifying potential of consciousness as a whole. She knows that nothing can be outside or isolated from the movement of “‘life’… which is the “sum of the relations of man and woman.” Impersonal woman, then, is closer than impersonal man to an understanding of the dynamic movement of consciousness through history that involves both impersonal man and woman. This resembles James’s idea associated to transitional states that are more aligned than substantive states with the movement of consciousness as a whole. In this sense both Riding and James want to expand readers’ purview to go beyond the limiting perception of impersonal man’s conceptualizing
(substantive states) to understand the larger “universal” view that entails consciousness as a whole—the movement of both states through time.

True Communication and “Constructive Dissociation”

The incorporation of language in Riding’s theory of human consciousness that is comparable to James notions of subjectivity links her to the other poets under discussion in this project. Like Stein, who in “Poetry and Grammar” comes to value “real narration” (writing that is not dependent on language systems), Riding emphasizes the significance of communication without communicative systems (336). For instance she states, “The very power to think has been for man a loss of truthfulness, it is difficult to think truly because the power to think is also the power to think as he pleases” (The Word Woman 37). In other words, consciousness or the “power to think” with its potential to both create habitual patterns and “arrive at the initial facts of human mind” has tended to favor the habituated patterns because man is able to place himself in a superior or more “flattering” position. Nonetheless, according to Riding, the ameliorative element to man’s thinking as he pleases also comes from thinking. She states, “[w]here, then, is the control—the means of correction? It can only come from what he thinks about. And the only fact [“initial fact”] which he perceives and with which he has at the same time, communication, is woman: she is only articulate fact” (37). In other words, the corrective measure to man thinking as he pleases comes from a shift in thinking about woman as a preconceived concept (that he created) to thinking about her as a “fact” (immediate presence). This is crucial because woman [unlike God (an abstraction) and things in the world] can communicate with man. Man needs woman because he needs to learn how to
be in true dialog. He needs woman as fact because “speaking” with woman as a habituated thought process is a one-sided conversation—man conversing with man’s notion of woman. By learning from woman about communication on the level of facts in the immediate present, man breaks the isolation he has sustained through his universalizing. Impersonal woman’s move then (the second work), now that she has learned about self-consciousness from impersonal man (first work) is to correct the lie of communicative systems. It is to teach man about true communication—that is, how to communicate without a fixation on systems that overrides the “initial facts” of individual difference in the immediate present. In other words, impersonal woman’s role (consciousness capable of contending with immediate truth) is to dissociate the systems that impersonal man has imposed on life due to his predilection to categorical determinates as a “derivative being.”

The dynamic between impersonal man and woman—that is, the play between systems and dissociation from those systems is also evident in Anarchism Is Not Enough (1936), written at about the same time as “The Word ‘Woman’” (circa 1934). In Anarchism Is Not Enough she criticizes contemporary writers and thinkers for their attachment to categorical thinking and offers an understanding of poetry that can undo “systematic wrongness” through “constructive dissociation” (114). However, while

87 For more on Riding’s idea of first and second work, see “The Word ‘Woman,’” pages 53-54.
88 For instance in “Jocasta” she spends a significant portion of the essay elaborating on the problematic nature of classifying structures in the work of a number of writers, literary critics, and philosophers, particularly focusing on Oswald Spengler, a German historian and philosopher, and writer and critic Wyndham Lewis. She states, “I not only object to Herr Spengler’s systematic wrongness because it is wrong, but also because it is systematic. Herr Spengler perceives a conspiracy and is delighted, Mr. Lewis
Riding in *Anarchism Is Not Enough* draws on the idea that consciousness has two states (substantive and transitive) that are depicted in impersonal man and woman in “The Word ‘Woman (what she terms the “real” and “unreal” in *Anarchism Is not Enough*), she does not elaborate on the evolutinal process that connects the present to the “source.” It is not until after her renunciation of poetry in *The Telling* that the history of consciousness is fully incorporated in to her ideas of language. Thusly, as I will show, her break from poetry continues to demonstration a constancy in her thinking that is comparable to pragmatism’s relational and non-dual philosophy.

In *Anarchism Is Not Enough* she speaks directly to the issue of how poetry (in the way she perceives of it) functions on the level of initial facts in the immediate present. Consistent with James’s understanding of substantive and transitive parts of consciousness, she identifies the “real” with the man-made and socially constructed world and the “unreal” to the part of consciousness she wants to encourage and bring to the fore: the capacity to reside in the contingent and irreducibility of the immediate present. Her critique of the “real” is not a dualistic move to distance or separate human existence from the world but a desire to underscore that normativity (the systems that place us in categories: nationality, race, gender as well as the systems with which we communicate) are lies because they create a category or symbol that overrides the truth of perceives a conspiracy and is infuriated. Therefore though I admire Mr. Lewis because he is right, I restrict my admiration because he is systematic” (61). Riding understands Spengler’s position as promoting the “collective-real,” the domination of systems that dismiss radical individuality. She feels Lewis’s “individual-real” is admirable because it takes the individual into consideration; however, she perceives that he remains in systematic paradigms.
our irreducible difference and radical individuality. She suggests that her understanding of poetry has the potential to disrupt those systems and provide an opportunity in which embodied human beings can go beyond the normative systems of identity. Riding is not rejecting our physicality in the material world, but instead is insisting that our habituated responses that rely on overriding structures must be undone if we are to live in truth rather than lies. As Samuels puts it, Riding’s “rigorous personalism” that takes the self beyond systems of identification accesses the non-duality of the unreal and creates a space in which “each person process[es] the inexplicable continually…to arrive at a condition (rather than conclusion) that can access truth” (xxxi).

This continual inexplicability is possible through the performative experience with language. For instance, in the following passage she explains that words have three levels that productively complicate the reading/writing process by destabilizing habituated patterns. She states, words:

may be true words, that is of intrinsic sense; they may be of logical words, that is of applied sense; or they may be poetical words, of a misapplied sense, untrue and illogical in themselves, but of supposed suggestive power. The most the poet can do now is to take every word he uses through each of these levels, giving it the combined depth of all three, forcing it beyond itself to a death of sense where it is at least safe from the perjuries of either society or poetry. (ANE 12)

In other words, the poet—who takes each word through all three senses (intrinsic, applied, and misapplied) demonstrates the complexity of language (not simply a tool that makes a correlation between “logical” word and thing). In this way the poet applies and
misapplies, creating a space in which s/he processes the “inexplicable continually.” The poet—rather than using systems of language that through representation create lies—is able to access a condition of truth (Samuels). The engagement of the poet with the word in all three senses, including her/his imaginative and subjective experience, provides for a performative element in which there is a “death of sense” or death of a transparent relation to words. The poet’s participation and self-reflexivity as s/he takes each word through all three senses creates something new—something that cannot be contained within habituated reading/writing patterns. Poetry when used in this manner requires the continual processing of difference as the individual engages and unsettles expected meanings as perceptions change in time.

In the following section Riding explains this performative process as proceeding from “analysis,” which in turn creates “constructive dissociation.” For example she states:

But man’s powers for reconstructing reality are really a misuse of his powers for reconstructing himself out of the wreckage which is reality. The only true entity possible to man is an analytic entity: the synthetic entities of art are all parodies of self. An original poem is only seemingly synthetic: the words of which it is made are both the instrument of the analysis and the substance of the pure self of the poem which emerges from the analysis. Every poem of this kind is an instance of fulfilled originality, a model to the reader, of constructive dissociation: an incentive not to response but to initiative. (114)
In other words, man misuses his power by attempting to reconstruct reality, when he should be using his powers to dissociate himself from the “wreckage which is reality.” Man is misguided in his attempt to reconstruct the systems of the social world or the “machinery of knowledge” that is implanted in the real (43). To “reconstruct” for Riding is to rebuild and reaffirm the structures already existing, whereas “initiative” is an act of creation—something that did not exist before comes to fruition. A poem of this ilk “dissociates” from “reconstructed reality” because the individual’s thinking in relation to the words on the page is unpredictable, no system can forecast the innumerable potentialities in human perception in an instance in time. This “original [unreal] poem” is “constructive” because the act of dissociation from structures of the world incites initiative. It produces something new (constructs), rather than reconstructs reality through automatic “response[s]” to routine habituated patterns. Riding explains in the above quote that words are “the substance of the pure self [unreal self] of the poem” that is, the words are the “embodied key” (Samuels) to the unreal which finds realization through the reader’s/writer’s immediate and embodied “analysis” and “initiative.” In this way, Riding’s idea of “constructive dissociation” echoes Jamesian notions of consciousness in that she wants to emphasize the value of perception based on new insights in the immediacy of the passing moment—not tied to habituated patterns that blindly reconstruct status quo.

However, while this passage demonstrates a consistency to the other poets under consideration through her Jamesian-like notions and ideas of the performative, it also reveals her distinctions. Riding wants to make it clear that the “substance” she speaks of in reference to words “is only seemingly synthetic” (114). She does not want her idea of
“substance” to be confused with her term “synthetic entities” in poetry, which, for Riding, include the material aspects of the word. Synthetic entities in poetry are problematic because they give the impression of dissociating from reality. However, she believes they in actuality maintain an association to the “real.” She states, “synthetic entities are imitative, communicative, provocative of association. To compare a poem with a picture, music, or sculpture is to treat analytic entities and synthetic entities as if they were objects of similar reality” (115). Thusly, one can infer from this statement that, for Riding, synthetic entities in poetry refer to the foregrounding of imagery (picture), sound, rhyme, rhythm (music), and shape (sculpture). As in her dissatisfaction with Wyndham Lewis’s “individual-real” that accounts for the individual but remains in a systematic paradigm, she feels that the use synthetic properties does not do enough. Writers who apply such properties (Woolf, Sitwell, Eliot, and Joyce are a few that she names) are not doing anything different—they are, according to Riding, repeating the debilitating systematic paradigms that are entrenched in Western culture. Their work tries to be something new and original like the continual ongoing condition of the unreal, but they are not new, they repeat the real by creating another interpretive system. For instance, she states, “[i]t is about this encroachment and parody as it takes place in literature that I am really concerned. To put it simply, the unreal is to me poetry. The individual-real is a sensuous enactment of the unreal…The individual-real is a plagiarism of the unreal” (69). In other words, her concern is that while contemporaneous trends in literature come closer to the unreal than the more established tradition of representational systems (“collective-real”)—they actually never leave the realm of the systems.

89 For more on her critique of Lewis, Anarchism Is Not Enough, 43-45.
Nevertheless, despite her distrust of the material aspects of language that distinguishes her from the other poets in this project, Riding advocates for the performative element in language based on constructive conflict (or dissociation). All four writers are interested in the destabilization of habituated practices involved with communicative systems. Riding’s resistance to the synthetic or material quality of language has led to the assumption that she renounced poetry because she came to believe that transparency would lead to better communication.\(^9^0\) However, I suggest that Riding never loses sight of her concept of “constructive dissociation” and the performative element in language that leads true communication or communication without representational systems. As Tom Fisher suggests, Riding’s renunciation of poetry came from her belief that poetry as a genre was being corrupted by the systematicity of many contemporary poets. It therefore needed to be abandoned because that standardization exposed “an uncorrectable error-element in poetry.”\(^9^1\) He states, “her refusal of poetry took place within a larger critique of disciplinary knowledge…Poetry and philosophy were both on the wrong side of the quarrel with truth” (15). The constancy throughout her career is her skepticism of systems. Rather than perceiving of

\(^{90}\) For example, Jane Malcolm states, “Riding agitated against poetic metaphors because she believed that language should be transparent and used precisely and articulately, without intent to dissemble” (83).

\(^{91}\) She came to realize that the “error-element” in poetry—that is, its susceptibility to synthetic readings caused by “linguistic weakness [which] prospered too much… from poets’ making themselves too much at ease in it”—had become “standardized as linguistic privileges of poets [making it] an uncorrectable error-element in poetry.” She also understood that the “complete virtue of word-use” that she originally saw possible for poetry was better conceived of through language at large “in its actual complete readiness for serving a pure instrument of truth” (*Rational Meaning* 448).
Riding’s renunciation from poetry as a break in her thinking in which she moves from poetic language to prose as transparent language, an idea that suggests she was invested in systems of communication, I suggest her distrust in systems is also evident in her later work *The Telling*. Her ideas of non-duality and the performative nature of language link her to Dickinson’s challenge of Aristotelian notions of the lyric, Stein’s notion of human nature and the human mind, and Loy’s notion of healthy “competition.” However, her version of this performative emphasizes a careful balance between a reader’s ability to reason and imagine (something I explain further in the following sections). She felt that it was our human responsibility to use language well—to not get lost in the chaos or anarchy she saw in her contemporaries work. As James Oldham puts it, Riding calls “on us to exercise self-discipline in our use of language …to use language honestly and well [because] language is the only means we have to keep faith with one another and with our common being” (249). The balance between reason and imagination—between one’s ability to apply language and to imagine new meanings as context shift in time opens a space that places the reader in an ongoing, relational engagement with the text—a space that is democratic in its undoing of overriding systems and unifying in its connection to the truth of our common movement through time and change.

*The Telling*

The consistency of constructive dissociation in Riding’s work before and after her renunciation can be seen in how *The Telling* incorporates her worldview and history of consciousness in “The Word ‘Woman’” with her ideas of language in *Anarchism Is Not Enough*. Riding’s concept of true communication in “The Word ‘Woman’” is grounded in a gender argument in which the Jamesian lens reveals a correlation between
impersonal man and woman and substantive and transitive states. Her focus on gender is minimized in *The Telling*; however, the history of consciousness in “The Word ‘Woman’” is evident in her notion of “telling” that is concerned with the “whole sense of our immediate being” and includes both a present moment along with knowledge of the “origin of all Beings and their ongoing existence” (*The Telling* 39). “Memory” as one of the three constituents of “telling” refers not to the memory limited to “simple present personhood,” but to “remember[ing] what we in the whole were before selves were” (*The Telling* 24, 25). “Reason,” the second constituent in Riding’s concept of “telling,” when associated with “memory,” gives one the capacity to integrate knowledge of the whole “before selves were” with immediate presence (without this memory reason is a “servant of our bodies”—that is, it is incapable of thinking beyond survival instincts or concerns of the temporal self).

The three stages involved in writing a poem that she articulates in *Anarchism Is Not Enough* are: 1) intrinsic 2) logic or applied and 3) poetical or misapplied. This runs parallel to the three components of “telling” (memory, reason, and imagination) in *The Telling*. For instance, “intrinsic” (ANE) and “memory” (*The Telling*) are linked in that memory is the ability to remember beyond temporal identity which Riding sees as innate or intrinsic knowing. “Logic” and “analysis” (ANE) and “Reason” (*The Telling*) and are linked in their relation to the human ability to apply systems of language; and “poetic or misapplied sense” (ANE) and “imagination” (*The Telling*) are related in the word’s “suggestive power” or connotative power which requires the writer/reader to go beyond reasoning abilities. Imagination is needed in order to fill the gap between what words attempt to name and their failure to name in any absolute manner. Riding, both prior to

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92 The issue of gender is limited to pages 46-49 (*The Telling*).
and after her renunciation of poetry, speaks to the importance of destabilizing systems as a way to initiate the necessary performative between writer/reader and text in order to facilitate access to the “unreal” or “Being.” At both stages of her career, she resists representational writing, believing it to promote systems and counter the project of unification that is crucial to her non-dualist worldview.

Riding’s emphasis in *The Telling* on the “complete virtue of word use” shifts from an emphasis on the rejection of “synthetic entities” to a focus on “diction”—what she defines as “the use of words with attentive regard for their individual rational nature” (*The Telling* 70). However, as in *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, she underscores dissociation as a practice that can access “Being.” Riding believes that the power of words (“diction”) rests in their availability to human beings as a source of agreed upon definitions. All human beings are capable of reasoning and imagination. Everyone has access to both the common pool of rationally understood meanings and the ability to deal with the flux of meaning as contexts change and conditions shift in time. As James Oldham puts it “for Jackson, language is both the beginning and end of rationality” (254). In other words, language’s ability to mean and its failure to mean in any exacting manner divulges its power as a human language through which one can access to the spiritual realm of "Being." Readers’ innate ability to reason and imagine grants them the capacity to apply language to systems of meaning (reason) as well as the ability to ascertain the ways in which those systems fail, calling on the imaginative capacity in the meaning making process. The liberating force (freedom from hierarchies of systems) of words is contingent on the reader’s ability to recognize habituated patterns as well as the ability to disassociate from those routines. In this way, her spiritualism is profoundly secular in that
language as the route to the “unreal” or “Being,” is navigated through real world systems from which true communication in relation to ‘other’ becomes the unifying space where non-duality and knowledge of the “origin of all beings in their ongoing existence” is possible.

“Telling” as Action

Riding’s ideas of dissociation from systems of communication as a way to true communication are enacted in her essay “The Telling.” She creates a praxis in which normative expectations associated to reading an essay are dislodged, thereby providing the reader an experience of language in its “readiness for serving a pure instrument of truth” (Rational Meaning 448). She draws on the part of consciousness that has the ability to reason or apply commonly understood conventions of language. Readers utilize these habituated practices; however, when the text fails to cooperate by those standards, they are encouraged to engage their imaginative facilities to make sense of the text—thereby participating in the concrete moment, in an “ever-immediate truth.” “The Telling” (what Riding calls “a little book”) was first written as an essay for publication in Chelsea in 1967. The submission, a forty-seven page essay, included a “Nonce Preface” and an “Outline.” The second publication came out in 1972 in book form, and consisted of the original submission and another 125 pages of commentary on the main essay. The additional material was comprised of two chapters, titled “Preface for a Second Reading” and “Some After-Speaking: Private Words.” The following reading primarily focuses on the material that was submitted to Chelsea.

Starting with a “Nonce Preface”—a neologism suggesting the preface is designed for a particular occasion—Riding provides a hint that her essay will not adhere to
normative expectations of reading an essay. A preface that is designed for a single event contradicts the traditionally understood role of a preface as an introduction serving to enclose the book within an overarching frame. It contradicts conventional standards in the sense that a preface has a generalizing perspective which, in effect, works to make all reading experiences of the text identical. Conversely, a preface designed for a non-recurring occasion implies that the preface is suited to an individual event and does not have the capability to function uniformly for all readings of the text. This alludes to the notion that writing cannot be contained—that an author has no control over how readers will interpret and influence future readings of the text. In the essay Riding unsettles expectations of stability in order to get at the “ever-immediate truth” involved in true communication in her ideas of “telling.” Her “Nonce Preface” is apt in that it underscores the text’s relation to individual readings, emphasizing the individual’s role in influencing meaning in unpredictable ways—rather than reinforcing the generalizing effects of systematicity and the idea of textual fixity.

The placement of the “Outline” similarly disrupts conventional expectations of reading an essay. Its position in the text—between the preface and the beginning of the essay—leads one to believe that it is taking the role of a table of contents, evoking the clearly stated summary with headings and subheadings. However, instead, Riding writes two paragraphs that seem more appropriate in the body of an essay. The unconventional use of placing prose paragraphs in a section that seems to be functioning as a table of contents requires the reader to engage imaginative capabilities or think beyond habituated practices. The reader must use “initiative” in order to make sense of the text. Riding, again, puts into question the notion that there can be an objective reader “outside” a
stable sense of the text. She blurs the distinction between what should be “outside” (preface, table of contents) an essay and what should be “inside” (the actual text). She implies that there is no distinction and that objective observation is impossible. Like her non-dual concepts, she provides an experience of how in reading there are no borders, only one indistinguishable, indefinable moving whole as readers participate, changing and altering the text.

As one reads the second paragraph the definition of “outline”—referring to a line by which something is bound—becomes apparent and seems to be more appropriate than the definition that suggests an overview of a project with headings and subheadings. In the paragraph she alludes to an alternative to the dualistic nature of self, stating that her understanding of self is “implicated” in a “Whole,” a “manifold totality” that cannot be exceeded but is affected by “manifold individualness” (6). While her language is abstract and vague, one gets the impression that the “outline” functions as the “manifold totality” that cannot be exceeded and is constantly changing through “manifold individualness.” For instance, the line that she is drawing around her project (outline) is similar to the individual interpretive processes of reading (“manifold individualness”) that are always enfolding and expanding the book without the possibility of an objective “outside” position. Her vague statements do not clearly assert her purpose in the essay, but instead act as an undefinable “border” subject to multiple readings from which readers alter its meaning or defining lines by which it is bound. This enacts the idea of “manifold totality” in that, due to multiple interpretations, it cannot be enclose, rather its borders fluctuate and change in time through new readings. At the onset, Riding sets up a relation with the reader that has the potential to create “telling” (true communication) in her dismantling of
expectations for reading a book length essay. For instance, Riding draws on the reader’s reasoning abilities—the ability to logically apply language systems by calling on reader’s expectations regarding the function of a preface and table of context. However, at the same time, she subverts or puts those structures into question. Readers apply conventional responses, but must also rely on their imaginative abilities in order to make sense, thereby “mak[ing] its subject theirs” (61).

In the body of the essay, Riding continues to draw on readers’ reasoning abilities through maintaining expected norms of reading while unsettling those habitual patterns. The essay is divided into 62 numbered paragraphs varying from a third of a page to a page and a half in length. There are no introductory paragraphs laying out what is to come in an orderly fashion as is traditionally expected in an essay format. The paragraphs are connected through the repetition of phrases. For instance, the end of paragraph 2 mentions “missing stories” which is repeated in the first line of paragraph 3. Series of paragraphs are linked by topic, for instance, 7 through 10 critique philosophy (its “voice of a time,” that is, it limited perspective that remains in the temporal systems of reality). However, there are no transitional sentences that do the work of guiding the reader along a particular frame. Instead, the reader, lacking the conventional guide posts of summary and transitional sentences, must engage her imaginative abilities in order to sift through the information given. The confusion due to the dearth of organizational methods slowly diminishes as ideas begin to mount up through accumulation. The repetition of specific words and phrases reinforces a possible line of inquiry. Nevertheless the reader must make his own transitions between the gaps left by the author. Riding in this sense provides the reader an experience of accessing “Being,” in that one must negotiate
without established systems. One is left with the discomfort and confusion without the
crutch of habituated patterns and must rely on one’s individual impulses. This process
requires readers to dissociate from reading norms that produce automatic responses. The
reader is compelled to pay attention to the moment of reading and respond from radical
individuality.

In providing readers an experience of her ideas rather than encouraging a passive
response to authorial explication, she finds a way to communicate without the duality
associated to the illusion of an “inside” and “outside” (reader, outside viewing a book
that is inside the borders of front and back covers, passively absorbing the author’s
ideas). For example, the notion of “Wholeness” and “manifold totality” alluded to in the
“Outline” are elaborated on, illuminating her Jamesian-like ideas of non-duality and
wholeness. She discusses Christianity and the problematic way it separates history into a
“Before” (B.C.) and “After” (A.D.) (44). “Telling” opposes this dichotomy and
establishes unity through an enduring perseverance to individual difference in the
continuous present (or the “Now”) which wakes us up to the “all-that-is” (60). “When we
stand somewhat outside the story,” she states, we turn God and ourselves into two stories,
rather than going “from its first—Then to our Now without a break.” The notion of God
as perpetuating the separation of two stories “divides Before from After [and], keeps a
difference between then and Now never to be overcome” (44). The idea of unity that
connects “Then to our Now without a break” echoes Jamesian understanding of
“Oneness” that resists the monistic overriding notions of categorical sameness and is
understood as “parts strung together by the conjunction ‘and’” in a continual process that
yokes the past to new influences to consciousness. (*Pragmatism* 105).
The Jamesian lens illuminates how Riding evokes an experience of wholeness in her use of numbered paragraphs. The notion of wholeness as parts strung together is enacted through the paragraphs that are linked paratactically, rather than through transitional sentences. Knowledge gained from reading does not happen from a separation or a creation of “two stories”—that is, the reader on the “outside” being led or instructed by authorial explanation. Instead meaning develops as the pieces accrue. The repetition of ideas presented earlier influence ideas presented later and later ideas produce new contexts for ideas presented earlier. For instance, her critique of philosophy (paragraphs 7 through 10) that centers on philosophy’s limited temporal focus and its stabilization of time through systems is reinforce in her criticism of Christianity’s tendency to separate and fix time into the “Before” and “After.” Her argument expands from her discussion of philosophy to her discussion of Christianity in that we get another example of how ever-immediate truth is avoided. However, she does not give the reader traditionally expected clues or prompts such as “Like philosophy, Christianity is also guilty of divisiveness” or “Another way to conceive of the isolation in Western thinking is…” Nonetheless, by placing examples of institutions that foster isolation and separation next to each other in a paratactic manner, Riding encourages readers’ imaginative input to supply the connective link. In her example of Christianity she enlarges comprehension through the mention of the break between “then and now” which expands on philosophy’s temporal limitations. The first information is gathered into the context of the second. The use of numbers increasing in size enacts this phenomenon in the sense that 1 fits into 2, 2 into 3, 3 into 4, and so on.
This notion of wholeness and “manifold totality” are also manifested experientially in the way she ends the essay. Conventionally, one would expect a concluding section to highlight pertinent points in an argument. Instead she “ends” the essay by stating in the last sentence of paragraph 62, “should my names and descriptions of things not draw for you or you the circle of entirety, draw you or you that circle, as you know entirety, if each different circle contains all ourselves an infinite coincidence of truth will ring us ever round...Now I leave off” (54). The reader is left without any summary of the main points. Instead Riding addresses readers directly asking them to contribute. For instance, she seems to be saying that the circle of entirety—resembling “manifold totality” that has no outside—can have and will have many interpretations as each individual draws the entire. She encourages other readings of wholeness and alludes to the unfinished, incomplete nature of ever-immediate truth. There will be an infinite movement of entirety “ring[ing]” truth because new perceptions by new readers add to and change the previous obits of the circle—and will be folded into one entire whole. The particular ideas she presents may diminish, but a new configuration (coincidence) of truth will emerge. The ellipses add her statement “Now I leave off” gesturing to the unfinished nature of truth as well as visually leaving space for the reader.

She continues to disrupts conventional notions of the essay format by appending the essay with four short paragraphs (not numbered). The paragraphs include caveats warning against possible ego-driven interpretations of her text that would perpetuate the duality rather than the truth of oneness that she is adamant to get across. Her “final” statement in paragraph 62 seems to have reverberated in her mind after she composed it, giving her cause to reflect on how it could be misread. The text refused her “ending” and
inspired new ideas to clarify and enlarge her position. In this sense, she demonstrates how her essay is “a book in continual making” through the power of afterthoughts as they continue to “write” after one puts the pen down. In this example, the process enlarged her ideas, altering the whole through the absorption of new data. Instead of synthesizing those new ideas into the body of the text as is typical done in dealing with revision—setting them firmly within the “book ends” between introductory statements and concluding chapter—she places them after her ending statements in paragraph 62. She suggests that afterthoughts spill over and continuously refuse closure, underlining the truth of ever-immediate presence. In fact, the 1972 edition is an example of the never-ending nature of “telling” with its 125 pages of “after-speaking” written after the original 45 page text, “The Telling.”

In “Preface for a Second Reading” Riding continues to elicit a performatative through word choice. For example, she uses the word “simplifying” to discuss the detrimental effects of generalization (The Telling 60). She implies in this section that the radical individuality of the human state is simplified by custom and tradition. However, on the following page she uses “simplicity” in reference to Being or Subject. She states, “we should be using our small, individual simplicity for the understanding of the great simplicity of all-that-is.” In other words, to enter into the “personal sphere” of our radical individuality (rather than accepting self as the limiting, “simplifying” self which is subsumed in categories of social custom) is how one can access the “great simplicity of all-that-is” (i.e.: the manifold totality, the wholeness that is continual inclusivity, always inside, and ever-changing as new impressions provide new contexts). The “great simplicity of all-that-is” is a space that is without categorical systems that simplify or
reduce “the human state [radical individuality] itself to something easier.” Coupled with the abstract language, lack of summary statements, and transitional sentences, the choice to use “simplifying” and “simplicity” as words to define opposing concepts has the potential to cause readers to pause and reread. Readers are urged to reassess what they have read—to make sure they have followed Riding’s train of thought. The reader must let go of the passive readerly role and analyze the disparate way she applies connotatively similar words. In other words, the reader must engage her imaginative ability. Meaning is then produced by grappling with the confusion created in the text, sorting through the information given, thereby, contributing to the text. In this way, readers are interrupted from the passivity that is expected of them in the traditional essay format and encouraged to perform the “telling” that Riding refers to—“drawing their circle of entirety.”

The above example concerning her application of “simplifying”/“simplicity” clearly demonstrates her understanding of words as “both the beginning and end of rationality” (Oldham 254). Words are symbols that provide us with generally agreed upon meanings, in this case “to make simpler”/“a simple state.” Our reasoning abilities allow us to being or enter into language, determining those generally agreed upon terms. However, as Riding reveals, placing similar words in different contexts can drastically change their points of reference. Rationality, our ability to place words within the system of agreed upon meanings, is not enough in our process of meaning making. We must engage our imaginative abilities that can assess both the position of the word within a system and the position of the word in the new ever-changing and unpredictable context (something no system can account for). Riding states that in The Telling she “addresses the reader as speaker, one whose gift of reading is but the gift of speaking acknowledging
another’s gift of speaking” (61). In other words, Riding wrote the essay in a way that would demonstrate how reading, when interrupted from “the reading way of things”—that is, customs, habits, and “fashions” relating to communicative systems—allows the individual to contribute her voice. Not only does something new emerge in the reading/speaking of the reader but there is an acknowledgement of the past—the writer’s gift of reading/speaking. She states a few lines later, “I speak in consciousness of them [readers] as having speaking of their own to do; and no curtain drops at the finish.” In other words, reading/speaking has the potential to connect to a never ending telling that links the present moment to the chain of reading/speaking that existed prior to the current reading and extends into the future as readers’ continue “speaking.” In this way, writing and reading when dislodged from communicative systems evokes the “manifold totality” that she understands as the secular spiritual realm of the “unreal” or “Being.”

Riding’s “telling” involves a performative in which the act of reading/speaking connects one to the radically individual, immediate and embodied relation to “other.” In this way, the constancy in Riding’s thinking between her early and late work is apparent in how The Telling refines and extends her critique of systems evident in her early work. Her world view and ideas of language come fully in concert and her focus rests on the remediating value of departing from ranking constructs rather than on criticism of her contemporary’s use of systematicity. Her non-dual philosophy that has parallels to Jamesian subjectivity and consciousness stems, in part, from the contradictory position of being a female poet in the mist of the male avant-garde. Before her renunciation she is draw to and emulates the Fugitives’ egoist notion of the poet (male) as a way to be taken seriously. After her renunciation, she identifies with her notion of the feminine that offers
solutions to the duality and hierarchies she sees in the world around her. Her identification with a non-dual, democratic approach to living allows her to resists the male/female binaries that made being a female poet among the avant-garde difficult. It gave her the space to articulate a theory that offers solutions to dualities inherent in social norms—constructs that create competition and contention as well as gender imbalances that made her valuable insights go largely unrecognized.
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