Critique is not enough: the empirical imperatives of innovative American poetry

Christopher Rizzo

University at Albany, State University of New York, c.rizzo@gmail.com

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd

Part of the American Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd/1254

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
CRITIQUE IS NOT ENOUGH:
THE EMPIRICAL IMPERATIVES
OF INNOVATIVE AMERICAN POETRY

by

Christopher Rizzo

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts & Sciences
Department of English
2014
Critique is Not Enough:
The Empirical Imperatives of Innovative American Poetry

by

Christopher Rizzo

COPYRIGHT 2014
ABSTRACT

_Critique is Not Enough: The Empirical Imperatives of Innovative American Poetry_

proposes that innovative modern and early contemporary American poetries redefine the relation of knowledge, consciousness, and poetic performance to lived experience. This study demonstrates how the radically different poetic projects of Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Charles Olson not only equally insist upon empirically investigative poetics, but also endeavor, each to each, to individualize their poetic methodologies, which thus challenges the generalized Enlightenment myth of rationality. In that each of these writers undertakes to redefine the relation of knowledge, consciousness, and poetic performance to lived experience, they also undertake to rewrite our relation to the given practices of literacy that underwrite both modern and contemporary formations of culture.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I outline in my introduction, this book has been roughly twenty years in the making. I have had several mentors over the years, fortunately, but the two who have been the most influential are Pierre Joris and Don Byrd. It is for their conversation, advice, and generosity of phenomenal spirit that I thank them the most. This book would not have been written without them. I would be remiss not to mention my indebtedness to Robert Creeley, who, many years ago, made it clear to me that becoming a writer, both in critical and creative ways, importantly requires no handbook. More proximately, I have learned a tremendous amount from Charles Stein, Kenneth Irby, and Gerrit Lansing—if not from their work, and if not from their conversation, then from their example. The greatest teachers teach by example. I would especially like to thank Tomás Noel for his engaging and insightful afternoon conversations at the University at Albany about poetry and poetics. I owe a special word of indebtedness to Michael Peters as well. This book owes much to his own cosmopoetics. There are of course other scholars, artists, writers, and poets who, through both their work and their conversation, have influenced my thinking in this book; namely, Katherine Sullivan, Andrew Hughes, Whit Griffin, Jess Mynes, Dana Ward, David Rich, James Cook, Douglas Rothschild, and Tracey McTague. I would especially like to thank Anna Kreienberg for helping me see the final stages of this book to a conclusion. And in conclusion, I would first and foremost like to thank my family, especially my parents, Camille and Jerome, who are endlessly supportive of my efforts in life, which, in no small part, amount to my efforts throughout Critique is Not Enough.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract   iii
Acknowledgements   iv
Abbreviations   vii

Preface
The Empirical Primacy of Aesthesis   1
Renewing Empiricism   5
The Best of All Possible Worlds   17

Introduction: Cosmology, Poetics, and the Potentials of Empirical Form

     Cosmopoetics   19
     Cultural Mediation and the Special View of Creation   21
     Stepping Into the Empirical World: Di Prima’s “Rant”   24
     Whitman and the Pragmatics of Selfing a Mess   28
     Balancing the Cosmological Books   35
     *Psyche tou Kosmou* and the Potentials of Empirical Form   38
     Creative Strife and the Orders of Reality: Duncan’s “Idiocy”   45
     Contemporary Information   51

Chapter 1: Language Experiments: Whitman, Stein, and Knowledge of the Real

     Whitman’s Democratic Idiocrasy   55
     The Finish Beyond Which Philosophy Cannot Go   60
     The Ghost In the Rationalist Machine   66
     Experience and Reality Come to the Same Thing   73
     I Feel I Know Now: Stein’s “Bottom Nature”   76
     Frankly Openly Bored: Creation and the Myth of Rationalism   82
     Creatively Speaking: I Am I Because My Little Dog Knows Me   87
     The Fringe of Experience   91
     No One Goes Out to Buy Zero Fish   95

Chapter 2: The Ideal Language of the World: Pound and the Crisis of Self-Reference

     An Interpretation of the Cosmos by Feeling   101
     You Cannot Look at Zero Fish   106
     Those Flowers I Have Actually Seen: Pound, Zukofsky, and “Dame Philoserfy”   110
     Poetics, Mathematics, and the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness   116
     Leibniz’s *Characteristica Universalis* and the Cherry Tree   121
Pound, Frege, and the Crisis of Self-Reference 130

Chapter 3: The Olsonic Postmodern: Cosmopoetics and Empirical Constructivity

A Serious Character of the Post-West 138
There is No Frame 147
That Which Exists Through Itself: Autopoiesis and Identity 154
All the World’s Not a Stage: Emergence, Event, and Spacetime 161
All is There For Feeling 168
Negative Capability and the Science of the Imaginary 173
Alterrorization: Dialectic and the Problem of the Subject 178
Remember the Violets: Olson and Whitehead’s “Vectors” 185
When You Know What You Feel or Do: Origin, Animation, and the Mesocosm 191
We Are Our Emergencies: Information, Abstraction, and Lived Experience 198

Bibliography 202
ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Charles Olson

O/P  Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths
O/B  Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence
O/C  Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence
LL   Charles Olson in Mansfield: Last Lectures
TCP  The Collected Poems of Charles Olson
CP   Collected Prose
LFO  Letters for Origin 1950-1956
MAX  The Maximus Poems
MU   Muthologos: The Collected Lectures & Interviews
PT   Poetry and Truth: The Beloit Lectures and Poems
PVII The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II
SVH  The Special View of History

Works by Ezra Pound

ABC  ABC of Reading
TC   The Cantos of Ezra Pound
EW   Early Writings: Poems and Prose
GK   Guide to Kulchur
LE   Literary Essays of Ezra Pound
MA   Machine Art: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years
PC   The Pisan Cantos
P/F  Pound / Ford: The Story of a Literary Friendship
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P/Z</td>
<td><em>Pound / Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL</td>
<td><em>Selected Letters, 1907-1941</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td><em>Selected Prose 1909-1965</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td><em>Spirit of Romance</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Works by Gertrude Stein**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABT</td>
<td><em>The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td><em>Everybody’s Autobiography</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFH</td>
<td><em>History or Messages from History</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTW</td>
<td><em>How to Write</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIM</td>
<td><em>Lectures In America</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB</td>
<td><em>Tender Buttons</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WL</td>
<td><em>Look At Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures, 1909-45</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Works by Walt Whitman**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td><em>An American Primer</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td><em>The Complete Poems</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td><em>Specimen Days and Collect</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Empirical Primacy of Aesthesis

The title of Critique is Not Enough could have been very different. If I were a student of William James, and a far more conservative one than Gertrude Stein, in fact, then I would have stiffly yet accurately titled the present study Poetics, Empiricism, and Knowledge. As I doggedly and rather dogmatically demonstrate over the course of three chapters on Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Charles Olson, constructing knowledge of the real depends upon not only specifically lived rhythms of experience, but also, and more importantly, attentively feeling through such specificity of experience in its generative immediacy. Critique is Not Enough thus returns to the empirical philosophic tradition to reread these exemplary American writers and, in drawing upon the radical empiricism of William James and the empirically founded social theories of Bruno Latour, this study insists, at bottom, that empirically constructed forms of knowledge importantly underwrite what is variously described as “innovative,” “radical,” or “avant-garde” American poetics. While my main argument has diagnostic and thus pragmatically political aims, there is, at the same time, the matter of considering how both literary critique and criticism tend to treat their historical, cultural, and ultimately textual “objects” in a disciplinary climate of inquiry that, oftentimes, proves more criterial than critical. More than merely an interpretive intervention in American poetics, then, the empirical methodology of Critique is Not Enough undertakes to learn how to read the texts it treats from the texts themselves, rather than proceeding from the
assumption that, for instance, *The Pisan Cantos* will neatly fit into a rationally premade, a priori frame that reproduces a given logic of literacy.

The not altogether affective process of “feeling through” is known in Western thought as aesthesis, which is famously taken up by Plato in the *Timaeus*. Translators of Platonic texts often take *aisthēsis* to mean the ordinary perception of stimuli or objects and, in the *Timaeus*, Plato frames aesthesis with the rigorous dualism of Being and Becoming, the transcendent model of Being constituted by immutable ideal Forms on the one hand and, on the other, the immanent model of Becoming constituted by the sensual and fleeting existence that Whitman, for instance, celebrates with verve. In his attempt to unify these two models of reality, Plato dismisses aesthesis. He asks, “are the things we see and perceive by our other senses the only true realities? Is there nothing besides them and are we talking nonsense when we say there are intelligible forms of particular things?” (71). For the idealist Plato, such a question proves rhetorical. And, as I argue in Chapter 1, they are as well for René Descartes in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In other words, idealist philosophies may negotiate with the realist prospect of aesthesis, as both Kant and Hegel do, for instance, in the dialectical footsteps of Plato, but, at bottom, experience will always already obtain both general order and, thus, generalized meaning from sets of concepts given by Western rationalism.

Historically, the terms of the philosophic debate over the relationship between rationality and the real prove ubiquitously fundamental. In their introduction to *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, editors Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani rightly point out that Enlightenment thought introduced “the secular and materialist interpretation of human temporality,” which “displaced faith in a divine order, coming redemption and
transcendent meaningfulness, and substituted it with belief in human progress and earthly happiness” (12). While one can learn as much from Foucault’s well-known critique of the idea of Man, they go on to explain that Enlightenment thought “created the new myth of rationality and universalized its scope, experiencing it—mythically—as the revelation of the ultimate meaningfulness of existence” (12). Although one can argue that such a universalization of rationality’s scope is initiated by the philosophy of Plato and that, moreover, the Enlightenment marks the historical moment when such a universalization displaces rather than replaces a metaphysics of faith, the point is that of rationality’s status as “the new myth” or illusio. It is with Hegel, in fact, that a thoroughly idealist interpretation of material “earthly happiness” finds its most elaborately Enlightened form of this myth. Karl Popper, to whom much of the thinking in this book about dialectic as the default Western mode of conceptualization owes a debt, puts the matter succinctly:

As I have said, Hegel in his idealism went beyond Kant. Hegel, too, was concerned with the question: “How can our mind grasp the world?” But his theory—with the other idealists answered: “Because the world is mind-like”—was more radical than Kant’s. He did not say, like Kant: “Because our mind forms the world,” he said: “Because our mind is the world”; or in another formulation: “Because the reasonable is the real—because reality and reason are identical.” (“What Is Dialectic?” 415)

One purpose of this book is to think through alternatives to Hegel’s philosophy of identity, as well as the metaphysical systems of “the other idealists” that suffer the fate of systemically heterotelic incompletion. In doing so, the notion of aesthesis that I deploy throughout this study is grounded most importantly by William James, who, in his treatment of ordinary perception, develops an explicitly empirical understanding of aesthesis in the second volume of his magnanimous Principles of Psychology. “My theory, on the contrary,” James explains, “is that the bodily changes follow directly the
perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion” (449). Informed by James, then, the notion of aesthesis that I deploy folds together the process of immediate perception and emotion. As James points out, in fact, the trope of “folding” proves disingenuous if we assume that immediate perception and emotion suffer only a rationalist divide. By tracing aesthesis across the differing poetics of Whitman, Stein, Pound, and Olson, I demonstrate how these writers take reality and feeling, rather than the Enlightenment myth or illusio of a universalized rationality, as identical.

Chapter 1 begins by tracing Whitman’s theory of democracy discussed throughout Democratic Vistas. I argue that Whitman’s self-organizational vision for American democracy considers literature central to democratic practice and, more importantly, that such practice is grounded in networks of actual relations, each of which has its own specifically lived rhythms. Drawing upon key works in Leaves of Grass, Specimen Days, and the later collected notes and prose, I show how Whitmanic poetics is not only underwritten by aesthesis, but also how his insistence on the primacy of aesthesis anticipates the work of William James, specifically Essays In Radical Empiricism, in which he famously critiques the idealist Kantian conceptualization of consciousness. I then show how aesthesis bears upon James’ notion of the experiential “fringe” as a site of constructing knowledge of the world, which includes rather than depends upon the perception of language. The respective poetics of Stein and Whitman insist, each to each, on the empirical primacy of aesthesis as an epistemic process.

In Chapter 2, I argue that, despite Pound’s insistence upon scientific objectivism, aesthesis underwrites his ideogrammic method, which complicates traditional readings of
Poundian scientificity. Drawing upon key essays and longer prose works such as *Guide to Kultchur*, I show how aesthesis grounds his interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. On the other hand, however, I argue that Poundian poetics also attempts to develop an ideal language that overcomes the instability of linguistic representation and, in doing so, realizes what I call the “crisis of self-reference” in *The Pisan Cantos*. Framed by a discussion of Gottfried Leibniz and Gottlob Frege, specifically their analogous projects to develop such an ideal language, I show how Poundian poetics ultimately demonstrates the famous Russell Paradox that problematizes both realist and idealist conceptions of knowledge.

Chapter 3 begins with a critical reassessment of the relationship between Poundian poetics and that of Charles Olson. While Olson also insists on knowledge of the world through aesthesis, I argue that he ultimately rejects the metaphysical systematicity that Pound assumed necessary for poetics, a rejection that constitutes the cornerstone of the Olsonic postmodern. Drawing upon key lectures and prose works, such as his well-known “Projective Verse” essay, as well as his epic work *The Maximus Poems*, I show how Olson develops a non-discursive poetics of immediate experience. Resonant with not only the empiricism of William James, but also the cosmology of A. N. Whitehead, Olsonic poetics insists on the autotelic character of experience on the one hand and, on the other, the autopoietic or self-structuring character of knowledge on the other.

**Renewing Empiricism**

A wide range of contemporary thinkers inform this study, some more quietly than others. On the one hand, this book is unapologetically Jamesean in its empirical
insistences and, on the other, owes much to the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well, both of whom I marshal throughout. Other thinkers who have tacitly influenced the present study include Raymond Williams, whose *Marxism and Literature* is a guidebook to critical thinking about the nexus of literature, culture, mediation, and hegemony. While I do not deploy his theory on “structures of feeling,” it is certainly apt:

> We need, on the one hand, to acknowledge (and welcome) the specificity of these elements—specific feelings, specific rhythms—and yet to find ways of recognizing their specific kinds of sociality, thus preventing that extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (at root historically) reduced. We are then not only concerned with the restoration of social content in its full sense, that of a generative immediacy. The idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming. (133)

Elsewhere, Williams makes a distinction between structure and process, which is precisely the point at which this study departs from his thinking. A “structure of feeling” is always already a process and, to recall Williams, when we discuss the “generative immediacy” of experience, we should not assume an a priori distinction between the two. It is this sense of “generative immediacy” that inflects the problem of knowing reality only through mediation, and one of my main premises is that reality and speaking about reality are not categorically distinct. Williams: “If ‘reality’ and ‘speaking about reality’ (the ‘material social process’ and ‘language’) are taken as categorically distinct, concepts such as ‘reflection’ and ‘mediation’ are inevitable” (99). How does one escape from the devastating fatalism of such a proposition? The first step is to both acknowledge and welcome, as Williams says, “specific feeling, specific rhythms” through aesthesis.
Another contemporary thinker who has less quietly shaped my thinking throughout this study is the sociologist Bruno Latour. While I do not take up many of his specific arguments, most famously against rationalist models of modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour’s insistence on the inclusion of the nonhuman elements of empirical networks is particularly useful in reevaluating the rationalist divide between nonhuman nature on the one hand and, on the other, human society. More pointedly, however, I share with Latour a number of critical misgivings concerning our current age of critique.

In his provocative essay, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” Latour argues that the ubiquitous practice of critique now borders on irrelevancy precisely due to the cooption of key methodological features it assumes. The following passage is quite long, but I quote it in full because of its insight and relevancy:

Let me be mean for a second. What’s the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let’s say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu (to be polite I will stick with the French field commanders)? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique? Maybe I am taking conspiracy theories too seriously, but it worries me to detect, in those mad mixtures of knee-jerk disbelief, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social neverland many of the weapons of social critique. (230)
What Latour does not mention is that conspiracy theories are often founded upon “deep dark” connections between heterotelic and disparate objects of critique—buildings, billboards, novels, novelties, computer games, war games, fashion trends, ice caps, oil rigs, and so forth—and sets of a priori concepts meant to mediate or generally represent their reality. If we follow Latour’s logic, however, literary studies engages in paranoiac and conspiratorial activity with each vast textual network of meaning it discovers, structures, or deconstructs—the methodological imperatives depend upon who you ask. According to semiotic frameworks, for instance, one text will always already lead to another text, which posits an infinite network of articulations that transforms the heterogeneities of the cosmos—most often discussed in terms of multiplicities—into the One Text, outside of which is nothing, to recall the famous formulation of Derrida in *Of Grammatology*.

Drawing upon a critical distinction Latour makes in *Reassembling the Social*, to take such a contemporary methodological approach in literary studies entails making Stein’s poetics, for example, *ostensive* of a general theory, rather than *performing* its own (34-37). Does Stein ever discuss a “slipping chain of signifiers”? No. When she discusses Whitman in *Lectures In America*, however, she does negotiate with the problem of representation, saying that one of Whitman’s great strengths as a writer is assuming the methodological problem of “creating it without naming it,” the deictic “it” denoting what Kantians term the thing-in-itself, which, if we slide down such a slippery dialectical slope, is then the subject as well. She actually says that she is *interested in creation*, which is decidedly not a brand of Americanized jack-in-the-box deconstruction. Is it not disingenuous, then, to use an a priori general theory to “frame” Steinian poetics? In other
words, the methodology of *Critique is Not Enough* begins with exploring the performed articulations of poetic interest and, only then, using both classical and contemporary thinkers to elucidate particular points and situate a given poetics within the broader history of ideas. In a relatively recent essay, “Pound and the Poetry of Today,” Charles Bernstein puts the matter in different terms:

Starting in the 1980s, critics like Nicholls, Richard Sieburth, Jerome McGann, Burton Hatlen, Bob Perelman, Rachel DuPlessis, Kathryne Lindberg, and others, both most militantly Robert Casillo, tried to integrate Pound’s political and economic and gender ideologies into the trop(e)ical system that is his poetry. In doing this, these readers were giving Pound the respect of taking him at his word, in contrast to those critics who, like well meaning relatives, were often forced to say Pound didn’t know what he was talking about. The point here is not to say one approach or the other is right but to note that these approaches allow for different readings of Pound’s poetry. (*My Way* 156)

While I do not claim that Bernstein, nor any of the critics that he mentions, practices the empirical approach that I outline, I do give “Pound the respect of taking him at his word,” which will, as Bernstein points out, “allow for different readings of Pound’s poetry.” Be that as it may, I argue against the grain of literary studies writ large that there is no preformed theoretic “metalanguage” that Poundian poetics—nor that of the other authors I treat—demonstrates. “We have to resist pretending that actors [writers] have only a language while the analyst possesses the *meta*-language in which the first is ‘embedded’,” Latour argues, “As I said earlier, analysts are allowed to possess only some *infra*-language whose role is simply to help them become attentive to the actors’ own fully developed metalanguage, a reflexive account of what they are saying” (*Reassembling the Social* 49). In taking a position akin to Latour, I not only argue in spirit for a “renewal of empiricism,” as I outline below, I myself also perform experiential readings of texts that take “actors”—in this case, writers—“at their word,” which deviates from the traditional
practice of hermeneutics, in the main, by implicitly claiming that any empirical interaction between reader and written text is one of coextensive transformation between them and that, moreover, networks of empirically generative interpretations are neither *always already* stable nor topically singular. Again, as I discuss below, such a methodology is influenced by the thinking of Whitehead, in that it is both realist and relativist in a stroke.

The distinct problem that Latour outlines in “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” has to do with the “structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below.” As I discuss in Chapter 1, James takes “belief, or the sense of reality” as “more allied to the emotions than anything else,” which resonates with Whitman’s immediate acceptance of the real since, as James points out, the opposites of such belief “are doubt and inquiry, not disbelief” (*The Principles of Psychology* 2:283-84). In other words, the structure of conspiratorial explanations require the rationalist disbelief of “portrayals” or general theories of reality, while, at the same time, they appeal not only to a logical and thus retrospective causality, but also to the belief in the first proposition of a causal chain that emerges out of “the deep dark below” of reason, which will produce another, yet different, “portrayal.” In fact, it is the belief in the dualism of belief and disbelief that exemplifies one of the prime paradoxes of the hermeneutic practices that found Western literacy.

Latour questions models of reality that emerge through the Copernican Revolution of Kant, as well as other idealist models predicated upon discursive conditions of possibility. While reality indeed proves thinkable in general ways, it is
particularly knowable through the generative immediacy of experience, the conditions for which are not discursively or otherwise constituted, but decidedly a feature of actual occasions in themselves. The main argument of “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” is for a return to empiricism, rather than for the continuation of its critique. Commenting on his own early work, for instance *The Pasteurization of France*, Latour insists that the problem he faces is “not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism” (231). The present study performs inquiries into matters of authorial interest in the spirit of “renewing empiricism.” Latour:

> What I am going to argue is that the critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of a stubbornly realist attitude—to speak like William James—but a realism dealing with what I will call matters of concern, not matters of fact. The mistake we made, the mistake I made, was to believe that there was no efficient way to criticize matters of fact except by moving away from them and directing one’s attention toward the conditions that made them possible. (231)

What Latour terms a matter of concern—“concern” suggesting, in part, the construction and articulation of “facts”—I consider a matter of interest, for it is the singularity of interest coupled to “facts” that guides attentive aesthesis, and I indeed discuss the status of “facts” in the introduction at length. That said, while the present study discusses conditions of possibility, such as the devastating material conditions of the Civil War that inflect Whitman’s poetics, for instance, I do argue, both methodologically and with the matters of interest that I present, for the validity of an empirical constructivity in contemporary poetry and poetics, rather than for a discursive constructivism that is always already a subset of aesthetic materialism, which poet John Clarke bluntly terms a “mental disease” in his erudite *From Feathers to Iron* (76). Note that I argue for rather than against. Although I empathize with the work of, let’s say, a writer as eminent as
Barrett Watten and his latest study *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Politics*, I am decidedly more interested in how both human and non-human autopoietic entities can construct an actual world through real relations that are rhythmically and singularly specific to the environs of knowing that they collectively and coexistingly constitute, rather than through any discursive retrospectivity. In short, while I do seriously empathize with a wide range of materialist thinking, including that of Marx and Engels themselves, this study does not concern itself with—to say it in prepackaged academese—“articulating a materialism outside of discourse.”

Of course, I agree with Latour when he insists upon a Jamesean realist attitude. What Kant calls consciousness, I, along with James, call breath. Yet, in a discussion of Isabelle Stengers’ relatively recent parsing of Whitehead in *Thinking With Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, Latour comes closer to defining the attitude of the present study. “No one is at once more relativist than Whitehead—even an atom is a point of view—and more realist—even an atom is a point of view!,” Latour exclaims, pointing out that Whitehead “provides an extraordinary resource to get out of the tired old drama of realism versus relativism that has occupied so many of us for so long” (“What Is Given in Experience” 232). At the same time, it is necessary to note that the relativistic does not squarely equal the ideal. In other words, the distinction between realism and relativism, after Whitehead, proves sophistic rather than sophisticated. *Critique is Not Enough* argues for neither realism nor relativism, but rather outlines particularly experienced states of affairs. Which begs the rhetorical question of how, precisely, the double act of writing and reading is rightly situated outside the generative immediacy of experience. In other words, I question the systemic naturalization of rationalism itself,
which arguably finds its most cogent articulation in Hegel’s philosophy of identity outlined by Popper.

The classical distinction between realism and relativism returns us to Merleau-Ponty, specifically to his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty’s epistemology dedicates itself to the point that perception is already an awareness of objects. Since John Locke, the empiricist tradition took sensations or impressions as exclusively relativist in nature. Sensations indicated only an individual’s subjective state of awareness at a particular point in time and, as it turned out, such sensations were not squarely sensations at all, but rather information that required an interpretive representation by the Cartesian *cogito*. Merleau-Ponty argues against this particular empirical tradition, as well as against what he calls, in the *Phenomenology*, a tradition of intellectualism most apparent in Kant’s thesis that interpretation is founded upon a priori principles necessary not merely for the experience of objects, but rather for the possibility of such experience.

As forms of synthesis, such principles were conceptual and, needless to point out, the experience of objects was of a conceptual order. In the spirit of Neoplatonic thought, Kant understood form as a representative concept rather than in terms of the objectively sensible objects that were the property of Newtonian reality. As Merleau-Ponty argues, however, the empiricism that underwrites Kantian intellectualism was wrong from the start in its innocent reliance on Newtonian physics. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological view does not admit the relativist character of sensations and rejects the Hegelian need for mediation that Neo-Kantians would categorically assume, a need that would eventually prompt James to radically empty the cosmos of subjects and objects to posit a living reality of experience in *Essays In Radical Empiricism*. Traditional philosophy
invested itself so deeply in the importance of a subject-predicate proposition, or rather predicking a concept of the object, that it never took into account that perception, entangled with particular environs or perceptual fields, was already an awareness of objects. Said differently, to know the very materiality of phenomena in such a way is obviously far afield from Louis Althusser’s now infamous assertion that dialectical materialism stages an “epistemological break” from empirical philosophies that always already posit a subject who reveals the essence of a distinct object through the generalizing process of abstraction.

While Popper’s treatment of dialectical thought astutely points to the idealist excesses of Hegelian philosophy, Latour’s own treatment in We Have Never Been Modern proves equally insightful. With Kant, Western thought experiences the distinction between things-in-themselves and the transcendental subject “sharpened into a total separation” (56). Cartesian subjectivities recede infinitely from the world. As opposed to that of Kant, Hegel’s formalism is clear enough to see how dialectic reproduces contradiction in an ultimately devastating form, rather than synthetically reconciling “the people and the stones,” to recall W.C. Williams’ “A Sort of Song” in his 1944 collection The Wedge (Collected Poems 52). “Yet by believing that he was abolishing Kant’s separation between things-in-themselves and the subject,” Latour observes, “Hegel brought the separation even more fully to life. He raised it to the level of contradiction, pushed it to the limit and beyond, and then made it the driving force of history. The seventeenth-century distinction becomes a separation in the eighteenth-century, then an even more complete contradiction in the nineteenth” (57). Do we need the intellectual comfort of a rigorous close reading of either noumena in the Critique of
Pure Reason, or the methodic production of triad after triad in The Phenomenology of Spirit, to hear the force of Latour’s point? Yes. Only if we equally insist, however, on reproducing rationalist intellectualism and its postmodern disenchantment with the very logical structures meant to undergird a reasoned position. On the other hand, we would also need to generalize the generative immediacy of a radically felt awareness of the world in a thoroughly disciplined and self-reflexive response to the limits of intelligibility and, in turn, the limits of literacy itself.

The contemporary critique of empiricism, which denies the immediate experience of the actual world with a postmodishly dismissive gesture to the “empiricist myth” of unmediated access to reality—a gesture taught to graduate students across the globe with Pavlovian verve, I might add—rests upon the idealist trinity of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. Contemporary critiques of immediate access to reality as an “empiricist myth” themselves suffer the fallacy of “myth” as a social condition, however, due to the arbitrarily dialectical distinction between things-in-themselves and the subject on the one hand and, on the other, the subsequently discursive constitution of “myth” as a social condition itself. As I argued earlier, universalized rationality is the Enlightenment myth from which such critiques of empiricism suffer.

From a panoramic view, the issue here emerges at the confluence of culture and the symbolic. In tracing the history of culture as a concept, Chris Jenks explains that, from both sociological and anthropological viewpoints, to speak “of the cultural was to reaffirm a philosophical commitment to the difference, particularity and supposed plasticity that is ‘humankind’. Animals, even the chattering dolphins, ‘do’ nature, while human beings inevitably transform their world into, and by way of, a series (perhaps an
infinite series) of symbolic representations” (Culture 8). It is in this way that culture, articulated to language, becomes the domain of mediation – or else, arguably, mediation itself. “We no longer confront the natural as if we were continuous with it, as it is supposed that animals do,” Jenks explains, “We now meet with the natural and, indeed, experience it as preformed” (8). “We”? To whom does Jenks refer?

Such a view exemplifies a status quo rationalist position on the “empiricist myth” of immediacy. But there are problems with this formulation, not the least of which is that rationally separating out the socially constructed world of subjects and the objective or naturally given world of objects is wholly arbitrary and, of course, only itself requires the trope of “access” since, from an empirical perspective, one need not access that with which one is continuous. The position also assumes that language lacks materiality, that somehow neither spoken nor written words are usable things-in-themselves—a physical order of reality—and exist as a condition of experience. Ultimately, such a position will reduce to a might makes right argument: If you are an empiricist rather than a rationalist—if you do not share our philosophic assumptions that we take as either naturalized or denaturalized, depending on which position suits our self-justificatory and unilateral argument best, in other words—then you are no better than a “chattering dolphin.” Vae victis—and please serve our chardonnay. One is reminded of T.S. Eliot’s ostensibly cultured posturing: “Gertrude Stein was very fine but not for us” (ABT 202). Not for us.
The Best of All Possible Worlds

The list of thinkers influential to the present study is indeed tediously long. Given the time, this preface could outline the fully physical embodiment of consciousness discussed by Andy Clark, the psychic processes of reflective abstraction discussed by Jean Piaget, the biology of language and autopoietic systems discussed by Humbert Maturana and Francisco Varela, the classical-quantum boundary within a biospheric configuration space discussed Stuart Kauffman, or the self-structuration of spacetime discussed by Lee Smolin, to name the immediately memorable few. Perhaps, however, it is best to open the prolegomenon to follow with a very brief recollection of Friedrich Nietzsche, specifically the final sections of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

In “The Ass Festival,” which takes its allegorical cues from *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, Zarathustra realizes that doctrinal recalcitrance could consequentially make him behave, as scholars are wont to giddily recite, like a jackass. “And whoever has too much spirit might well grow foolishly fond of stupidity and folly itself. Think about yourself, O Zarathustra! You yourself—verily, over abundance and wisdom could easily turn you too into an ass” (315). As it inflects the present study, this passage suggests that *Critique is Not Enough* is merely one opening, one entry, one parable, one story among the many other possible stories to which I freely admit ignorance. The best of all possible worlds, Leibniz roll over, amounts to the best that one can accomplish in a particular time and space—a particular structure of knowledge, out of which will emerge the next.

Although the experience of breathy, healthy, physically explosive laughter interests me much more than wisdom as such—the philosophic wisdom sustained for over two millennia that powered the Enlightenment establishment—the former can easily
reduce to the latter out of habitual feeling, habitual thought, habitual rhythms of actual existence that amount to braying, like Nietzsche’s jackass, in response to the intrinsically physical and entirely secular sanctity of life itself, in all of its prolifically variegated and singularly unique forms. In an often overlooked yet insightful study, *On the Name*, Derrida points out that even “the counter-rule is still a rule” (8). I argue for the generative immediacy of experience precisely because even *counter-rationalism is still rationalism*. It is my hope that this study, in its opening, opening towards the field of attentions and articulations, opens to the future to create potentials for activity, rather than closing down such potentials in a hermeneutically and hermitically sealed book that, like the depth of space we see in the night sky, lacks air to breathe and sound to hear.
INTRODUCTION

Cosmology, Poetics, and the Potentials of Empirical Form

**Cosmopoetics**

“Indeed, perhaps it was the discovery that language is an order of reality itself and not a mere medium—that it is possible and even likely,” Lyn Hejinian speculates in the first of her “Two Stein Talks,” “that one can have a confrontation with a phrase that is as significant as a confrontation with a tree, chair, cone, dog, bishop, piano, vineyard, door, or penny—that replaced her commitment to a medical career with a commitment to a literary career” (*The Language of Inquiry* 90). Such a speculation has it exactly right. As either rhythmical marks on the page or rhythmical vibrations in the air, language is as physically experienced, and thus as known, as the things that constitute the world. While Hejinian situates Gertrude Stein’s work within a squarely empirical and phenomenological tradition, drawing upon James and Merleau-Ponty, respectively, she surprisingly circumvents the problematicity of mediation as such, however. Curiously, Hejinian leaves one to speculate about how “a confrontation with a phrase” can indeed prove “as significant as a confrontation with a tree,” despite the given critical climate in academe since the linguistic turn so-called, which is devoted, with Enlightened zeal, to evidencing the outright impossibility of such confrontational experience.

At the same time, I wonder at how long an age of critique can continue to develop and sustain compelling poetries that key into neither the modern logic of the representational poem on the one hand—to make a neatly reductive distinction—nor the postmodern logic of the non-representational poem on the other. After all, the new
millennium is over a decade deep. Stein was born in 1874, and the most famous of her more recalcitrant works, *Tender Buttons*, is a century old. If we are to discern the contemporary legitimacy of how “language is an order of reality,” then a serious reconsideration of the empirical tradition of twentieth-century innovative poetry and poetics is indeed in order. Whatever innovative writing practices might mean today—even if thought of as “post-avant,” to recall Ron Silliman’s temporally twisty term for contemporary innovative poetries—they tend to suggest discursive resistance in an age of critique, rather than an empirically practicable alternative to not only an official verse culture that emerges from New Critical practices, but also, and more saliently, the oftentimes theoretically innocent liberal humanism to which New Critics and their current progenies subscribe, as though it was a merely apolitical subscription to *The New Yorker*.

To borrow a description of Amiri Baraka’s poetics from Ammiel Alcalay, *Critique is Not Enough* argues for the contemporary relevancy of poetries that investigate “the relation of lived experience to knowledge, consciousness, and action” (*A Little History* 193). I am interested in the ways that the various *weltanschauungen* (worldviews) of these poetries rewrite the discursive assumptions of not merely the classical literary tradition, but also the determinism of cultural mediation, to construct a poetics that is empirically *au fond*. I am interested in how writing redeems empirical feeling from the disciplinary apparatuses of discourse and how, moreover, such redemptive gestures do not *always already* appeal to a general theory of knowledge, but rather to specifically lived rhythms in specifically lived environments or contexts of knowing. For instance, as Claudia Franken points out in *Gertrude Stein: Writer and Thinker*, “grammar as
representative of a repressive, authoritative pre-figuration of writing by rules, which is ‘not a thing to feel’...is not respected” by Stein (267). Grammar is constituted by ideal sets of concepts that control not merely thought, but also, and more importantly, one’s sense of rhythm. Grammar is not a thing to empirically feel.

**Cultural Mediation and the Special View of Creation**

In “From Experience to Discourse: American Poetry and Poetics In the Seventies,” Charles Altieri makes an important distinction between “a poetics of immediate experience and a poetics acknowledging its status as discourse,” and now that such a critical distinction is over thirty years old—the essay appeared in 1980—the question of an empirical poetics may strike us as either disingenuous or naïve, depending upon the degree of empathy we feel towards the early New American writing, spearheaded by Olson, that largely constitutes the literary landscape to which Altieri attends (191). In an age of postmodern critique, after the profound announcements of cultural and linguistic turns that readily reveal the ostensible “empiricist myth” of immediate access to reality, the main objective of the present study is to do more than merely revisit the diversity of philosophic systems that litter the history of Western metaphysics in an attempt to argue against the deterministic fatalism of an always already discursive impossibility to the potential relations between poetics, knowledge, and experience. Rather, my aim is to show how the poetic projects of Whitman, Stein, Pound, and Olson exceed the merely prosodic by rewriting, each to each, the philosophic assumptions that underwrite the problem of determining the real on the one hand and, on the other, the logic of referential discursivity that the term “myth,” understood as a social condition, surely implies.
Given a cursory glance, the effort of the present study may seem to disingenuously write against the grain of contemporary cultural wisdom in the humanities. In a word, culture indeed conditions how one makes sense of the world. By providing sets of values, ideas, and beliefs through acculturation, culture determines the ways in which we can relate to ourselves, others, and nature by orienting our desires and thus constituting our tastes and habits. To this end, I defer to Raymond Williams. Through acculturation we form culturally specific frames of reference, and given sets of dichotomous categories define good or bad, man or woman, black or white, rich or poor, and so forth. These reductive categories limit our ability to perceive, to think, and ultimately to act; the complexity and particularity of our experience is generalized and thus limited. By conditioning not only our human relationships, but also those to history, nature, nation, and ultimately to power, culture shapes how we understand reality.

This is not to overlook, however, the problematic of a monolithic and squarely hierarchical Discourse that underwrites Western culture to this day, despite a range of powerful postmodern critiques that theorize a plurality of discourses. Which is as much to say that the categorical division between discourse and culture itself strikes one as too dogmatic, especially if one is to construct useful and productive lines of inquiry into contemporary writing and writing practices. After all, if a plurality of discourses can produce a post-Marxist feminist critique that deploys Lacanian psychoanalysis to foreground a form of heretofore unrealized capitalist subjectivity, then who are we to say that such an approach cavalierly and, at the end of the day, illegitimately crosses the divide between culture and discursivity? Critiques that concern the relationship between commodity culture and its subjects, for instance, are indeed discursive.
Understood as a discursive formation, however, the ubiquitous conditionality of culture is arbitrary, at best, in the philosophic sense. At stake is how Whitman, Stein, Pound, and Olson write through the metaphysics of a liberal humanist discursivity that itself prescribes an ostensibly inescapable social determinism, which reads as a form of cultural fatalism. In other words, the development of poetic methodologies that exceed the theory and practice of classical prosody is at stake. Taken as serious thinkers in their own right, rather than mere writers whose projects are the culturally produced objects of inquiry for either literary criticism or theoretic critique, the development of a “poetics of immediate experience” that writes across the literary tradition amounts to the development of a cosmology or a *cosmopoetics*. While the projects of each of these figures obviously differ, at times in overtly significant ways, each engage “in re-taking the cosmology of creation as fact,” to recall Olson’s provocation (*CP* 364). It is important to note that the term “fact,” contexturally speaking, indicates an “act” or an actual process of energetic activity, rather than invoking the all too familiar dialectic between natural givens and social constructions. Each to each, their poetics unfold the potentials for empirical elaborations upon the methodological processes of creatural “fact.”

Interestingly, Olson discusses his view of cosmology in *Poetry and Truth*, a series of lectures delivered at Beloit College in 1968. “I happen, as a poet,” he explains, “to be interested in what is the old word, I think, for creation as a structure—which is the word cosmology” (13). While Olson fails to name his source for such a definition, his imperative is clear. The Greek term *kosmos* (κόσμος), used significantly by Whitman as well, means variously to order, arrange, structure, and so forth—decidedly not in harmony with the quotidian definition of a complete, orderly, and harmonious system.
Like his view of history, Olson’s view of “creation as a structure” is indeed special, if only due to the processual character of systematicity that it homologically suggests. In other words, if structure is always a creatural process of construction, then no poetics, no cosmology—indeed, no general system of thought—is ever complete. As we will see in the final chapter, the view of “creation as a structure” underwrites the actual contexture of structures without the conditionality of a squarely metaphysical structuralism to determine the features of creatural systems.

Stepping Into the Empirical World: Di Prima’s “Rant”

The narrative of *Critique is Not Enough* did not begin with the respective poetics of Whitman, Stein, Pound, or Olson, but rather with that of the New American writer Diane di Prima, specifically a piece entitled “Rant,” written while di Prima was lecturing at the University of Buffalo Poetics Program on Olson in the mid-1980s. “You cannot write a single line w/out a cosmology,” di Prima begins, establishing the necessity of a cosmology understood as “creation as a structure.” She continues:

there is no part of yourself you can separate out saying, this is memory, this is sensation this is the work I care about, this how I make a living

it is whole, it is a whole, it always was whole you do not “make” it so (*Pieces of Song* 159)

Recalling Pound’s infamous insistence on making *The Cantos* cohere, di Prima writes across the grain of not merely the rational imperative of categorization, but also, and more saliently, the discursive logic that requires such an imperative for conceptualization to occur. As she later declares, “discourse is video tape of a movie of a shadow play,” and,
as we will see in Chapter 3, it is with the Platonic development of Socratic dialectic that
the fixed systematicity of discourse establishes such a threefold removal from the
immediate experience of the real.

What is at stake for di Prima is equally at stake for not only Olson, but for
Whitman, Stein, and Pound as well: How does it mean to construct a poetics, a
cosmology, a singularly comprehensive and intelligible image of the world and one’s
relation to that world—in short, how does it mean to construct a weltanschauung specific
to not merely one’s literary affiliations or commitments, but also, and more importantly,
specific to one’s own empirical existence, a weltanschauung that is neither commonly
given by culture nor rigorously selected from the cannon of Western philosophic thought,
but rather one that is continually constructed through empirical engagements with the real
to singularize consciousness?

“There is no way you can not have a poetics,” di Prima warns, “no matter what
you do: plumber, baker, teacher” (160). In doing so, she points out the problem of
cultural inheritance and conditioning on the one hand and, on the other, suggests that not
only are “poetics” and “cosmology” strongly homologous terms, but also that individuals
are ultimately responsible to take up the challenge of actively constructing their
weltanschauung:

There is no way you can not have a poetics
no matter what you do: plumber, baker, teacher

you do it in the consciousness of making
or not making yr world
you have a poetics: you step into the world
like a suit of readymade clothes (160-61)
The consciousness of the individual may be individual—the teacher, for instance, goes about her day without a cosmogonic thought, her experiences mediated and generalized by discursively constituted cultural categorizations deployed through habits of use—yet such a consciousness is not constructed actively in accordance with the particularity of experience. Interestingly, when Stein insists that “if anything is alive there is no such thing as repetition,” she insists, equally, on the singularity of empirical knowing (*Lectures In America* 174). Only if experience is mediated by a discursive logic that will first “separate out” characteristics of a “whole” experience and, through the retrospective process of rationalization, recombine the patterns of experience in general ways, can cultural patterns of meaning then repeat in the metronomic manner of an iambically founded measure, to recall Pound’s injunction “to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (*LE* 3). On such rational sense-making, di Prima’s stance is clear:

> the ultimate claustrophobia is the syllogism
> the ultimate claustrophobia is “it all adds up”
> nothing adds up & nothing stands in for anything else (160)

As we will see in Chapter 2, Pound attacks syllogistic logic because, in part, the syllogism functions to manipulate sets of abstractions that are only contingently articulated to the particularity of the real and, thus, the syllogism functions to generalize an empirically constituted image of the world.

Such an *imago mundi*, of course, recalls Olson. In Chapter 3, we will see how Olson emphasizes not only the necessity for the singular process of such an image, but also the necessity for the singularity of all things—so singular, in fact, that “nothing stands in for / anything else.” When di Prima points out that one will inevitably “step
into the world / like a suit of readymade clothes,” she suggests that such a suit will
ultimately prove ill-fitting, if only because, despite over two millennia of tailoring in the
West, it is still cut from Platonic cloth—notwithstanding transient issues of literary style.
Which is as much to say that a mediated image of the world, rather than one actively
constructed through the generative immediacy of experience, always already appears
either congruent, or incongruent with the general patterns that ideal Forms condition.
Only through a discursive optic, in other words, can one rationalize the “ungrammatical”
characteristics of di Prima’s “Rant.” Grammatical constructions, akin to the iambic
metric that Whitman eschews, for instance, attempt to make manifest discursively
preformed idealities, rather than empirically performed actualities. In di Prima’s case—as
it is with Whitman, Stein, Pound, and Olson—such performance turns upon the refusal of
dualities that “separate out” the experiential body from the material world of real
relations. Di Prima:

There is no way out of the spiritual battle
the war is the war against the imagination
you can’t sign up as a conscientious observer

the war of the worlds hangs here, right now, in the balance
it is a war for this world, to keep it
a vale of soul-making (161)

Such a deadly struggle “against the imagination” is waged by, precisely, the cultural
conditionality that readily supplies images of the real, the ill-fitting “readymade clothes”
that homogenize not only experience, but also the psychic identification with the self, the
world, and the actual epistemic relations between them. As a sensitive reader of Olson, di
Prima is surely aware that the Greek term psyche (ψυχή) indicates not only
“consciousness,” but also “self,” “soul,” and “breath.” As strongly homologous terms,
“soul-making” is also consciousness-making and self-making in a stroke, and the addition of “breath” to this nexus of terms suggests the radical physicality of psychic processes. The actual, empirical struggle—decidedly not the idealistic struggle of purely symmetrical yet contradictory dialectical forces that undergo sublation—proves a struggle “for this world, to keep it / a vale for soul-making.” The construction of an image of the world, an *imago mundi*, an image of “a vale for soul-making,” an image of earthly life rather than the homophonic “veil” that conceals such a truing process, “hangs here, right now, in the balance.” Of course, such a “balance” is wholly that of the cosmos, which knows neither good nor evil, since both are culturally mediated concepts and nothing more. The cosmos knows only the Olssonic “fact” of “balance,” blind to the moral force of mortal coils, yet inflected by sensation nevertheless.

**Whitman and the Pragmatics of Selfing a Mess**

In a recent essay on Whitman, the seemingly immutable literary critic Harold Bloom observes that in “the odd, rather luridly impressive death-poem, *Chanting the Square Deific*, an amazing blend of Emerson and an Americanized Hegel, Whitman identifies himself with Christ, Hermes, and Hercules (*Walt Whitman* 97). “Chanting the Square Deific” is commonly read by Whitman scholars as outlining a transcendentally Neoplatonic—if not a squarely American Transcendentalist—theology, a conclusion with which I go part of the way, if only because the poem, rife with theological motifs, succinctly outlines a broader Whitmanic cosmology. Yet Bloom’s casting of the poem as “an amazing blend of Emerson and an Americanized Hegel” cursorily strikes one as not only curiously “odd,” but also “luridly” unimpressive. Despite a range of rigorously
thorough discussions on the cherry-picked relationship between Whitmanic poetics and Hegelian philosophy, the most contemporarily cogent of which is arguably Kathryne V. Lindberg’s essay “Whitman’s ‘Convertible Terms’: America, Self, Ideology” collected in *Theorizing American Literature*, I am more interested in the poet’s empirical insistences, which, in terms of Whitman scholarship, are most often couched in critical discussions of both the pragmatic and phenomenological aspects of his *weltanschauung*. Rather than cast Whitman as “an Americanized Hegel” by precedential default, this study reads his poetics as neither commonly given by the classical literary tradition nor selected wholesale from the cannon of Western philosophic thought, but rather as one that is continually constructed—just as *Leaves of Grass* is a continuous construction—through empirical engagements with the real to singularize consciousness. And, as we will see in Chapter 1, Whitman understands “consciousness” not in the airily metaphysical sense commonly taken up by Anglo-American Romanticism write large, but rather as a fully physical psychic construction that emerges from the rhythmically generative immediacy of experience.

About Hegelian philosophy Whitman knew little. Joseph Gostwick’s 1854 anthology, *Outlines of German Literature*, turns out to be the poet’s primary source text, although, as Lindberg points out, Gostwick affords Hegel “nineteen pages in which he attempts to lay out Hegel’s major themes and texts by summary, with only about a page of translation. Most quotations are drawn from the Introduction to the *Encyclopedia* and from *The Philosophy of History*” (*Theorizing American Literature* 250). What would one say of a poet, today, who read roughly twenty pages of Derridean philosophy in summary, replete with one entire page from *Writing and Difference* or *Margins of Philosophy* in
translation? Surely, it would be foolish to call that poet an Americanized Derrida.

Lindberg, however, does provide us with a far more productive observation:

Whitman’s direct references to, and invocations of, Hegel and the American Hegelians occur late in his career as attempts to defend his version of America on philosophical grounds and to enlarge his audience from his few confirmed Whitmanians to English and Continental patrons and academics. (251)

In saying that such “references to, and invocations of, Hegel” amount to a display of opportunism by an unarguably shrewd American writer, I propose to avoid the ubiquitous problem in criticism today of reading a poet’s most readily acknowledged philosophical source either in place of the poetry, or as a critical “frame” for the poetics. Whitman was well aware of the historical relationship between philosophy and poetry that Gordana P. Crnković, in a recent essay on the difficulties of translating “poetic prose,” articulates:

Art apprehends the world and we apprehend the art through our humanized senses—our ears, eyes, touch. This sensual apprehension profoundly affects us and changes our minds, but in ways different from those caused by clear concepts. From Plato on down, however, European and Western philosophy has commonly deemed such aesthetic apprehension inferior to conceptual cognition. (The Sound of Poetry, The Poetry of Sound 94)

As a poet who celebrates “sensual apprehension” throughout his poetry and prose, Whitman understands that his is likely to be considered an “inferior” body of work by both the American Hegelians and Continental academics alike. In other words, Whitman attempts to “defend his version of America on philosophical grounds” precisely because it is only upon such “grounds” that scholars and critics, both American and European, could possibly consider his project of import at all. As Lindberg flatly states, the “indisputable fact that the American poet knew the German philosopher only second- or thirdhand through summaries and poorly translated fragments hardly prevented Whitman from capitalizing both on Hegel’s image and on certain hints that endorsed his own
ambitions for American poetry” (248). I find it difficult to read Whitman as an “Americanized Hegel” based “on certain hints.” On the other hand, I am inclined to agree with the dated yet obviously still relevant essay by Olive W. Parsons, “Whitman the Non-Hegelian,” in which she traces a range of significant differences between the respective projects of poet and philosopher. “In regard to nature, to the universal and the particular,” Parsons writes, “to the concrete and the abstract, to the universe, to the self, to the body, to the soul, and to immortality, Hegel and Whitman stand so far asunder that many of the similarities between them cited from time to time are misleading, if not fallacious” (1093).

Whitman is similar, however, to an entirely different thinker in the history of Western ideas. D.J. Moores suggests that Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is less significant to Whitmanic poetics than Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, for Whitman “anticipated Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist doctrine: ‘I am the absolute source—my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them’” (*Mystical Discourse in Wordsworth and Whitman* 77). Moores is quite right to highlight Merleau-Ponty’s existential imperative, upon which he expands in the introductory paragraphs of the *Phenomenology*, explaining that “[a]ll my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless” (ix). Whitman:

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is (*CP* 121)

In other words, Whitman claims that “I am the absolute source.” Whitman’s vision and audition of the American landscape and life of its people is inextricable from his
“particular point of view,” his “experience of the world without which the symbols of science”—or the signs of language, for that matter—“would be meaningless.” Earlier in “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes:

I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)
My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods,
No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,
I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooking you round the waist,
My right hand point to landscapes of continents and the public road.

Not I, not any one can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself. (CP 118)

While it certainly is “odd” for such a Hegelian so-called to have “no philosophy”—precisely where does sublation occur here, anyway?—my point is that this passage demonstrates an empirically “particular point of view,” punctuated by an insistence on “the public road” of life’s “perpetual journey” that one must particularly come to know through experience. In this respect, neither organized religion (“church”) nor organized thought (“philosophy”) have much empirical use value to Whitman. In his insistence on the necessary primacy of experience, in fact, Whitman sounds more akin to Herodotus than Hegel.

In another interesting and recent study, The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy, Stephen John Mack notes that “in Whitman we have the condition of thought (immediate experience), we have an aspect of the cause of thought (problematic experience), and we have the effect of that cause and condition (thought itself)” (61). While I applaud Mack’s analysis, we should recall that the method of any
analytic requires the division of concepts into discrete logical categories to supply
experience with meaning and, in turn, that Whitmanic poetics takes such immediacy and
problematicity as synonymous terms; as Mack suggests, the Whitmanic “thought itself” is
a consequence of its empirically existential condition. Put differently, meaning is not
prior to the generative immediacy of experience, which, from a contemporary theoretical
vantage, may strike one as problematic, as Philip Fisher eloquently says:

For a late-twentieth century reader who has been encouraged to think that
sexuality, or even the humanist idea of “Man,” is a historical formula of relatively
local meaning, the swagger of Whitman in his confidence that “just as you feel
when you look on the river and sky, so I felt”…seems either naïve or simply
incredible…for Whitman the politics of any aesthetics within a democratic social
space requires that there exist experiences across time that not only will happen in
identical ways but will be noticed—that is, arouse attention—and will even
produce the same feelings within people living centuries apart. (The New
American Studies 78-79)

Fisher’s hesitancy about Whitman’s “swagger” is entirely appropriate for the
contemporary thinker who feels the theoretical ghost of Foucault reading over one’s
shoulder. On the other hand, however, it is exactly the status of “feeling” in Whitman that
Fisher misses. It is not that experiences “will happen in identical ways” or that such
experiences “will even produce the same feelings within people living centuries apart.” It
is that the generative immediacy of experience commonly allows the human being—“one
of a living crowd”—to know the world particularly. “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or
ever so many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd (CP 191)

Whitman does not articulate the repetition of a particular emotion or set of emotions
here—happiness, contentment, awe, and so forth—but rather the common process of
feeling itself, which has not only to do with the particular experiences of emotion, but also the identicality of that emotion with the sensual perception of “the river and sky,” from which emerges “thought itself.” If there is a human condition—decidedly not the human condition—expressed in this passage, then it is that of knowing the world through the generative immediacy of experience. While specific to neither “time nor place,” such empirical knowing does not transcend its own necessity for the radical physicality of time and space. The capability of feeling—of experiencing perception and emotion at once, to recall James’ doctrine of perception—constructs both the particularity and commonality of the “absolute source” of selfhood in merely a “look.”

If the Whitmanic self, this “absolute source,” is also universal, then it is only so through an ability to empirically know the real. Actual earthly life requires the generative immediacy of experience. As Crnković notes, “such aesthetic apprehension” is deemed “inferior to conceptual cognition” by philosophy for a range of reasons, not the least of which is that, in the immediacy of experience, life proves intractably messy or “problematic.” From the Platonic development of Socratism to the present, traditional philosophy functions to systemically impose a logical and rational order upon everything that constitutes the universe, and such systems consequentially have no place for wandering self-contradiction, indirection, or “striding through the confusion” of daily existence with a Whitmanic confidence in being alive. Michael Warner:

Whitman’s writing thematizes a modern phenomenology of self everywhere: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself.” But it almost always does so in order to make the pragmatics of selfing a mess: “And what I assume you shall assume.” (Breaking Bounds 40)

Warner shrewdly and quite accurately points out that Whitmanic “selfing” is, in a word, messy. In fact, little of Whitman’s “kosmos” is dialectically tidy—a subject cleanly
separated out from an object, for instance—yet I do not believe that Whitman’s writing
undertakes “to make the pragmatics of selfing a mess.” Generally speaking, pragmatic
approaches to knowledge inquire into the problem of know-how, which is empirically
oriented, rather than the problem of know-what, which is rationally oriented. In this sense,
“the pragmatics of selfing” is characteristically “a mess” because “selfing” is itself an
actual, empirical, earthly process of indirection. It is upon real “grounds,” not those of
Hegelian philosophy, that Whitman founds his poetics, which is no better exemplified
than in “Song of the Exposition”:

I raise a voice for far superber themes for poets and for art,
To exalt the present and the real,
To teach the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade,
To sing in songs how exercise and chemical life are never
to be baffled,
To manual work for each and all, to plough, hoe, dig,
To plant and tend the tree, the berry, vegetables, flowers,
For every man to see to it that he really do something; for
every woman too (CP 231)

Balancing the Cosmological Books

If Whitmanic poetics undertakes to “exalt the present and the real,” then how, as
Bloom suggests, can we read “Chanting the Square Deific” as a “death-poem”? While
unquestionably inquiring into the character of mortality, the poem celebrates, with
Whitman’s trademark optimistic zeal, the four prime dimensions of his cosmology, all of
which are constituted by multiple figures. For instance, when we inquire into Whitman’s
geometrical “square” from a Judeo-Christian standpoint, we see how he adds a fourth
dimension to the traditional Godhead trinity of God, Christ, and Holy Spirit, the latter of
which is cast as the feminine “Santa Spirita.” Of course, for Whitman the third dimension
is Satan, who epitomizes pride, struggle, revolt, and so forth. Usefully, Bloom points out Whitman’s use of Greek mythological figures, too, namely Hermes and Hercules, who equally constitute the dimension of “sorrow,” “labor,” and “suffering” articulated to “affection,” “hope,” and “charity” traditionally personified by the Christ figure (CP 458). Unlike a classical geometric “square,” however, Whitman’s cosmological structure is not a bloodless Pythagorean abstraction, but rather a living, breathing form that emerges from the diversity of human experience: it is a consequence of experience, rather than an ideal model contingently articulated to the physical world.

Needless to say, such a view is far afield from reading Whitman as “an Americanized Hegel,” as critic Kerry C. Larson does, for instance, in her reading of the poem. Larson finds “an unmistakably formulaic slant to the poem’s development, as though Whitman had only to set up his antithetical drives and then let the work of dialectic run its course” (Whitman’s Drama of Consensus 227). I argue that the poem breaks the “formulaic slant” of triadic and thus dialectical thinking in its development of a fourfold cosmological view and that, moreover, “antithetical drives” are not opposed theses, but rather identified potentials, or rather, as Whitman says, the fully physical “real identities” of creation itself.

Organized in four discrete cantos that reflect the dimensional quality of Whitman’s cosmology, “Chanting the Square Deific” begins by rewriting the classical philosophic relationship between the atemporal or eternal essence of reality and processes of actual change, the sensual character of the latter always already understood as subordinate to the former:

Chanting the square deific, out of the One advancing, out of the sides,
Out of the old and new, out of thee square entirely divine,
Solid, four-sided, (all the sides needed,) from this side
Jehovah am I,
Old Brahm I, and Saturnius am;
Not Time affects me – I am Time, old, modern as any,
Unpersuadable, relentless, executing righteous judgments,
As the Earth, the Father, the brown old Kronos, with laws,
Aged beyond computation, yet ever new, ever with those
mighty laws rolling (CP 457)

Whitman proposes that the total structure of the cosmos is not atemporal, as dualistic
transcendental models of reality posit. In the very act of voicing “I am Time,” Whitman
conflates the eternal essentiality of reality and empirical sensuality, denying the One an
atemporal character. What is more, “the brown old Kronos” is as spatial as “the Earth.”
The cosmological imperative of temporality and spatiality folded into one actual
continuum of “mighty laws rolling” suggests that the actual spatiotemporal cosmos,
rather than the abstract representation of that cosmos, defines the One. Whitman:

Therefore let none expect mercy – have seasons,
gravitation, the appointed days, mercy? no more have I,
But as the seasons and gravitation, and as all the appointed
days that forgive not,
I dispense from this side judgments inexorable without the
least remorse (CP 457)

If “Chanting the Square Deific” is indeed merely a theological treatise and nothing more,
then why do we find Whitman waxing on “the seasons” and “gravitation”? Precisely
because the “mighty laws rolling” are natural laws open to the moral inflections of
interpretive processes. For instance, while the ostensible father of modern physics,
Galileo Galilei, determined that the phenomenon of gravitation accelerates all objects
with mass at the same rate equally, the facticity of such a determination does not exceed
social construction. “There are laws,” Olson proclaims at the outset of his important
essay “Human Universe,” and Whitman’s claim, despite the problematic of social
constructivity, anticipates that of Olson (CP 155). In other words, the cosmos knows nothing of the moral articulations of good and evil, right and wrong, and so forth. What makes such “mighty laws” both “mighty” and “righteous” has nothing to do with the Word and everything to do with the empirically *just* observation that, if I drop the voluminous *Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems* and my pencil at the same time, then both objects strike the floor simultaneously.

Rather than strip the cosmos of any “righteous” or morally upright character, Whitman instead inflects the notion of the “righteous” itself, suggesting that *the physical events that happen in the cosmos are right because they happen*, which is not a tautology. As far as Whitman is concerned, “each thing exactly represents itself,” as he exclaims in “All is Truth” (CP 486). Scientific discourses may have different ways to represent Galilei’s findings, but such representations—which always already have ethical and political dimensions precisely because they are socially constructed—are only contingently articulated to an actual event that “exactly represents itself.” Whitman’s cosmology admits an actuality to empirically felt change, out of which emerges the fully physical essence of reality known as gravitation.

*Psyche tou Kosmou* and the Potentials of Empirical Form

What I have outlined thus far of Whitman’s cosmology should recall the classical philosophic distinction between immanent and transcendent models of reality, the former of which are commonly termed process philosophies and strongly resonate with his poetics. Indeed, Whitman anticipates Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of “eternal objects” put forth in his magnanimous *Process and Reality*. A key feature to Whitehead’s
cosmology, eternal objects are “potentials for the process of becoming” and, as such, constitute definitive determinants of “actual entities,” or rather the “events” that Whitehead terms singular occasions of becoming (PR 29). Eternal objects function as ideal abstractions, but, in turning Platonic ideal Forms on their head, eternal objects are only encountered in concrete experience. Potentials must emerge from actual, evental occasions. Whitehead:

The actualities have to be felt, while the pure potentials can be dismissed. So far as concerns their functionings as objects, this is the great distinction between an actual entity and an eternal object. The one is stubborn matter of fact; and the other never loses its ‘accent’ of potentiality. (PR 239)

A “stubborn matter of fact” is one of immediate concrete experience, and only out of such actual experience can one abstract phenomenological sensations, geometrical shapes, mathematical numbers, physical laws, and so forth. Consequently, real networks of relations between actual entities obtain their universal qualities from particularly emergent potentials. In this way, Whitehead is able to unify immanent and transcendent models of reality in one organic process philosophy.

I noted earlier that I do not read Whitman as “an Americanized Hegel,” nor do I read him as any form of dialectician. His is a cosmology synonymous with a weltanschauung that, as we saw with di Prima, is neither commonly given by the classical literary tradition nor selected wholesale from the cannon of Western philosophic thought, but rather one that is continually constructed through empirical engagements with the real to singularize consciousness. Yet, while the very writing of “Chanting the Square Deific” serves to further define such a singular cosmology, Whitman does anticipate Whitehead’s eternal objects, in that Platonic ideal Forms are now empirical forms snatched from the fluency of actual change. Whitman:
Defiant, I, Satan, still live, still utter words, in new lands
duly appearing, (and old ones also,)
Permanent here from my side, warlike, equal with any, real
as any,
Nor time nor change shall ever change me or my words. (CP 458)

As the personification of resistance, Satan functions as an eternal object, a potential for
the process of becoming that is not only as “real as any” in the actual occasion of
immediate experience, but also, and just as important, unaffected by the actual
temporality of “change.” To feel “warlike” is to select a characteristic of Satanic
potentiality in the generative immediacy of experiencing an actual occasion, which, in
turn, defines actual relations in real time. Experience obtains meaning not from a priori
social conditions, but rather from sensibly emergent potentialities.

Again, the obvious counterpoint to such an argument is that the signifier,
“warlike,” is both socially constructed and arbitrarily articulated to its signified.
Whitman’s cosmology, however, begins not with conceptuality, but with feeling, which
bifurcates into perception on the one hand and emotion on the other. In other words,
while the referential meaning of “warlike” proves unstable, to actually sense and thus feel
potentials occurs first and foremost. To feel “warlike” is the same kind of thing as to feel
the effects of gravity, for instance, in that each “exactly represents itself.” While
postmodern semiotic theories tell us that there are irreconcilable gaps between signifiers
and signifieds, and that the construction of knowledge occurs exclusively within this
slippery linguistic domain of mediation, the cosmological imperative of Whitmanic
poetics tells us, to again recall di Prima, “nothing stands in for / anything else” and that,
moreover, the construction of knowledge occurs with feeling through the selection of
potentials by actual entities that amount to their own specific occasions, rather than an
additive set of abstract relationships, wherein “nothing adds up” when the theoretic representations of reality, along with their variables, proliferate exponentially. One can give any name to gravitation, in other words, but the phenomenon expresses itself through empirically felt effects.

In “Chanting the Square Deific,” the Satan figure functions to balance that of the Christ figure who appears in section two of the poem, ultimately inflecting a “dissatisfied,” “despised,” and “brooding” Satan with “sweet love” (CP 458). As we saw, the first section mainly deals with the motif of qualitative temporality and, again to balance the geometrical figure of the “square deific,” the fourth and final section of the poem posits the living spatiality of the geometrical form itself. Whitman is no Descartes:

Santa Spirita, breather, life,
Beyond the light, lighter than light,
Beyond the flames of hell, joyous, leaping easily above hell,
Beyond Paradise, perfumed solely with mine own perfume,
Including all life on earth, touching, including God,
including Saviour and Satan,
Ethereal, pervading all, (for without me what were all? what were God?)
Essence of forms, life of the real identities, permanent,
positive, (namely the unseen,)
Life of the great round world, the sun and stars, and of man,
I, the general soul,
Here the square finishing, the solid, I the most solid,
Breathe my breath also through these songs. (CP 459)

Although it is easy to read “breath” as a literally organic human function, the poem realizes the full constitution of the One as “the general soul,” not merely “of man,” but of the cosmos. Akin to the “Spiritus Mundi” of W.B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” as well as the more generally known Latin phrase anima mundi, the “life of the real identities” emerges from a Whitmanic Psyche tou Kosmou, or rather the Soul of the Cosmos that binds all phenomena.
Patrick Harpur interestingly notes in his erudite study *The Philosopher’s Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*, “All Neoplatonists, Hermetic philosophers, alchemists and Kabbalists have asserted that the cosmos is animated by a collective soul” and that, moreover, and more to the point, such a view is “the true orthodoxy, they say, from which the erroneous orthodoxy of what the philosopher A. N. Whitehead has called ‘the last three provincial centuries’ has erroneously lapsed” (55). Harpur rightly threads Whitehead into this general nexus of Western philosophies. The Neoplatonic tradition takes attempts to unify both transcendent and immanent cosmological models of Creation, which accurately describes Whitehead’s project in *Process and Reality* to rewrite Plato’s *Timaeus*. It is interesting to also note, however, that the various Neoplatonic cosmologies that Harpur outlines ubiquitously hypostasize the poetic Eros, as does traditional Platonic philosophy, in that the poetic Eros is not only the cosmic soul, but also emanates from the One. As we will see, Whitman’s view of such a cosmic soul differs from this Neoplatonic assumption.

It is in the *Timaeus*, in fact, that we find the first rigorous description of the cosmic soul or Soul of the World. Harpur insightfully points out that such a unification traditionally takes a form of animism that underwrites “conceptions of the World as organism” (56). He continues:

> The Romantics imagined Nature in this way. Imagination was coextensive with Creation, just like the Soul of the World. They were identical. Every natural object was both spiritual and physical, as if dryad and tree were the inside and outside of the same thing.

The problem with framing Whitman’s cosmology in this manner, however, proves twofold. While certainly resonant, his cosmology does not seek to unify disparate conceptual elements into a coherent systematic whole on the one hand and, on the other,
unlike Plotinus, out of whose work Neoplatonic philosophies emerge, Whitman is surely not “ashamed of being in a body,” as Porphyry observes of Plotinus (History of the Concept of Mind 111). The latter is both literally and figuratively a matter of “attitude,” indicative not only of an orientation towards the physiological body, but also the physiognomical body, as Whitman famously declares at the outset of “One’s-Self I Sing” (CP 37). While bodily matter is always a matter of manner, such a Whitmanic attitude or orientation towards the body emerges out of his insistence on empirical knowing.

“And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?” Whitman asks in “I Sing the Body Electric,” and we can likewise rhetorically inquire into the difference between the Body and the Soul of the Cosmos (CP 128). An answer comes quickly: There are only symmetrical yet contradictory dualisms in need of logical reconciliation within a philosophical system that takes the dialectic as its default method of conceptualization and, thus, of ordering experience. Whitman’s is a living imago mundi, an empirically founded vision of “creation as a structure.” As di Prima insists, “it is whole, it is a whole, it always was whole”—“a whole” structure, yes, but a finished structure to which totalizing and, more often than not, totalitarian philosophic regimes appeal? To Whitman, the cosmos “is a whole” undivided by Western rationalism, and while the topology of the square is “permanent,” such a figuration does not only “breathe,” but it also expresses the actuality of spatial change itself. “Here the square finishing, the solid, I the most solid,” Whitman writes, the cosmic soul constituted by creaturely matter that, at once, is as “solid” as it is “deific.” Importantly, Whitman’s figure of “the square finishing” is not one of totalization, for totalizing philosophies seek to reconcile rationally distinct
symmetries, rather than take such conciliatory and reconciliatory conceptual gestures as empirically unnecessary.

It is interesting to note that Olson echoes Whitman’s cosmological sensibility when he perceives Creation as feminine:

That great descending light of day
It was the wild geranium not the frigid gentian which
stood above my eye & steered me into
the Soul’s
size into sawol into
the Armenian
jointure of
into Creation’s
View of herself (MAX III.193)

To Olson, “the Soul’s size”—the capitalized Soul of the Cosmos, in other words—indeed proves a matter of perceiving the quantitative spatial dimension of the actual cosmological condition expressed by “Creation’s / View of herself.” While we can articulate such a feminizing of “Creation” to contemporary theorizations of écriture feminine, my point is to show how, on the one hand, Olson perceives of the imago itself in non-humancentric terms and, on the other, displaces patriarchal and thoroughly hierarchical representations of the Creation supported by both the classical literary and philosophic traditions. Whitman does likewise. In beginning the fourth and final section of “Chanting the Square Deific” with “Santa Spirita, breather, life,” Whitman feminizes the traditional third term of the Godhead, namely, the Holy Spirit or Spiritus Sanctus. His
cosmology, however, transforms this third term into a crucial fourth dimension constituted by the feminine Soul of the Cosmos, the Creation that is radically spatial and, in turn, symmetrically balances the masculine principle of “Time.” Thus, space and time, along with love (in the figure of the Christ) and strife (in the figure) of Satan, together constitute a fourfold dimensionality to the empirically felt “wholeness” to which di Prima speaks.

**Creative Strife and the Orders of Reality: Duncan’s “Idiocy”**

In adding the dimension of resistance to his cosmology, which manifests itself in a range of ways, Whitman anticipates not only the philosopher Whitehead on the one hand and, on the other, the poets Di Prima and Olson, but also the poetics of another New American writer, Robert Duncan. In an important and lengthy essay, “Man’s Fulfillment in Order and Strife,” Duncan explicitly internalizes the notion of resistance, attributing the notion of such “creative strife” to Heraclitus:

> The very life of our art is our keeping at work contending forces and convictions. When I think of disorders, I often mean painful disorders, the disordering of fruitful orders that form in one’s own work. This is the creative strife that Heraclitus praised, breaking up, away from what you knew how to do into something you didn’t know, breaking up the orders I belong to in order to come into alien orders, marches upon a larger order. (*FC* 112)

One way in which Whitman participates in “creative strife” entails the “breaking up” of given epistemic orders “in order to come into alien orders.” Specifically, Whitman breaks the traditionally given patterns of the English iambic metric, patterns that not only condition meaning, but also, in a stoke, give preformed conceptual orders to experience. More to the point, in adding a fourth dimension to the traditional Godhead, Whitman
participates even more radically in “creative strife,” as he re-visualizes his cosmological
\emph{imago mundi} in a manner that exceeds the merely literary imagination.

Duncan does likewise. “We are no more than ourselves, members of the human
community at once hopeful and despairing,” he explains, “if not at war with the threat of
foreign tyranny, at war with the threat of our own inner tyranny, at war for the world
view against the national or party polemic, at war for the totality of our human nature
against the polemics of a character-forming rigor mortis” (\textit{Fictive Certainties} 120). As di
Prima points out in “Rant,” “the war that matters is the war against the imagination / all
other wars are subsumed in it” (160). The “war that matters” turns out to be a “war for
the world view against the national or party polemic,” which necessitates “creative strife”
with, first and foremost, the empirical constitution of an individual’s \textit{weltanschauung}. In
a recent and compelling essay on Duncan’s deployment of “creative strife,” Eric
Keenaghan explains that “internal struggle is the only way we know we’re alive. For
poetry to help us live, writers must continually combat their precepts and reinterpret their
experiences to avoid static—and statist—complacency” (649).

In contrast to either a given or elected logic, Duncan’s participation in “creative
strife” resonates with a Whitmanic \textit{experience of the world}. I noted earlier that such an
empirically founded \emph{imago mundi} exceeds mere literary activity, and Duncan crosses that
arbitrarily discursive boundary by appealing to both “the language of poetry,” by which
he means the language of a developing poetics or cosmology, and a sense of “wholeness,”
to which both di Prima and Whitman speak. “But in the language of poetry,” Duncan
explains, “in the reality of the imagination—what in certain intensities of language-
excitement we actually do imagine—the coexistence of all beings and things in the time
of human thought is a fact” (*Fictive Certainties* 121). In attending closely to language, in
cleaving to the empirically lived rhythms of an “actual occasion,” to recall Whitehead,
Duncan is then able to know “the reality of imagination” as the epistemic site of
constructing an *imago mundi*, particularizing his *weltanschauung* and, in doing so,
consciously and conscientiously reordering consciousness through “creative strife.”
Duncan’s perception that “everything in human experience is so real and immediate
where our human consciousness and conscience, our *conscience*, is alive and aware,”
should immediately recall di Prima’s insistence in “Rant” that “the war is the war against
the imagination / you can’t sign up as a conscientious objector” (*Fictive Certainties* 121).
In other words, the coupling of consciousness to conscience makes explicit the
problematic of psychic conduct, specifically how one engages “creative strife” to reorder
experience “in order to come into alien orders” of knowing that are particular to their
emergent forms. One cannot, however, reduce a sense of “wholeness” to a metaphysical
unity. As Don Byrd points out in a relevant essay on the poetics of Robin Blaser, “order
does not depend upon the simplicity of the *logos*, and it never did. According to Ashby’s
law of requisite variety, the greater the *variety* of forms the greater the possibility of order”
(*The Recovery of the Public World* 406). In that they are epistemic, poetic forms evidence
the specificity of their emergent occasion. A sense of “wholeness” is their consequence.

Comparing Whitman to Dante in another important essay, “Changing Perspectives
in Reading Whitman,” Duncan explains that Whitman served as “a perennial source from
which my own art as a poet drew” on the one hand and, on the other, claims that
“Whitman, like Dante, projected a poem central to his civilization and his vision of the
ground of ultimate reality—*Leaves of Grass*, like *The Divine Comedy*, being not an epic narrative but the spiritual testament of a self-realization” (162). As he later comments:

Whitman did not believe he came at the end of a civilization but at the beginning, even, before the beginning, at the apprehension of what was yet to come. He does not represent his time but announces its coming. “America,” for Whitman, is yet to come. And this theme of what America is, of what democracy is, of what the sexual reality is, of what the Self is, arises from an urgency in the conception of the Universe itself, not a blueprint but an evolution of spirit in terms of variety and a thicket of potentialities. His own work in poetry he sees so, moved by generative urgencies toward the fulfillment of a multitude of latent possibilities. (*Fictive Certainties* 166)

In Duncan’s view, to realize the self is literally to construct a subjecthood “yet to come,” a realization that “arises from an urgency in the conception of the Universe itself,” or rather what I have variously termed a poetics, cosmology, *cosmopoetics*, *weltanschauung*, and so forth. Rather than theorized as a culturally conditioned and thus linguistically mediated subjectivity, the notion of which contemporary postmodern theory ultimately owes much to Hegel, Duncan equates “spirit” and selfhood, which resonates with similar homologies latent in the Greek term *psyche* (ψυχή). Rather than mediated by the “polemics” of either the nation-state or the market, either disciplinary institutions or consumerist culture, the individual participates in “the process of the Cosmos,” which is not only constructive, in that it takes the individual and the Creation as coextensive, but also creaturely, in that creation itself extends to “the Universe itself” (*Fictive Certainties* 123). As we have seen, the “potentialities” of which Duncan speaks are analogous to those of Whitehead’s eternal objects, which Whitman anticipates.

The process that Duncan discusses is immediately empirical, yet we are left to wonder what precisely constitutes the perception that, rather than a mediated a priori proposition, the “self” is not only an emergent consequence of “creative strife,” but also
one that is consistently particularized. In “Towards an Open Universe,” Duncan explains that “becoming aware of the order of what is happening is the full responsibility of the poet” and that, moreover, a poem is “a highly organized event is in its very individuality (‘idiocy’ the classical Greek would have said)” (Fictive Certainties 82). The activity of writing, which is one of “creative strife,” develops the self—known homologically as consciousness, spirit, soul, and so forth—as well as the poem at once, the latter of which is the projection of the former. When Duncan speaks of the “very individuality” of the poem and “idiocy” as the status of a poem written without a “blueprint,” he also speaks of the “very individuality” and “idiocy” of selfhood.

In “After Reading Barely and Widely,” Duncan plays on the Greek term “ἰδιος” (idios), which literally means “one’s own,” but extends its meaning toward that of “idiocy,” namely “separate, distinct, peculiar” (The Opening of the Field 88). Whitman plays on a similar reading of “idiocy,” specifically the term “idiocrasy,” which, as I argue in Chapter 1, articulates his poetics to his vision of democracy. Be that as it may, my point here is to show that a “separate, distinct, peculiar” consciousness is constructed actively in accordance with the singular and generative immediacy of experience. Duncan finds in Whitman a self who participates in the radically empirical “process of the Cosmos,” a singular consciousness that consistently expresses the “simple separate person” of “One’s-Self I Sing” (CP 37).

Duncan’s insistence on the coextensive particularities of self, poem, and Cosmos recall not only Whitman, but also Pound. Consider “Keeping the Rhyme” in The Opening of the Field:

By stress and syllable
by change-rhyme and contour
we let the long line pace even awkward to its period.

The short line
we refine
and keep for candor.

This we remember:
ember of the fire
catches the word if we but hear
(“We must understand what is happening”)
and springs to desire,
a bird-right light
sound. (51)

In his important essay “The Lasting Contribution of Ezra Pound,” Duncan recalls that, in 1948, “Dallam Simpson in Four Pages issued a Manifesto I have always thought of as Poundian in its origin,” the first premise of which states that “We must understand what is really happening” (A Selected Prose 92). Duncan’s insistence on “creative strife,” which orients one “away from what you knew how to do into something you didn’t know” through “becoming aware of the order of what is happening,” clearly resonates with Simpson’s Poundian imperative. Yet, while “Keeping the Rhyme” discusses the formal principles of writing verse, and thus cursorily reads as a contemporary variation on the form of a classical ars poetica, the poem exemplifies the particularity of “idiocy,” insisting that “we let the long line pace even awkward to its period.” Despite a lack of grace, in other words, the “pace” of the “long line” is particular to itself and, thus, performs and exemplifies the specificity of its own rhythm, a specificity upon which, of course, Pound ubiquitously insists.

It is interesting to note that the New American poet, Robert Creeley, also comments upon this Poundian imperative. In “Notes Apropos ‘Free Verse’,” Creeley recalls his now often anthologized poem, “I Know A Man,” likening the process of
writing to that of driving. “The road, as it were, is creating itself momently in one’s attention to it, there, visibly, in front of the car,” Creeley explains, “There is no reason why it should go on forever, and if one does so assume it, it very often disappears all too actually. When Pound says, ‘we must understand what is happening,’ one sense of his meaning I take to be this necessary attention to what is happening in the writing (the road)” (Collected Essays 493-94). Such “necessary attention” is not only an imperative for the process of writing, but also for one to participate in “the process of the Cosmos.” In particular, Duncan subtly articulates the extant life of “Keeping the Rhyme” to that of the Earth and seasons in the final couplet:

This is the Yule-log that warms December.  
This is the new grass that springs from the ground.  (51)

Duncan merely observes and describes neither the “Yule-log” nor the “new grass” in an ostensibly objective manner, suggesting that the organic growth of the poem mimetically represents that of nature. To Duncan, the poem is an actual extension of the natural world, just as the human organism is an extension of that world. As singular occasions of creation, both the writer and the writing participate in the Creation, rather than cultural forms of mediation, which is the main cosmological imperative of the present study.

**Contemporary Information**

Such an imperative, underwritten by an insistence on empirical forms of knowing, has been nearly twenty years in the making. Although the story that I tell is one that equates poetics and cosmology—cosmopoetics, in other words—by tracing the development of empirically founded innovative American poetries over the long twentieth-century, my empirical optic is nothing new. While an undergraduate freshman
doing research on e.e. cummings, I happened upon a blue clothbound book without wraps placed inconspicuously on a library desk. Curious, I opened the book to an arbitrary page:

Cup.

Bowl.

Saucer.

Full. (7)

This “piece,” from what I later discovered as Creeley’s *Pieces*, sounded so singular, so empirically originary, so radically attentive in the deceptive simplicity of its order, that I felt compelled to set *The Enormous Room* aside for the diminutive, laconic, yet still irregular “pieces” that intuitively rather than logically resonated together. Only later would I discover Jack Spicer’s insistence that poems “should echo and reecho against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can” (*The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* 61). Indeed, such a sensibility aptly resonates with Creeley’s own in *Pieces*. Soon after, it was Pound who initially defined the impulse to not only open the book, but to also continue reading, rather than to steadfastly focus on the research project at hand: “That is to say people engaged in the pleasures of thinking or in the search for answers to their curiosity both write and want to read contemporary information and formulation some of which is crystallized in chunks too long for magazine articles and too short for a book” (*SP* 54). Immediately, *Pieces* resonated with my curiosity “to read contemporary information,” which quickly became a curiosity to write as well. The feeling of such information was actual, empirical *difference*.

I easily read the entirely of *Pieces* that same afternoon, knowing ever increasingly, page by page, that I had discovered a writing that was, indeed, of a different order and
perceptive register than that of Shakespeare, Donne, Pope, Lord Byron, or any of the other English writers of the classical literary tradition spoon-fed to students across the United States, to this day, daily. In a word, *Pieces* struck me as “contemporary,” while even cummings, in his canonical enormity and flashes of irregularity, retained readily recognizable features of classical versification, despite his obvious empirical inclinations. At that time, my notion of contemporary writing meant simply particular and, later, I expanded the definition to a particularity of consciousness coextensive with a particularity of form. Upon finishing the book, I also realized that Creeley could not be an island, so to speak. Who were his contemporaries?

While we are many years removed from Donald Allen’s groundbreaking 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, one significant theme of *Critique is Not Enough* is articulated by Creeley’s statement on poetics: “*Description* does nothing, it includes the object,—it neither hates nor loves” (408). To be sure, Allen’s anthology collects a wide range of differing poetries under the same New American umbrella. The poetry of John Ashbery and that of Robert Duncan are significantly different, for instance, even as they individually emerged as writers in their own right during the 1950s. Yet the radical empiricability of its constituents binds the anthology as a whole, despite its ranging geographical categorizations of Black Mountain Poets, San Francisco Renaissance, New York School, and so forth. Situated against the dominant New Critical poetics of T.S. Eliot—which Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) pejoratively termed Eliotic “Bullshit school poetry”—the New Americans advocated a process-oriented poetics that did not pledge allegiance to the flag of descriptive representationality that Eliot’s heir apparent,
Robert Lowell, took up and waved with Machiavellian zeal throughout the Cold War years (qtd. in *All Poets Welcome* 4).

Edited by Allen and Warren Tallman, a lesser known yet still important 1973 anthology, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, includes a selection of statements on poetics from a range of modern and postmodern writers. Notably, the editors begin the anthology not with Ezra Pound, who died the year before in 1972, but rather with Walt Whitman, specifically his open letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson included in the 1856 second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In his preface, Tallman explains that the open letter opens the anthology on open field composition “both for its eloquence and as prophecy, a new poetry to emerge in the New World he saw opening up around him” (ix). While “eloquence” is a rhetorical principle with which the New Americans wanted little to do, at least in the main, and while “prophecy” invokes a squarely Neoplatonic mystical tradition within which it is difficult if not altogether untenable to situate Whitman, it is the insistence upon the “open”—which immediately recalls both Robert Duncan’s important 1966 essay “Towards an Open Universe” and, earlier, Charles Olson’s 1950 “Projective Verse” essay—that suggested I open *Critique is Not Enough* with Whitman. One could rightly add Pound’s observation that Whitmanic poetics presented the “first heave” against the ideality of an iambically based metric. In effect, Whitman “opens” the poetic line to the experience of particularly lived rhythms that are specific to their emergently performative occasion. He thus opens this book.
CHAPTER 1

Language Experiments:

Whitman, Stein, and Knowledge of the Real

Whitman’s Democratic Idiocrasy

“ONE IDENTITY! chants democratic En Masse, pelting behind in motorcars, oblivious of the corpses under the wheels,” quips D. H. Lawrence, “God save me, I feel like creeping down a rabbit-hole, to get away from all these automobiles rushing down the ONE IDENTITY track to the goal of ALLNESS” (Studies 152). Throughout his invective against Walt Whitman, Lawrence consistently points out that Whitman not only settles on generalizations, but that he also values the teleological generalization of an a priori totality in an apparently mechanical manner, as though Whitman’s earthly compost is actually a Newtonian scrap yard. “You are just a limited Walter,” he shrewdly advises, yet, in overlooking the particularities of Whitman’s project, Lawrence finds himself “creeping down a rabbit-hole” of his own generalizations (Studies 149). Contrary to what he may claim, Whitman’s formative process is one of immediate experience, particularly lived rhythms in a specific present that inform a range of vernacular forms. As we will see, Whitmanic poetics takes aesthesis as constitutive of empirical reality, and it is this formulation that underwrites his vision of democracy, wherein the essence of man is not labor, as materialist philosophies often dictate, but rather the sensual and quite radical physicality of being.

For Whitman, the rhythmical schemas inherited by the classical tradition promote a life of habit that methodically looks to history for the presence of its meaning. He
outlines this stance clearly in *Democratic Vistas*: “The great poems, Shakespeare included, are poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the life-blood of democracy. The models of our literature, as we get it from other lands, ultramarine, have had their birth in courts, and basked and grown in castle sunshine; all smells of princes’ favors” (343). Of all Whitman’s writings, *Democratic Vistas* proves not only a commentary on the nature of democracy, but also a cogent *ars poetica*, arguing for the central role of American literature in “the fruition of democracy” that “resides altogether in the future” rather than the past (344-45). As it resonates with his vision of American democracy, Whitman’s poetic project is prospective, taking its meaning from the possibilities that a future affords, rather than from “fashionable life, flippancy, tepid amours, weak infidelism, small aims, or no aims at all, only to kill time” (326). While this description of American “fashionable life” in the late nineteenth-century is eerily akin to that of the twenty-first, my point is that literature, for Whitman, requires methodological reinvention in accordance with its time, by which I mean both its historical context and its rhythmically meaningful performance at once. Just as democracy is prospective, so too is such reinvention, and rather than understand method as a logical and discursive term, Whitmanic poetics performs a prospective way to proceed toward the meaningfulness of lived experience.

Of course, Ezra Pound points out as much in a letter to Harriet Monroe when he insists that “rhythm MUST have meaning,” which underscores his own quarrelsome romance with the classical formalism of Romantic poetry (*SL* 49). Whitman, however, anticipates Pound’s ethical imperative. “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave,” Pound writes in *The Pisan Cantos* (Canto LXXXI), and it is to Whitman that Pound
defers with much chagrin: “His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America...He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission. / Entirely free from the renaissance humanist ideal of the complete man or from Greek idealism, he is content to be what he is, and he is his time and his people.” It is a bitter pill for Pound to swallow that Whitman, similar to Dante, “wrote in the ‘vulgar tongue’, in a new metric” (EW 187-88). Pound’s point turns just as much on the phrase “a new metric” as it does on “vulgar tongue,” the vernacularity of Whitman’s lines rejecting the “Greek idealism” of preformed metrics to perform a rhythm at one with meaning.

Consider “To a Certain Civilian”:

What to such as you anyhow such a poet as I? therefore leave my works,
And go lull yourself with what you can understand,
and with piano-tunes,
For I lull nobody, and you will never understand me. (CP 347)

Whitman, for his part, lulls the classically trained reader into believing that the final line is an accurate heptameter until the final “me” fades into a feminine ending so-called, thus constructing a meaningful rhythmical pattern particular to the performance of the poem. In other words, the metronomic “piano-tunes” are understandable precisely because they are formally predictable in their metrical monotony and, as a trope for poetry, such “tunes,” to which one is already attuned, formally repeat meaning, despite the variable emphases and durations of syllables the classical literary tradition fails to always already control. Vernacular rhythmicity is the cornerstone of Whitman’s decidedly American vision of a democratic poetics that reconciles the particularity of lived experience with the commonality of biological life itself.
“Few are aware how the great literature penetrates all, give hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals,” Whitman declares in “Democratic Vistas,” arguing that “over all the arts, literature dominates, serves beyond all—shapes the character of church and school—or, at any rate, is capable of doing so. Including the literature of science, its scope is indeed unparalleled” (SD 322-323). Literature is democratic only in that it “dominates” on the one hand yet, on the other, “serves beyond all.” Such a democratic vision folds together poetry and journalism, for example, with the natural sciences, but the power of a literature that “dominates” proves provisional, just as the organizational power of democracy and that of poetics prove provisional. It is important to note that when Whitman speaks of democracy, he ultimately speaks of self-organizational change:

I say the mission of government, henceforth, in civilized lands, is not repression alone, and not authority alone, not even of law, nor by that favorite standard of the eminent writer, the rule of the best men, the born heroes and captains of the race…but higher than the highest arbitrary rule, to train communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves. (SD 335)

The role of Whitman’s new American literature is to “furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for the women and men of that country, and enforce them in a thousand effective ways,” preparing each individual for self-government, or rather personal control, which “must abide its time” (SD 336). Throughout “Democratic Vistas,” he negotiates with the problem of how to develop the individual while, at the same time, developing the collective:

We shall, it is true, quickly and continually find the origin idea of the singleness of man, individualism, asserting itself, and cropping forth, even from the opposite ideas. But the mass, or lump character, for imperative reasons, is to be ever carefully weighed, borne in mind, and provided for. Only from it, and from its proper regulation and potency, comes the other, comes the chance of individualism. The two are contradictory, but our task is to reconcile them. (SD 329)
This is not the assertion of the absolute autonomy of the individual at the expense of the collective or “aggregate,” but rather the cultivation of a general American identity of difference that gestures toward a cultural—indeed, global—pluralism, which values the “loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man” (SD 369). Whitman notes that the discordance between the individual and the collective is “a serious problem and paradox in the United States,” yet the antinomy of the one and the many is at least as old as Plato and is decidedly a problem of the State—not necessarily of the United States. Be that as it may, to Whitman the “simple idea” is that “man, properly trained in the sanest, highest freedom, may and must become a law, and series of laws, unto himself, surrounding and providing for, not only his personal control, but all his relations to other individuals, and to the State” (330). In other words, Whitman’s utopic democracy, when realized, leads to the outmoding of State authority and “an idiocracy of universalism,” or rather the common ubiquity of idiosyncrasy—of difference, in other words—bound by “comradeship” or love, which is precisely how his poetics performs (350). Needless to say, such a vision of democratic idiocracy is indeed utopic in the best sense of the word.

Needful to point out, however, is that Whitman anticipates Hardt and Negri’s sense of the democratic “multitude,” which they define as “singularities that act in common” who create “not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself” (Multitude 105-109). Whitman’s “idiocracy of universalism,” or rather the universal idiocracy that underwrites the future of American democracy and his democratic poetics, looks forward to a form of Hardt and Negrian democratic multitude, in which “there is no conceptual or actual contradiction between singularity and
commonality” (*Multitude* 105). A democratic poetics is prospective in the sense that it looks forward to a non-dialectical commonality of particularity, one in which, to Whitman, “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (*CP* 63). Together, individuals *physically* constitute the common body of national wealth through a cultivated understanding of both the existential rhythms of life and the practice of a common social relation of “comradeship” that is as felt and, thus, as real as “atoms” or “piano-tunes” themselves.

**The Finish Beyond Which Philosophy Cannot Go**

Whitman’s practice returns Romantic poetry to its senses, so to speak, as though the classical tradition had been so anxious in its shame about the radical physicality of the body that it sought to forget the phenomenal fact of inspiration, praying daily to the muse of centralized metaphor for a purely textual and ideally governed coherence. Surely, Whitman is at times an idealist who spoke highly of “Hegelian formulas,” especially in *Democratic Vistas*, as John W. McDonald discusses throughout his erudite and recent study *Walt Whitman: Philosopher Poet* (376), yet my point is that there is no dialectic negation of the negation evident in the poetry. “Very well then I contradict myself,” Whitman admits, but no transformative and reductive synthesis of the dialectic thesis and antithesis, in Hegelian method, follows. What we find, of course, is Whitman’s famous proclamation that “I am large, I contain multitudes” (*CP* 123). Whitman revels in multitudinous contradictions, whereas, alternatively, “Hegelian formulas” attempt to not merely tolerate contradiction, but, more importantly, overcome them. His democratic poetics is expansively transformative, moving from subject to subject, and only
discursive in the sense that it articulates a networked field of subjects or “multitudes.” He is an unapologetically erudite sensualist who writes in a vernacular that only hints at grammatical and dialectically descriptive propriety. “The Base of All Metaphysics”:

Having studied the new and antique, the Greek and Germanic systems,
Kant having studied and stated, Fichte and Schelling and Hegel,
Stated the lore of Plato, and Socrates greater than Plato,
And greater than Socrates sought and stated, Christ divine having studied long,
I see reminiscent to-day those Greek and Germanic systems,
See the philosophies all, Christian churches and tenets see,
Yet underneath Socrates clearly see, and underneath
Christ the divine I see,
The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend,
Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,
Of city for city and land for land. (CP 262)

If “underneath” philosophical and theological “systems,” then Whitman’s democratic and transparently universal idiocracy is a non-discursive phenomenon, situated outside such discourses, the poems recording “a language fanned by the breath of Nature,” which socially “tallies life and character” empirically (380). Comradeship is a matter of substantial feeling that suffers no dialectical and thus rationalist divide from vernacular rhythmicity. In other words, to tally means to count, and it is with “a language fanned by the breath of Nature,” rather than with a language constricted by the formally ideal strictures of a given discourse, that one measures the radical physicality of both rhythm and selfhood in the “life and character” of a performance that is particular to itself. It is an earthly, physical rhythm that Whitman is after, one that, in its specificity, is essentially irreproducible: “Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself” (“Song of Myself,” CP 118). Such time is not ideal, but empirical, absolute, and known through aesthesis. “[B]eginning with individuals and ending there again,”
Whitman’s democratic poetry, in the diversity of its rhythms, allows individuals “to rule
themselves”—or, at least, to sensually perceive the poems of *Leaves of Grass* in real time.
To understand Whitman’s work is to immerse oneself in the performative “barbaric yawn”
of its language (*CP* 737).

Whitman’s universal idiocrasy is before discursive constructivity, in the Greek
sense of *prologos*, or rather before the many inflections of a retrospective *logos*: speech,
reason, discourse, and so forth. It is this decidedly prospective present—a present that
suffers no inflection by the well-known Heideggerian reformulation of *logos* as speech,
for instance—that Whitman takes as prime. Poetry is not the place for a discursive logic
that conceptually orders the generative immediacy of experience:

The insignificant is as big to me as any,
(What is less or more than a touch?)

Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.

(Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so,
Only what nobody denies is so.) (*CP* 93)

What “proves itself” to Whitman is decidedly haptic, rather than either coldly logical or
zealously rhetorical, precisely because truth is empirically essayed in each particular
environ of knowing. As I noted in the introduction, Whitman says that “each thing
exactly represents itself” in “All is Truth” (*CP* 486). The self-representation of “each
ting” is taken as true only when it “proves itself” through aesthesis. Such proof is not
logical, but rather immediately empirical. While one can certainly rationalize the “damp
of the night,” in other words, the reality of dampness is felt and thus known through
aesthesis (87).
If Whitman’s universal idiocrasy is before discursive constructivity on the one hand, then, on the other hand, the “melodious character of the earth” is “beyond” philosophy and, arguably, all other disciplinary frameworks. “Faces”:

The melodious character of the earth,
The finish beyond which philosophy cannot go and does not wish to go,
The justified mother of men. (CP 479)

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, musical tropes recycle, each instance particular to its context yet common in its sonorous “character” or quality. It is not the reductive cliché of mother Earth that Whitman has in mind, but rather “the melodious character of the earth,” which amounts to a rhythmically organized sequence of sounds that are related in such a way as to create a particular phrase or idea. The organization of rhythmical phrases into lines in the crux of Whitmanic vernacularity. And as he makes clear throughout *Democratic Vistas*, democracy is the “younger brother of another great and often used word, Nature” (348). The rhythmical structure of the natural world and that of democracy are both born of the Whitmanic cosmos through the universal idiocrasy of “comradeship”—things articulated to things, creating meaningful networks—which is decidedly not the metaphysical Logos of Western humanism. Aesthesis makes rhythmical structure knowable by denying the classical dualism between the objective reality of the natural on the one hand and, on the other, the subjective reality of the social. Creaturely existence entails the interactivities of physical bodies—atoms, stones, trees, birds, people—in articulated networks of actual relations experienced as “comradeship.”

For Whitman, such a stance is naturally democratic, poetic, and decidedly American in both scope and spirit:
America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and cosmical, as she is herself. It must in no respect ignore science or the modern, but inspire itself with science and the modern. It must bend its vision toward the future, more than the past. Like America, it must extricate itself from even the greatest models of the past, and, while courteous to them, must have entire faith in itself, and the products of its own democratic spirit only. (367)

Again, we see that Whitman’s multitude is ultimately a self-organizing democratic mass bound by the actual feeling of “comradeship” through aesthesis, just as many leaves make up the sheaf we know as *Leaves of Grass*. Yet, as Jed Rasula points out, by 1860 “Whitman had been the voice the polity could never absorb, visionary of American vistas forever antithetical to the greed of a nation on the brink of becoming a world power” (*This Compost* 53). Rasula is right to note Whitman’s apparent obliviousness to the dangers of imperialism, especially in terms of the exploitation of labor and the disregard for fundamental human rights. To Whitman, a democracy constituted by actual “comradeship” is not merely “antithetical to the greed of a nation,” but more specifically circumvents Adam Smith’s concept of “self-love” articulated in *The Wealth of Nations*:

> But man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and show them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this…It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow citizens. (118-119)

Whitman begs a democratic feast for all, which emerges from a commonality of love, rather than from the self-love of Smith’s individualism. The narcissism of the capitalist project makes of empathy a tool for manipulation and, in terms of the poetry that Whitman held central to a healthy future democracy, the work of “self-love” is always
already one of self-interest that does not appeal to an “all-surrounding and cosmical” form of sympathetic benevolence. As we know, for political economy the essence of man is labor. For Whitman’s democracy, however, the essence of both man and universe is a binding rather than capitalistically productive “self-love” that ultimately proves the physically lived essence of reality.

Such commonality is rooted in the substantial or essential physicality of being. On the one hand, the functionality of the natural world is no longer structured by labor and, on the other, the functionality of the subject who contains “multitudes” is no longer structured by needs. As Jean Baudrillard points out in The Mirror of Production, these two senses of function that Whitman displaces “belong to the anthropological sphere of use value described by Enlightenment rationality and defined for a whole civilization (which imposed it on others) by a certain kind of abstract, linear, irreversible finality: a certain model subsequently extended to all sectors of individual and social practice” (56). In this displacement, Whitman does not morally divide the natural world into the dialectic thesis and antithesis. “This operational finality is arbitrary in such a way that the concept of Nature it forgets resists integration with it. It looks as if forcefully rationalized Nature reemerges elsewhere in an irrational form,” Baudrillard observes, “Without ceasing to be ideological, the concept splits into a ‘good’ Nature that is dominated and rationalized (which acts as the ideal cultural reference) and a ‘bad’ Nature that is hostile, menacing, catastrophic, or polluted” (56-57). For Whitman’s democratic poetics, the natural world is neither “rationalized” universally nor “dominated.” The natural world knows neither “good” nor “bad,” for such terms are moral constructs, representing heterotelic entities and events. The generative immediacy of experience has nothing to do with the Hegelian
trinity of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, and everything to do with a radically empirical aesthesis.

“I celebrate myself,” Whitman declares, but only unto the end of his universal idiocrasy. The celebration of himself not only celebrates the “multitudes,” the many others, but also the “earth to be spann’d, connected by network” (CP 429). To celebrate means to perform, to extol, to rejoice, to make widely and openly known: these are the terms of an earth “connected” by the “network” of universal idiocrasy. As I argued earlier, Whitman’s vision of democracy insists that individuals physically constitute the common body of the nation together, but only through a cultivated understanding of both the particularly lived rhythms of life and the practice of a common “network” of “comradeship” that is as felt and, thus, as real as things themselves.

The Ghost In the Rationalist Machine

Like Plato’s Republic, Whitman’s Democratic Vistas outlines the prospects for a republic that is indeed no place on earth, yet, at the same time, Whitman’s democratic method empirically inflects dialectical methodologies, extending from the perceptual to the conceptual, from the real to the imagined and back again. If the body is an extension of the earth, then Whitman’s vision of democracy is an extension of what is phenomenally felt. “My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, / this air,” he writes in the opening section of “Song of Myself” (CP 63). The body is so entangled with the natural world from which it extends that the poetry itself, grounded by vernacular rhythms, enjoins and conjoins the cosmically related forms of nature and democracy. The extensivity of the body is certainly not a new idea, yet for Whitman the
extensive body conditions how it means to be human. The Whitmanic cosmos is not merely a generative one, bodied forth by “procreant urge,” but one of physical substance (CP 65). In the context of his work, substantiality suggests not only essence, but also that which has mass and occupies both time and space in its particular constitution. He may be “the poet of comrades” who contains “multitudes,” but when Whitman asks “To be in any form, what is that?” his answer comes quickly: “Mine is no callous shell” (CP 91). Dichotomies between form and content, body and soul, heaven and earth, and so forth are the products of ostensive rationality, not an extensively performative poetics constituted by vernacular substance, or rather the substance of aesthesis. Whitman’s body and his body of work are the same kinds of things, neither of which are “callous.”

The modern story of the “callous shell”—a trope related to that of the machine, the vessel, and so forth—arguably begins with Enlightenment thought. Worth recalling is that Hegel squarely resurrects Cartesian rationalism with his philosophy of identity, going beyond Kant’s proposition that the mind forms the world to posit that reason and reality are squarely identical, which allows him to develop a theory of the world out of pure reason, entirely on a par with a Cartesian pure mathematics. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in fact, Descartes undertakes to establish the existential division between mind and body that Whitmanic poetry so thoroughly undoes. “But what then am I? A thing that thinks,” reasons Descartes, “What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions” (19). Later in *Meditations*, he firmly establishes the logical distinction between mind and body, arguing that “my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing” and “it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it” (54).
Essence is separated out from material form and, in a stroke, Descartes rationalizes the dominance of conceptualization over perception. “I found that the judgments of the external senses were mistaken,” he concludes, “And this applied not just to the external senses but to the internal senses as well” (53). This conclusion allows Descartes to develop his doctrine of “the ghost in the machine,” which considers “the body of a man as a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin”—a “callous shell,” in other words (58).

Be that as it may, my point here is that Whitmanic poetry is grounded not merely by aesthesis, but, more radically by the empirically grounded substance of perceptive feeling. “The Wound-Dresser”:

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,  
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,  
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv’d neck and side-falling head,  
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump,  
And has not yet look’d on it. (CP 335)

Whitman does not merely describe a scene. The poem performs its substance, each comma pausing as carefully as one would “undo the clotted lint.” The “respiration and inspiration” of the rhythm, at one with “the sound of the human voice,” is as countable and accountable as the numbers of Cartesian pure mathematics, with the difference that Whitman’s reality is empirically felt, as though, unequivocally, “breathing rattles” (CP 64, 90, 335). His physical being performs the poem’s form, neither of which are a “callous shell.” Interestingly, Descartes uses the “bloody stump” of amputation to demonstrate his claim that sense perception is uncertain and that, moreover, the mind and body are distinct:
In these and countless other cases, I found that the judgments of the external senses were mistaken. And this applied not just to the external senses but to the internal senses as well. For what can be more internal than pain? And yet I had heard that those who had a leg or an arm amputated sometimes still seemed to feel pain intermittently in the missing part of the body. So even in my own case it was apparently not quite certain that a particular limb was hurting, even if I felt pain in it. (Meditations 53)

Descartes assumes that the sensation of pain in a missing limb is objectively questionable.

While Whitman worked as a nurse during the Civil War, his friend and doctor, Silas Weir Mitchell, studied just this phenomenon of feeling “phantom” limbs. He notes that after an amputation it is not uncommon for a patient to continue to feel a missing arm or leg. In Injuries of Nerves and their Consequences, he observes that “it is not easy to forget the astonishment with which some of these persons reawaken to a perception of the long-lost leg or arm” (349). In fact, Mitchell goes on to say that “very many have a constant sense of the existence of the limb, a consciousness even more intense than exists for the remaining member.” While Cartesian rationality cannot admit embodied consciousness, Mitchell’s Whitmanesque findings evidence not only the radical physicality of feeling, but also the extensive substance of consciousness. Andy Clark, who has written extensively on the philosophy of mind, points out that the Cartesian idea of ‘mind as spirit-stuff’ is no longer scientifically respectable. Instead, mind is seen as the working of a purely physical device. In identifying that physical device solely with the biological brain, we again make a leap of faith, depicting the biological brain itself as the sole and essentially insulated engine of mind and reason. This conception is the old idea of special spirit-stuff in modern dress. A thoroughgoing physicalism should allow mind to determine—by its characteristic actions, capacities, and effects—its own place in the natural order. (Natural-Born Cyborgs 43).

When Whitman insists on an “identical body and soul” in “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” he insists not only on their empirical inextricability, but also on the extensive substance of consciousness (CP 578). In contrast to Hegel’s philosophy of
identity, Whitman puts forth a poetics of identity, whereby the natural world is indistinct from the fully physical and actually lived substantiality of social and biological being in a stroke. In Whitman’s empirical cosmology, reality and feeling are identical. “And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?” he asks in “I Sing the Body Electric,” and the answer is clearly Cartesian “spirit-stuff” (CP 128). Throughout Leaves of Grass, form is understood as both matter and essence as an indivisible unity. As Whitman notes in “Poetry To-Day in America—Shakespere—the Future,” democratic poetry is “twined, as weft with warp” and empirically has “its own physiognomy, man’s and woman’s, its own shapes, forms, and manners, all times” (SD 288). Such differing and idiosyncratic poetic works are particular to the actual occasion—the time and manner—of performance.

“Words have a physiognomy,” Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out in Phenomenology of Perception, “because we adopt towards them, as towards each person, a certain form of behavior which makes its complete appearance the moment each word is given” (274). If we follow Whitman, then language—concepts, that is—are phenomenal events in time, actual extensions of “the melodicous character of the earth,” which, as I argued earlier, amount to a rhythmically organized sequence of sounds that are related in such a way as to create a particular phrase or idea. It should come as no surprise that the phenomenon of the phantom limb does not escape Merleau-Ponty’s attention. “An emotion, circumstance which recalls those in which the wound was received,” he explains, “creates a phantom limb in subjects who had none” (Phenomenology 88). For Merleau-Ponty, what is found behind the phenomenon is “the impulse of being-in-the-world,” “something like ‘attention to life’ in Bergson,” which he defines as “the awareness we experience of ‘nascent movements’ in our bodies” (90-91).
For Whitman, “the impulse of being-in-the-world” is a generative force, a radically
physical impetus on a par with “the procreant urge of the world” (CP 65). “One of my
cherish’d themes for a never-achiev’d poem,” writes Whitman at the end of Specimen
Days, “has been the two impetuses of man and the universe—in the latter, creation’s
incessant unrest, exfoliation, (Darwin’s evolution, I suppose.) Indeed, what is Nature but
change, in all its visible, and still more its invisible processes? Or what is humanity in its
faith, love, heroism, poetry, even morals, but emotion?” (196-97). Of the two founding
ontological terms of Western metaphysics—change and humanity—Whitman arguably
makes Leaves of Grass, the topology of which values its own “incessant unrest” of
accumulative change, growth, and affectively informed aesthesis. He ultimately
understands the Heraclitean flux of change and human emotion as sensuously felt and
strongly homologous, together constituting the physical substance of reality that, in its
“nascent movements,” look toward a future prospectively. If there is anything to learn
from Whitmanic poetics, it is that relationships to others, the natural world, and language
are formed by “comradeship” or an interconnected and interacting network of specifically
lived rhythms that have nothing to do with Cartesian ghosts.

It is interesting to note that one of Whitman’s contemporaries, Herman Melville,
makes of Ahab a Cartesian in Moby Dick: “And if I still feel the smart of my crushed leg,
though it be now so long dissolved; then, why mayst not thou, carpenter, feel the fiery
pains of hell for ever, and without a body?” (420). Whitman answers such a question in
“As I Lay with my Head in Your Lap Camerado”: “And the threat of what is call’d hell is
little or nothing to me, / And the lure of what is call’d heaven is little or nothing to me”
(CP 346). The “threat” and the “lure” mean “little or nothing” precisely because, in the
Whitmanic cosmos, both exist only in space and time. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, the poems “exalt the present and the real”—which decidedly does not constitute a *metaphysics* of presence. (*CP* 231). “The pleasures of heaven are with me,” proclaims Whitman, “and the pains of hell are with me” (*CP* 83). Hell is not only where you are, to recall Christopher Marlowe’s Mephistophelean formulation, but also, and more importantly, *where you feel you are*. The Battle of Bull Run:

The Saturday and Sunday of the battle (20th, 21st,) had been parch’d and hot to an extreme—the dust, the grime and smoke, in layers, sweated in, follow’d by other layers again sweated in, absorb’d by those excited souls—their clothes all saturated with the clay-powder filling the air—stirr’d up everywhere on the dry roads and trodden fields by the regiments, swarming wagons, artillery, &c.—all the men with this coating of murk and seat and rain, now recoiling back, pouring over the Long Bridge, a horrible march of twenty miles, returning to Washington baffled, humiliated, panic-struck. (*SD* 23)

Whitman’s experiences at the camp hospitals in Virginia the following year (1862), prove worse. “I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near, each cover’d with it brown woolen blanket. In the door-yard, towards the river, are fresh graves, mostly of officers, their names on pieces of barrel-staves or broken boards, stuck in the dirt” (*SD* 26). The depictions are not those of universal “comradeship,” yet they are the particularly lived experiences that concretize for Whitman the shared physicality of human being through suffering rather than any ecstatic moment. What is more to the point, they point up how radically dialectical ideologies intervene in the Whitmanic cosmos to produce not merely political struggle, but, more saliently, the myth of domination over the Other—whether or not the Other turns out to be the Confederacy, for example, or Nature itself. The tropism of the dialectical cut between two terms can and does lead to a literal, physical one.
Experience and Reality Come to the Same Thing

While the suffering of war informs his work, Whitman’s democratic poetics is indeed optimistic. “With many men the question of life’s worth is answered by a temperamental optimism which makes them incapable of believing that anything seriously evil can exist,” William James observes in “Is Life Worth Living,” “Our dear old Walt Whitman’s works are the standing text-book of this kind of optimism. The mere joy of living is so immense in Walt Whitman’s veins that it abolishes the possibility of any other kind of feeling” (*Pragmatism* 219). While I have suggested, contrary to James, that Whitman’s optimism actually opens up possibilities for feeling and that, moreover, Whitman empirically understood that “evil can exist,” James importantly notes that the “joy of living” is in Whitman’s “veins.” Feeling is not only physically substantial, but also systemic. Although one can make too much of a simple trope, James’ language is precise. He, too, inquires into the phantom limb:

What is the phenomenon? It is what is commonly known as the extradition, or projection outwards, of a sensation whose immediate condition is the stimulation of a central organ of perception by an incoming nerve or nerves. As the optical centres respond to stimulation by the feeling of forms and colors, and the acoustic centers by that of sounds, so do certain other centres respond by the feeling of a foot, with its toes, heel, etc. This feeling is what Johannes Muller called the “specific energy” of the neural tracts involved. (*Essays In Psychology* 207)

As with Whitman, conscious feeling is not merely physical, but bodily extensive and systemically so. It is a “projection outwards,” the responsiveness of which is on a par with “the feeling” of vision and audition. It is also on a par with a radically empirical “joy of living.” “Ontological emotion so fills the soul that ontological speculation can no longer overlap it and put her girdle of interrogation-marks around existence,” James explains in *The Will to Believe* and, in doing so, points out the substantial difference
between Whitmanic poetry and philosophy, in that the former is constituted by
“ontological emotion”—by which I mean the actual occasion of feeling—rather than
speculative questioning. (74) “I accept Reality and dare not question it,” writes Whitman,
if only because “Reality” is knowable through “ontological emotion” and not, first and
foremost, through a rational ontology of language. Consider “Song of Myself”:

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your
throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or
lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice. (CP 67)

Whitman is after the “stimulation by the feeling” of sound itself, which is precisely the
formal point William Carlos Williams suggests in his introduction to The Wedge, roughly
a hundred years later, when he asks “What does it matter what the line ‘says’?” (The
Collected Poems II.54). The “hum” of a “valvèd voice” reduces language to sonic
vibrations that neither approach “music” nor even lettered “rhyme,” but nevertheless
express affective forms available for feeling through aesthesis. Whitman is after the
sensual activity of audition in its most hypostatic form.

In the same passage from The Will to Believe, James cites the above section of
“Song of Myself,” in fact: “Even the least religious of men must have felt with Walt
Whitman, when loafing on the grass on some transparent summer morning, that ‘swiftly
arose and spread round him the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the
earth’. At such moments of energetic living we feel as if there were something diseased
and contemptible, yea vile, in theoretic grubbing and brooding” (74). Whitman’s
democratic poetics is immersed not in the speculative mood of indeterminacy, but rather
in the possible mood of ecstasy—of “energetic living” in the continuous flow of ineluctable experience that intrinsically requires no justification.

I argued earlier that the two large “themes” of *Leaves of Grass* are “the two impetuses of man and universe,” namely emotion and change. Since James is an avid reader of Whitman, it may not come as a surprise that they are alike in this respect. “Bare activity, then, as we may call it,” James points out in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, “means the bare fact of event or change. ‘Change taking place’ is a unique content of experience, one of those ‘conjunctive’ objects which radical empiricism seeks so earnestly to rehabilitate and preserve. The sense of activity is thus in the broadest and vaguest way synonymous with the sense of ‘life’ (84). For Whitman, bare activity is “bare” in any way but *theoretical*. Events are factual precisely because they are phenomenally actual. Again, consider the same section from “Song of Myself” that James cites in “Is Life Worth Living”:

> I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,  
> How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me,  
> And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,  
> And reach’d till you felt my beard, and reach’d till you held my feet. *(CP 67)*

“Bare activity” is conjunctive or connective in a flow of experience *that is at one with that of reality*. “Should we not say here that to be experienced as continuous is to be really continuous,” James asks, “in a world where experience and reality come to the same thing?” (31). Whitman’s sense record of intimate human connection is constituted, sound to sound and word to word, by the “bare fact of event or change.” Yet, such a “bare fact” is simply one in a continuous series, to follow James’ trope, which should
remind us of “the melodious character of the earth,” which amounts to a rhythmically organized sequence of sounds that are related in such a way as to create a particular phrase or idea. The melodious character of the poem is an extension of “the melodious character of the earth,” in other words. What is more, Whitman’s sense of “being-in-the-world,” to recall Merleau-Ponty, is on a par with that of James, “for we are only as experients” (Essays in Radical Empiricism 84). James takes “belief, or the sense of reality” as “more allied to the emotions than anything else,” which resonates with Whitman’s immediate acceptance of the real since, as James points out, the opposites of such belief “are doubt and inquiry, not disbelief” (The Principles of Psychology II.283-84). “I accept Reality and dare not question it,” says Whitman. In other words, such an acceptance relies upon the generative immediacy of experience and not, in fact, rationalizing ontological categories of being. In Whitmanic poetics, the knowledge of reality extends from the continuously changing event of being-in-the-world, which is inextricable from the emergence of human emotion. What is felt is the real. All else is “theoretic grubbing.”

I Feel I Know Now: Stein’s “Bottom Nature”

Gertrude Stein points out in Lectures In America that the problem with which she grapples in Tender Buttons is not first and foremost with nouns, but rather with the non-representational recreation of things, the impetus for which, she claims, is none other than Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. Marjorie Perloff argues forcefully that Stein does not begin “with an idea to represent words, words that are then arranged in sentences, but with those sentences themselves,” each to each moving away from the notion of naming and
towards “word order”—an order so expressive that there would be no need for most punctuation” (21st-Century Modernism 35). True, and I add that Stein hears the Whitmanic “melodious character of the earth” as that of language. Steinian poetics is one of perceptive sequencings, rather than the “theoretic grubbing” of logic and reason, which allows Tender Buttons, for instance, to recreate the au fond commonality of the real—“the bottom nature,” to use Stein’s phrase—without actively deploying rational structures of knowing. And I use the term “sequencings” rather than “syntax” because the latter has everything to do with rational forms of ordering experience on the one hand, and the former, on the other hand, has everything to do with perceptive forms of ordering experience through aesthesis.

At the end of Lectures In America, Stein outlines the problem of representation in the nineteenth-century, a problem with which we are all too familiar today. The notion that signs stably stood for things in an unproblematic manner was not only a ubiquitously cultural dilemma, but also one of poetry, philosophy, linguistics, and so forth. It was a problem of humanist disciplinarity writ large, in other words, and it is interesting to note that at the outset of the twentieth-century, specifically between 1906 and 1911, Ferdinand de Saussure gave his own series of lectures, compiled into Course In General Linguistics, which famously addresses the unstable relations between signifiers and that which they signify. Yet Stein invokes neither philosophy nor linguistics in her account of the problem: “Slowly and particularly during the nineteenth century the English nineteenth century everybody had come to know too well very much too well the name anything had when you called it by its name” (241). The Romantic doctrine of “passionately completely passionately naming that thing by its name” indeed has a storied history,
stemming back to its Platonic foundations, yet my point turns on Stein’s move away from “the English nineteenth century” and towards the making of a new American poetics:

And then Walt Whitman came. He wanted really wanted to express the thing and not call it by its name. He worked very hard at that, and he called it Leaves of Grass because he wanted it to be as little a well known name to be called upon passionately as possible. I do not at all know whether Whitman knew that he wanted to do this but there is no doubt at all but that is what he did want to do. *(LIA 241)*

According to the logic of representation, the subject divides the epistemological domain into a total system of signs, which we know as language, and a total system of objects, which we know as the world. Once complete, this division is overcome by noting the relationships between signs and objects, language and the world. In themselves, things ultimately mean nothing. Only through the construction of relationships does anything—or any body’s biography, for that matter—obtain meaning. Western metaphysics takes given relations as a source of meaning, in other words, and the Word as the ultimate cause. Alternatively, Whitman sees that things themselves perform their meaning without reliance upon generally given relations that defer to the logic of representation.

What then do we make of a desire “to express the thing” rather than “call it by its name”? Whitman shows Stein that the ideal requirements of form, which order the classical tradition—and which, additionally, call the classical tradition itself by its proper “name”—carry only a symbolic authority and nothing more. “She means yes by yes and little by little and went there to have them along,” Stein writes in *History or Messages from History*, “Symbolism means yes by yes with part of it which they take. Taken made easily it is too bad. I feel I know now” (15-16). On the one hand, the “part of it which they take” is that which one speculatively interprets to mean something other than an articulation literally indicates and, on the other hand, to “know now” is to “feel I know
“now” during the actual occasion of articulation. It is a formation of empirical knowledge. Through the perceptive action of aesthesis. To call a thing by its name is to not only refer to the logic of representation, but ultimately to the idealist doctrine of the Word, the Logos, the One, Discourse, and so forth. Stein develops a methodology that involves “looking at anything until something that was not the name of that thing but was in a way that actual thing would come to be written,” and when Stein qualifies the writing of the “actual thing,” the text is neither vague nor ambiguously coy (LIA 237). The phrase “in a way” suggests that poetic processes are substantially a matter of perceptive “looking.” Not coincidentally, the phrase “in a way” also suggests Stein’s methodological insistence upon how to write, rather than what such writing might mean if traditional symbolic patterns of linguistic representation were disrupted. To simply reorient the relationships between concepts qua concepts is on a par with moving furniture around the room of representation in the Grand Hotel of the Logos, either centered or decentered. The language of Western metaphysics has no vacancies, yet there is always room for one more.

Horace Traubel explains in his introduction to An American Primer that Whitman describes Leaves of Grass a “language experiment,” by which he means to “give the spirit, the body, the man, new words, new potentialities of speech—an American, a cosmopolitan (the best of America is the best cosmopolitanism) range of self-expression” (viii). If we take Stein at her word, and I do, then “to express the thing” means to give, by means of physical action, “new potentialities of speech.” Rather than merely play with concepts, rupturing the traditional rules of grammatical and metrical propriety with the ataxic use of signs, Stein’s own language experiments evidence a cosmopoetic or worldly,
if not wordy, “range of self-expression” that performs “new potentialities for speech.” In this, such “new potentialities” literally and assertively speak to the “literalism and self-assertion” of Stein’s work noted by Bob Perelman in *The Trouble With Genius* (130). On the other hand, the usual observation that Stein’s work ubiquitously uses simple language speaks to the matter of “speech”:

Way cause dust helping themselves hardly bay invites titles repeat in ahead now and man turnover parts in speech there very welcome having it pointedly afire with gentle fairly displace did it can feel a dance. (*HTW* 60)

My point is not to suggest that this is vernacular English in the Whitmanic sense, but rather that these “parts of speech” are simple—*common*—in that we both hear and use such language daily. Put differently, one commonly experiences such terms as “dust,” “helping,” “invites,” “repeat,” “parts,” “welcome,” “gentle,” “feel,” and so forth. On the other hand, Steinian poetics insists on sequencings that performatively express the “actual thing,” sequencings that do not reduce to ostensive matters of syntax. Later in *How to Write*:

The question is if you have a vocabulary have you any need of grammar except for explanation that is the question, communication and direction repetition and intuition that is the question. Returned for grammar. (60)

If the performance of a composition functions in place of grammar, as Stein effectually argues in “Composition as Explanation,” then the answer to the question posed by the phrase “have you any need of grammar” is decidedly no. “Resemblance is not a thing to feel. Nor is grammar,” Stein points out, and in doing so shifts attention away from conceptualizing grammatical schemas that play into the logic of representation (“resemblance”) and toward “a thing to feel,” “to feel a dance” of perception (*HTW* 59). To Steinian poetics, the thing-in-itself is not a discursive construction and, thus, not of
the Kantian variety (*Ding-an-sich*), but rather it is “a thing to feel” through the generative immediacy of aesthesis. If feeling and knowing are homologous terms, then the thing-in-itself is that which one knows through perception and not through representation.

Addressing the problem of nouns, Stein “went on with this exceeding struggle of knowing really knowing what a thing was really knowing it knowing anything I was seeing anything I was feeling,” and she adds that “I had to feel anything and everything that for me was existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name” (*LIA* 242). Stein’s insistence on “really knowing” speaks to not merely the aesthetic problem of using nouns, but, more poignantly, the culturally ubiquitous problem of the ontological relationship between the individual and a mediating language. Foucault: “The only thing we know at the moment, in all certainty, is that in Western culture the being of man and the being of language have never, at any time, been able to coexist and articulate themselves one upon the other. Their incompatibility has been one of the fundamental features of our thought” (*The Order of Things* 339). While I do not want to put words in Stein’s mouth, so to speak, her insistence on “existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself” negotiates with the problem that Foucault outlines. It is not exclusively that the human being and *language* are incompossible, but that the human being and the representational language of Discourse are incompossible, which leads Stein to insist upon *how language is used*. “Subject matter,” Marjorie Perloff points out, “the world outside the text or picture frame, matters only with respect to what the artist *does with it*” (*21st-Century Modernism* 49). What makes Stein’s “range of self-expression” cosmopoetic is that poetic form extends from the particularly felt occasion of action or performance. Put
differently, “existing so intensely” requires a singularity of perception out of which emerges the actual particularity of sequencings—“what the artist does with it,” or rather, to put a finer point on Perloff’s observation, what the artist does with it. Like that of Whitman, Stein’s poetics is one of idiocrasy. Art does not exist in a vacuum, linguistic or otherwise. In that it is a form of “really knowing”—as epistemic, in other words—poetic form is participatory.

Frankly Openly Bored: Creation and the Myth of Rationalism

Perceptive forms of feeling are at stake for Stein, just as they are at stake for William James, her friend and mentor at Radcliffe College. In his fascinating study Irresistible Dictation, Steven Meyer points out that Stein rejected the associational nature of James’ stream of consciousness theory, “removing every association from the sentence” in her own work (237). Yet both Stein and James are, in the end, radical empiricists. Meyer: “Feeling and being are thus intimately connected, and it is this intimacy that the sentence details. A person’s feelings, for instance, do not just happen to exist but are the result of something that causes one to feel a certain way” (237). The general understanding about emotion is that it is caused by perception, which in turn determines bodily expression, including what is either said or written. William James:

My theory, on the contrary, is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion. Common-sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on
the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colorless, destitute of emotional warmth. (The Principles of Psychology II:449-50)

As we saw with Whitman, for Stein “a thing to feel” is at one with both the perception of that “thing itself” and its corresponding emotion. In other words, the rational bifurcation of “feeling” into physical sensation and emotion collapses. It is this unity of perception and emotion that has everything to do with bodily changes that are, as James explains, “so indefinitely numerous and subtle that the entire organism may be called a sounding-board, which every change in consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate” (450). For Stein, the body entire is indeed a “sounding-board” for the perceptive change that underwrites writing processes, constituting the way in which the radical physicality of the subject—recalling Whitehead, Stein terms the subject an “entity” throughout her work—relates to the world.

After studying with William James, Stein attended Johns Hopkins Medical School, and her studies were short lived. “I went to the medical school where I was bored and where once more myself and my experiences were more actively interesting me than the life inside of others,” Stein explains in Lectures In America, “But then after that once more I began to listen, I had left the medical school and I had for the moment nothing to do but talk and look and listen, and I did this tremendously” (138). As Stein says in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, “The last two years at the medical school she was bored, frankly openly bored” (81). She is far more interested, that is, in lived experience than the “theoretic grubbing” of either philosophy or science.

“That was what science was,” Stein explains in Everybody’s Autobiography, “every solution was an opening to another problem and then William James came that is I
came to him and he said science is not a solution and not a problem it is a statement of the observation of things observed and perhaps therefore not interesting perhaps therefore only abjectly true” (250). Stein’s feeling that she lacked “energetic living,” to recall James, turns out to be “abjectly true.” Science, to Stein, “is not interesting since it is the statement of observation and the laws of science are like all laws they are paper laws, as the Chinese call them, they make believe that they do something so as to keep every one from knowing that they are not going on living” (EA 251). Statements of observations are descriptions that play directly into the logic of representation, or rather the logic of “resemblances” that require precision in naming. One might say that the scientificity of description depends upon an ostensibly objective artistry of the noun. The scientific method of which Stein would have been aware involves four fundamental steps: 1) the observation of phenomenon, 2) the proposition of an explanatory hypothesis, 3) the proposition of predicted phenomenon to be observed, and 4) observation of the predicted phenomenon. While it is indeed grounded in empirical observation, such a rote algorithm leaves Stein “bored, frankly openly bored.” In other words, she is methodologically bored with the rational illusio of objective representation to which scientific disciplines subscribe.

We know from the work of Wittgenstein that, on the one hand, description is the general work of philosophy and, on the other, description is an activity that consistently fails to make the infinite finally finite, if indeed we can describe description itself, which Wittgenstein took as the ultimate goal of philosophy (Gert 221). Stein learns this lesson, in part, from James:

When I was working with William James I completely learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, with
ultimately the complete description of anything with ultimately the complete
description of everything. If this can really be done the complete description of
everything then what else is there to do. We may well say nothing, but and this is
the thing that makes everything continue to be anything, that after all what does
happen is that as relatively few people spend all their time describing anything
and they stop and so in the meantime as everything goes on somebody else can
always commence and go on. And so description is really unending” (LIA 156).

To tap the infinite number of descriptions for one single phenomenon is to engage in
logocentric futility. No matter how exact or interesting a description may appear, it
ultimately faces the problem of temporality and change. In other words, a description
offers itself as an answer to the implicit question of “What is that?” Wittgenstein is, of
course, correct. Description is entirely a philosophical problem, if only because it is
entirely rooted in a question of Socratic dialectic. It is merely a discursive construction
and nothing more, bound to its own memory of time, its own retrospection and, thus,
prone to narcissistic nostalgia. Philosophic and scientific modes of description are both
bound to the Socratic problem of answering every answer with a question, and Stein is
quite aware that “listening to an answer makes you know that time is existing but asking
a question makes you think that perhaps it does not” (EA 251). In “asking a question” of
an answer, one enters the dialectical play between the infinite and the finite, the ancient
problem of the continuous and discrete, the conceptual ordering of a perception of time
that will register the “abjectly true” fact that the temporal is both and neither, present in
its absence and absent in its presence. Such an antinomy finds its resolve in either
indeterminacy, which is no resolution at all, or relativity, which turns relations into a
matter of subject positionality.

Description, in other words, overlooks creation. As one of the central features of
rational thought, description is retrospective and, in turn, can only depict the illusio of the
non-metaphysical presence, the empirical present, articulated by Stein’s phrase “I feel I know now.” Stein’s “now” is that which is felt and known, without recourse to rational retrospection and, in turn, a mode of description that requires “completely passionately naming that thing by its name.” As I point out in my preface, at stake is not merely the aesthetic mode of description, but rather the universalized Enlightenment myth of rationality that was charged with “the revelation of the ultimate meaningfulness of existence” (Essays on Boredom and Modernity 12). Stein is, in part, bored or dissatisfied with the experience of such a literally meaningless myth. The following passage is long, but, as with many of Stein’s texts, necessary to quote at length:

I had always been very impressed from the time that I was very young by having had it told me and then afterwards feeling it myself that Shakespeare in the forest of Arden had created a forest without mentioning the things that make a forest. You feel it all but he does not name its names. Now that was a thing that I too felt in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name. After all one had known its name anything’s name for so long, and so the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new.

What was there to do. I commenced trying to do something in Tender Buttons about this thing. I went on and on trying to do this thing. I remember in writing An Acquaintance With Description looking at anything until something that was not the name of that thing but was in a way that actual thing would come to be written. Naturally, and one may say that is what made Walt Whitman naturally that made the change in the form of poetry, that we who had known the names so long did not get a thrill from just knowing them. We that is any human being living has inevitably to feel the thing anything being existing, but the name of that thing of anything is no longer anything to thrill any one except children. So as everybody has to be a poet, what was there to do. This that I have just described, the creating it without naming it, was what broke the rigid form of the noun the simple noun poetry which now was broken. (LIA 237)

Throughout the nineteenth century, Romantic poetry took description as its mode of being, or rather “the thing being alive” in accordance to the “paper laws” of discourse that “keep every one knowing that they are not going on living.” Stein recognizes that the
Shakespearean question of “to be or not to be” becomes, with the Romantics, “to be *and* not to be,” which, in the Hegelian formula, produces only synthetic becoming. Existence is measured by acts of descriptive interpretation in a synthetic manner, rather than “naturally,” by which Stein means *feelingly*. If, as Stein claims in *How to Write*, “A grammar is a collection of observations on the necessity of their having been nothing modulated,” then the process of “creating it without naming it” measures existence through observations that interact with the world in continuous modulation without marking a properly rationalized subject (77). The “simple noun poetry” that answers to the logic of representation assumes to know not only what words mean, but *how* they mean before they are ever used, which is as much to say before they are ever felt through the Steinian “now.” It is interesting to note that such an epistemological assumption to already know what and how words will mean in the future—ahead of time, so to speak—depends upon rational *retrospectivity*. Stein is not foremost interested in the stability of meaning, an interest that marks the linguistic turn and its slippery signifiers so-called, but rather the temporal situatedness of how words are felt and known, which is as much to say how meaning is discovered through empirically constructive acts of knowing.

**Creatively Speaking: I Am I Because My Little Dog Knows Me**

“Act so that there is no use in a centre,” Stein begins the third and final section of *Tender Buttons*, “A wide action is not a width. A preparation is given to the ones preparing” (43). The classical literary tradition assumed form as preformed, the terms of its poetics always already prepared for “the ones preparing” to write the next iteration of
preparation. Stein discusses the disciplinarity of such a “given” preparation in “Composition as Explanation”:

That is because war is a thing that decides how it is to be done when it is to be done. It is prepared and to that degree it is like all academies it is not a thing made by being made it is a thing prepared. Writing and painting and all that, is like that, for those who occupy themselves with it and don’t make it as it is made. (WL 21-22).

To “make it as it is made” requires a trust in empirically constructive processes, a trust that itself requires one to act “so that there is no use in a centre” that predetermines the necessity for the coherency of “[w]riting and painting and all that.” Moreover, constructive or creative processes require the generative immediacy of aesthesis, which Stein points out at the outset of “Portraits and Repetition,” clarifying that “by made I mean felt” (LIA 165). There is nothing academic about “feeling it as it is felt,” so to speak, and Stein, in her insistence that “all order is in a measure,” wants nothing to do with “a thing prepared” but rather “a thing to feel” (TB 50). Making, feeling, and knowing are homologous terms for the order that emerges from perceptive rather than prescriptive measures that are both visual and auditory. “A sound,” she says, “a whole sound is not separation, a whole sound is in an order” (TB 23). In this sense, such “a whole sound” stands for the deictic “it” in the phrase “make it as it is made.” And to make, of course, requires the performative rather than the descriptively ostensive. Put differently, an intensity of perceptive attention given over to generative experience is necessary to “make it as it is made.” In contrast to the Kantian categorical imperative, in other words, which appeals to the reason of syllogistic logic, the Steinian empirical imperative is that one must “act,” which appeals to the generative immediacy of experiential knowing. The
rationality of “preparing” has nothing to do with the sequencing—the “order”—“in a measure” that is radically felt.

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein makes an interesting point: “She knows that beauty, music, decoration, the result of emotion should never be the cause, even events should not be the cause of emotion nor should they be the material of poetry and prose. Nor should emotion itself be the cause of poetry or prose” (211). Romantic poetry takes emotion, expressed by the essential voice of the subjective “I,” as the central cause of poetic form that *calls* things by their proper “name.” As Stein says in *Tender Buttons*, “should there be a call there would be a voice” (48). When Stein, in her own reading of *Tender Buttons*, explains that “I was of course not interested in emotion,” she is decidedly not interested in emotion as the Romantically central cause of poetic form (*LIA* 191). Such cause depends upon what Aristotle terms the first hypostasis, or rather the first and central cause: the Word, the Logos, and so forth. “Act so that there is no use in a centre,” Stein enjoins. Act, in other words, to ensure that such a “centre” of systemic coherence has no use value to the performative process of writing. As the central cause of poetic form, emotion is managed by “prepared” ideal Forms, perhaps the most important of which is not grammar, but a range of rhetorical devices outlined as early as 1589, for instance, in George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie*. In coupling perception and emotion, Steinian poetics relies upon neither “emotion itself” as a reasonably framed “cause of poetry or prose,” nor its attendant range of ideal metrical, grammatical, and rhetorical forms designed to “order” experience.
I noted earlier that Stein’s vocabulary is common, yet not squarely vernacular in the Whitmanic sense. In “What Are Masterpieces and Why There Are So Few of Them,” Stein attends to a “felt” difference between “talking” and “creation”:

I talk a lot I like to talk and I talk even more than that I may say I talk most of the time and I listen a fair amount too and as I have said the essence of being a genius is to be able to talk and listen to listen while talking and talk while listening but and this is very very important very important indeed talking has nothing to do with creation” (WL 148).

Why is it that “talking has nothing to do with creation”? Taking Stein at her word, so to speak, “talking” has everything to do with “voice.” As she points out, “should there be a call there would be a voice,” and “talking” has everything to do with the quotidian representative act of calling a thing by its ostensibly proper name. If the classical literary tradition takes emotion, expressed by the essential voice of the subject, as the central cause of poetic form, then Stein undertakes to undo the Romantic nexus of identity, voice, emotion, and the logic of representation in a stroke. Later in “What Are Masterpieces,” she explains:

The thing one gradually comes to find out is that one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything. Identity is recognition, you know who you are because you and others remember anything about yourself but essentially you are not that when you are doing anything. I am I because my little dog knows me but, creatively speaking the little dog knowing that you are you and your recognizing that he knows, that is what destroys creation. That is what makes school. (WL 148-49)

So, “creatively speaking,” Stein writes, the immediately perceptive act of “the little dog knowing that you are you” (which requires no preformed concepts to order experience) coupled to a disciplined human consciousness “recognizing that he knows” (which requires preformed concepts that give general meaning to experience) “is what destroys creation.” In other words, discursive mediation “destroys creation” through a
humancentric and thus symbolic determination of given identities. Rather than call a thing by its name—iPhone, penny, particle accelerator, capitalist mode of labor, Gertrude, Spot, and so forth—in the manner prepared by “school” for the writer, Stein alternatively suggests that, “creatively speaking,” one must perceptively “make it as it is made.” Stein’s insistence that “one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything” decouples “the act of doing” from a discursively subjective “I” and, in turn, couples “the act of doing” to the generative immediacy of empirical “knowing.” Her proclamation that “I am I because my little dog knows me,” moreover, significantly inflects the idealist Cartesian maxim cogito ergo sum, in that “I am I” qua “a thing to feel” effectively erases the stable and thoroughly reasonable Cartesian subject that “has nothing to do with creation.” The tale of Stein’s work is literally out of school.

**The Fringe of Experience**

Although the discussion of writing practices in non-Euclidean terms is oftentimes overlooked by contemporary scholarship in favor of semiotic readings, an understanding of non-Euclidean geometry and the “fourth dimension,” which was indeed taken quite seriously by thinkers and artists in Stein’s historical context, will show a different dimension, if you will, to Stein’s project. There is no need to rehearse the many articulations of her writing to Cubism, but it is important to note that the pictorial planes of Cubist art are non-Euclidean and, thus, do away with traditional assumptions regarding referentiality. As we have seen, Steinian poetics concerns itself with “a thing to feel,” and the notion of pictorial resemblance is squarely referential in this regard. “Resemblance is not a thing to feel,” we recall, “Nor is grammar.” Painting and poetry, in other words, are
not seen as texts in the contemporary postmodern sense, but rather as that which is *seen* and thus known through aesthesis.

While there are several useful discussions of Cubism’s relation to Steinian poetics, Randa Dubnick’s insightful study, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism*, notes one feature of Stein’s interest in Cubist work important to my present discussion. “Stein believed that until Cézanne the composition of a painting had a central figure and a background, but in Cézanne’s work all things had equal importance,” Dubnick observes, “Stein described the cubist’s composition as decentralized, with corners having as much importance as the center of the canvas” (18). How does such a pictorial decentralization translate into Stein’s project, however? Dubnick argues that she writes against the grain of traditional narrative, specifically its assumption of Aristotle’s dramatic arc of action outlined in the *Poetics*. “Because Stein wanted to capture the present moment,” Dubnick explains, “she soon rejected the conventions of beginning, middle, and end as not authentically representative of human perception of the world” (19). As I noted earlier, Stein begins the third and final section of *Tender Buttons*, “Act so that there is no use in a centre,” and it is this assumption of a center—a central figure of dramatic action and a central climax or “middle” to a central motif—that Stein decentralizes *empirically*. While we have seen how such a “centre” functions as the rationalized cause of systemic coherency, we will now explore how the non-Euclidean space of Cubist art inflects Steinian poetics, specifically in terms of this philosophic “centre.”

While there are a range of ways to discuss the articulation of Stein’s insistence on the generative immediacy of experience, perhaps the clearest is to consider how James’
“fringe” of experience highlights such an insistence, which turns on the point of the limen, or rather the smallest unit of experience. James terms the limen—of words, people, trees, cars, little dogs, and so forth—a “fringe,” which constitutes the second of three critical terms in his theory of attention. The first term, “focus,” indicates whatever one most clearly and immediately perceives. The fringe, interestingly, indicates a radius of lower-resolution around an area of focus and, James’ third term, the “margin,” indicates the very limit of individual perception. Attention circumscribes the entire range of sensory experience: “The words in every language have contracted by long association fringes of mutual repugnance or affinity with each other and with the conclusion, which run exactly parallel with like fringes in the visual, tactile, and other ideas,” James explains in Pragmatism, “The most important element of these fringes is, I repeat, the mere feeling of harmony or discord, a right or wrong direction in thought” (185). For James, the “fringe” of language—to follow his example—is the very site of perceptive feeling, a feeling of “a right or wrong direction in thought” constituted by association. As we have seen, however, Meyer points out—rightly, I believe—that Steinian poetics removes “every association from the sentence.” What, then, is felt at the fringe of experience? If we take the margin as an event horizon, then the fringe of experience functions as the site of potential rather than associative forms:

The time when there is not the question is only seen when there is a shower. Any little thing is water.

There was a whole collection made. A damp cloth, an oyster, a single mirror, a manikin, a student, a silent star, a single spark, a little movement and the bed is made. This shows the disorder, it does, it shows more likeness than anything else, it shows the single mind that directs an apple. All the coats have a different shape, that does does not mean that they differ in color, it means a union between use and exercise and a horse.

A plain hill, one is not that which is not white and red and green, a plain hill makes no sunshine, it shows that without a disturber. So the shape is there and
the color and the outline and the miserable centre, it is not very likely that there is a centre, a hill is a hill and no hill is contained in a pink tender descender. (TB 46)

Rationally speaking, the ataxic or disorderly syntax of the text—it “shows the disorder”—inflects the formal, communicative ideal of discursivity. Such ataxia is ostensive, which is as much to say that “it shows more likeness than anything else” and “it shows the single mind that directs an apple.” In other words, the text illustrates or paints a representative picture, so to speak, of “the single mind” (stable subject) that “directs” (orders) the “apple” (object or thing-in-itself) through the very ataxic effects that challenge and thus highlight such rationalist assumptions.

Empirically speaking, however, Stein’s process attends to “a thing to feel” and its attendant “fringe,” the limen on the threshold of experience, which, it is important to note, constructs an “order” or sequence that is specific to itself, without appeal to “the miserable centre” that rationalism will always already assume. Who could, for example, possibly anticipate the “illogically” ordered phrase “makes no sunshine” after “a plain hill”? In other words, I suggest that, while Stein does engage in word play, such play is an effect of perception not merely ordering conception, but reordering what it is possible to experience and, thus, how it is possible to know. Any dialectic between clarity and confusion fails to synthesize a final outcome—in general truth, that is—and ultimately breaks down. “I am inclined to believe that there is really no difference between clarity and confusion,” Stein remarks, “just think of any life that is alive, is there really any difference between clarity and confusion” (LIA 174). As Michael Warner said of Whitman’s project, the “pragmatics of selfing” is clearly “a mess.” A “life that is alive” attends to the fringe of perceptive experience, or rather the potential forms of knowing. As an artist, Stein does not appeal to “the miserable centre” that determines the given
orders and thus meaning of experience, but rather to the fringe *qua* the point of creative decision making that allows one to “make it as it is made.”

**No One Goes Out To Buy Zero Fish**

Interestingly, Stein points out that “the miserable centre” is “not very likely,” which makes empirical sense when we consider that such a center amounts, literally, to nothing. Kate Fullbrook notes that Stein, in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, “assigns to her lifelong companion the repeated comment that she has met three geniuses in her life: Stein, Picasso, and Alfred North Whitehead” (*Special Relationships* 242). Whitehead undoubtedly represents the philosopher king of this unorthodox trinity and, in his *Introduction to Mathematics*, he brings to a head the problem of “the miserable centre.” Indeed, the locution sounds Steinian: “No one goes out to buy zero fish” (63). In geometrical terms as well as in those of the visual arts, the concept of zero amounts to nothing, infinity, and one point. Cartesian graphical space is predicated upon this concept of zero as a limit to a linear number line that allows for not only the determination of coordinates, but also, and more interestingly, a clean solution to Zeno’s paradoxes. The concept of zero to the Greeks was merely a intellectual curiosity and, without zero as a limit systemically integrated into their counting system, Zeno could show that his arrow would never hit the target. In other words, without the limit of zero continuous motion is *theoretically* divided into an infinite number of discrete steps. In pointing out the empirical absurdity of buying “zero fish,” Whitehead also suggests that “the miserable centre” is “not very likely” because it is a concept without “a thing to feel,” which is arguably Stein’s point as well. To Whitehead, zero has no empirical, actual relevancy (*PR*
Incorporated into Cartesian philosophy, zero is at the center of a pure mathematics, only contingently articulated to the material real.

Like the Cubists, Stein questions the symbolic zero that functions as “the miserable center,” which, in the visual arts, is termed a vanishing point. In Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea, Charles Seife gives an intuitive account of the mathematical history of zero and, in his discussion of the fifteenth-century Italian architect Filippo Brunelleschi, he explains the first known use of a vanishing point:

In 1425, Brunelleschi placed just such a point in the center of a drawing of a famous Florentine building, the Baptistry. This zero-dimensional object, the vanishing point, is an infinitesimal dot on the canvas that represents a spot infinitely far away from the viewer. As objects recede into the distance in the painting, they get closer and closer to the vanishing point, getting more compressed as they get farther away from the viewer. Everything sufficiently distant—people, trees, buildings—is squashed into a zero-dimensional point and disappears. The zero in the center of the painting contains an infinity of space. (86)

Throughout the thousands of pages of Stein’s work, from the early Three Lives to the posthumously published Stanzas in Meditation, there is no one center, one single formal subject, to which her language answers. It is this illusory structure of a perfectly described three-dimensional space that underwrites the representational tradition in the arts and the sciences. It is the center of the Enlightenment myth of rationality. While the image refers to something outside of itself—Brunelleschi’s two-dimensional drawing, for example, refers to the three-dimensional Baptistery building—every mark on the page formally refers to the zero-dimensional vanishing point. Put differently, the singular point that is zero-dimensional yet contains an infinity of space ultimately determines representations of measure, not actual measure in real time. A symmetrically ordered series of discrete points undergirds the representational image and, as the origin of this
order, the zero-dimensional center point exists *in name only*. Zero represents the Paper Law of all “paper laws."

In the seventeenth-century, Descartes solidified his claim to not only the father of modern philosophy, but also to analytic geometry. As we saw with Zeno’s paradox of the arrow that never reaches the target, adding zero to a linear number line conditions a limit, and it is precisely this zero-dimensional limit, used effectively by Brunelleschi, that underwrites the Cartesian coordinate system that unifies number and shape. The mathematical equations are less relevant to our discussion than the consequence of this Cartesian reconciliation, which entails representing every geometric object, such as squares or triangles, by an equation. To Descartes, zero is not only the center of the coordinate system, but also inheres in every geometric shape on the one hand and, on the other, in God. As Dominic Widdows points out in *Geometry and Meaning*, the coordinate system measures through symbolic relationships: “The description given by Descartes of choosing a particular line as a unit, and ascribing numerical lengths to other lines according to their ratio with this unit, is one of the first clear-cut definitions of ‘measurement’” (141). Among the range of meanings ascribed to the Greek *logos*, one will unsurprisingly find *ratio* or measure. The Cartesian dream of a rational universe governed by ratios, wherein a symmetry of proportion is necessary for anything to make ultimate sense, proves radically Pythagorean. Again, measure is purely representational, a description of the Steinian “thing to feel,” not the-thing-itsel on the fringe of experience.

The algebraic and axiomatic details of how Cartesian analytic geometry rewrites that of Euclid do not concern us here, although it bears pointing out that, until the early nineteenth-century, the founding axioms of Euclidean space were taken as unassailably
true. In his erudite study *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought*, Vladimir Tasić discusses the historical problem with Euclid’s fifth postulate, namely that the fifth and final postulate is logically independent of the others:

One way to show this is to provide a *model* for a geometry where the fifth postulate fails while the rest of the assumptions hold true. To provide a model means to assemble a collection of geometrical objects that we could call “points,” “lines,” “circles,” and so on, where all these objects satisfy all of Euclid’s axioms and postulates except the fifth. In other words, we find an alternative interpretation of geometrical concepts that would conform to all the postulates except the fifth. This was done within the “Euclidean” space we ordinarily seem to be experiencing—apparently contradicting Kant’s claims (21).

Bertrand Russell, in *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry*, states the problem differently, explaining that with the discovery of non-Euclidean space, “we can no longer affirm, on purely geometrical ground, the apodeictic certainty of Euclid” (56). The real was redefined with the nineteenth century non-Euclidean geometers, Janos Bolyai and Nikolai Lobatschewsky, both of whom laid the mathematical foundations for the work of Bernhard Riemann. By the mid-nineteenth century, the flat space of Euclidean geometry that underwrites the Cartesian coordinate system became indeterminate, as Linda Dalrymple Henderson demonstrates in her magnanimous *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*. Riemann distinguishes between unbounded space and infinite space:

On the surface of a sphere space would be unbounded yet finite, and the sphere, in fact, is the most easily understood model for the non-Euclidean geometry implied by Riemann. Once space is finite and a line cannot be extended indefinitely (as Euclid’s parallel postulate assumes it will be), it is possible to establish that no line can be drawn parallel to a given line. (*The Fourth Dimension* 5)

Not until Albert Einstein included Riemannian space in twentieth century physics did the importance of non-Euclidean geometry become evident. In Einstein’s theory of general
relativity, space is continuous and, in that sense, cannot suffer a divide from matter, whereas, in Newtonian physics, deterministic space is independent of the phenomena that occur within its paradoxically infinite limits. When quantum theory is taken into account, the classical problem of the continuous and the discrete—or rather the classic formal contradiction of being \textit{qua} becoming—clearly appears.

In distinguishing between the discrete manifold and the continuous manifold, Riemann ultimately distinguishes between symbolic or representational measure on the one hand and, on the other, actual measure that includes physical interaction with the world. The former constructs a model of experience that determines relationships to produce meaning and, on the other hand, the latter \textit{constructs meaning through continuous and interactive experience}. James’ empiricism and that of Stein, albeit without the question mark, both ask: “Should we not say here that to be experienced as continuous is to be really continuous, in a world where experience and reality come to the same thing?” (\textit{RE} 31). To “say here,” as Stein says, is necessary if “there is no there there,” yet James and Stein do indeed diverge, in that Stein \textit{feels} the singular “thing” of “experience and reality” without representational justifications that depend upon Euclidean axioms on the one hand and the Cartesian zero-dimensional point—the formal subject of all representational schemas—on the other (\textit{EA} 298). To Stein, writing amounts to creating a world of discrete things to feel \textit{and their relations} through perceptive interaction in a continuous non-Euclidean spatiotemporal manifold. Her poetics does not construct different ways of representation, but rather, akin to Whitman, different ways of knowing “the internal melody of existence,” the series of actual events that emerge from the fringe of experience through aethesis (\textit{LIA} 197).
In one of the most lucid statements about her own writing process, Stein explains that “writing should be very exact and one must realize what there is inside in one and then in some way it comes into words and the more exactly the words fit the emotion the more beautiful the words that is what does happen and anybody who knows anything knows that thing” (EA 275). Of course, what “is inside” turns out to be “the internal melody of existence,” and “words” are “what does happen”—a series of actual events, that is—when they are coextensive with a given emotion. This process is anything but rational. Just as Stein undoes the dialectic between clarity and confusion, she also undoes the dialectic between being and nothing that, in the Hegelian sense, synthetically produces becoming. For Stein, it is becoming (“what does happen”) that makes being as it is made, so to speak, which is necessarily evident to “anybody who knows anything.” Such an insistence upon the creative act requires feeling potential forms of knowing on the fringe of experience. Even for a self-proclaimed “genius,” however, it is impossible to perceive all potential forms at once. It is with the work of Stein’s fellow radical modernist, Ezra Pound, that such an impossibility becomes clear.
CHAPTER 2
The Ideal Language of the World:
Pound and the Crisis of Self-Reference

An Interpretation of the Cosmos by Feeling

In the *Pisan Cantos*, Pound invokes “Whitman, exotic, still suspect / four miles from Camden” as an example of an overly subjective and technically slapdash writer (546). And when Pound observes the “horrible air of rectitude with which Whitman rejoices in being Whitman,” he, akin to Lawrence, takes issue with an overtly egoistic subjectivity that becomes a kind of moral quality (*SR* 178). Pound, however, conveniently overlooks his own consistently “horrible air of rectitude,” which tends to make his own work, rather than that of Whitman, “impossible to read…without swearing at the author almost continuously” (*SL* 21). Be that as it may, Pound’s qualification of Whitman as “exotic” is itself unusual yet apt when we recall that Pound, in *The Spirit of Romance*, asks “Did this ‘chivalric love’, this exotic, take on mediumistic properties? Stimulated by the color or quality of emotion, did that ‘color’ take on forms interpretive of the divine order? Did it lead to an ‘exteriorization of the sensibility’, and interpretation of the cosmos by feeling?” (94). Whitman indeed takes on the responsibility of an “interpretation of the cosmos by feeling,” and the most productive result, in Pound’s estimation, is a dismantled metrical regularity.

“Great art,” Pound contends, “is made to call forth, or create, an ecstasy,” yet it would be misguided to read such a contention as Dionysian, as he goes on to explain that “ecstasy is not a whirl or a madness of the senses, but a glow arising from the exact
nature of perception” (*SR* 82-91). Such an “exact nature of perception” must, with a Poundian “horrible air of rectitude,” prove objectively precise in an obsessively positivist manner. Interestingly, he comments on Whitman in a letter to his father, Homer Pound, in 1913. Pound’s critique has much the same edge as his critique of Yeats’ symbolism, published in *Poetry* the same year:

> I would rather talk about poetry with Ford Madox Hueffer than with any man in London. Mr. Hueffer’s beliefs about the art may be best explained by saying that they are in diametric opposition to those of Mr. Yeats. Mr. Yeats has been subjective […] Mr. Hueffer believes in an exact rendering of things. He would strip words of all ‘association’ for the sake of getting a precise meaning. He professes to prefer prose to verse. You would find his origins in Gautier or in Flaubert. He is objective. (P/F 12)

Yet not purely objective. Pound understands that any idealist claim to absolute subjectivity refutes itself, yet, at the same time, his poetics is underwritten by a principled belief that one can feel the objective essences of material reality without subjectification.

For Pound, the Steinian “thing to feel” is prehensive:

> There are two opposed ways of thinking of a man: firstly, you may think of him as that toward which perception moves, as the toy of circumstance, as the plastic substance receiving impressions; secondly, you may think of him as directing a certain fluid force against circumstance, as conceiving instead of merely reflecting and observing. One does not claim that one way is better than the other, one notes a diversity of the temperament. The two camps always exist. In the ’eighties there were symbolists opposed to impressionists, now you have vorticism, which is, roughly speaking, expressionism, neo-cubism, and imagism gathered together in one camp and futurism in the other. Futurism is descended from impressionism. It is, in so far as it is an art movement, a kind of accelerated impressionism. It is a spreading, or surface art, as opposed to vorticism, which is intensive (*EW* 287)

Despite his claim to the contrary, Pound surely takes issue with a subjective and wholly reflective “toy of circumstance.” To give the most obvious example, he considers Whitmanic poetics an impressionistic “surface art” because it seems to cursorily rely upon subjective observation and description. In other words, his poetics is impressionistic
in that it oftentimes takes the subject of Whitman as the subject of the poem. As I suggested earlier, to read Whitman’s work in such a way is not precisely “intensive,” yet, on the other hand, the methodological stakes for Pound are indeed high. The ostensible exoticism of Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” disrupts the formal politesse of grammar and pentameter, yet it is decidedly not cultured enough “to call forth, to create, an ecstasy,” at least in Pound’s estimation. Whitman becomes for Pound a Dionysian “emotional man”: “By bad verse, whether ‘regular’ or ‘free’, I mean verse which pretends to some emotion which did not assist at its parturition. I mean also verse made by those who have not sufficient skill to make the words more in rhythm of the creative emotion. Where the voltage is so high that it fuses the machinery, one has merely the ‘emotional man’ not the artist” (SP 376).

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot makes a well-known claim for modernist aesthetics. “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion” he explains, “it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (SE 10). In his analysis of Hamlet, Eliot adds that the “only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is invoked” (SP 123). The “only way” to “escape from emotion,”—from the prison house of affectivity, apparently—is through formulaic contrivances fit to a particular emotion that has already undergone analysis to determine its general kind. In this respect, Eliot amounts to a negative of Whitman, for what is “an
escape from emotion” if not calculatingly reliant upon the Enlightenment myth of rationality?

Contrary to Eliot, Pound understands that “emotion and belief are our motive forces” (LE 219) and, as such, together they inform the rhythmic individuality of the writer, by which I mean the very biologicality of an individual organism. Emotion, in other words, is essentially physiological. “I believe in an ‘absolute rhythm’,” he explains, “a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man’s rhythm must be interpretive, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable” (LE 9). Rhythm is not only an interpretation of an emotional condition, however. If the individual is integral to the cosmos, then rhythm is an “interpretation of the cosmos by feeling” as well. Poundian poetics mixes “fragments of ideas, the emotion and concomitant emotions” into a “harmony” that “must form an organism, they must be an oak sprung from an acorn” (LE 51). The moral imperative is clear. The writer, the cosmos, and the writing must rhythmically cohere.

It is interesting to note that Pound considers energy and emotion as homologous terms: “Energy, or emotion, expresses itself in form” (SP 376). While the trope of energetic force is ubiquitously noted throughout modernist studies, Pound’s articulation of energy to emotion often goes overlooked. “Energy,” Pound continues, “whose primary manifestation is in pure form, i.e., form as distinct from likeness or association can only be expressed in painting or sculpture…Energy expressing itself in pure sound, i.e., sound as distinct from articulate speech, can only be expressed in music. When an energy or emotion ‘presents an image’, this may find adequate expression in words.” While the
arguably “pure sound” of Louis Zukofsky’s 80 Flowers, to name one example among
many, challenges Pound’s exclusionary “can only be” logic, the prospect that emotion
“expresses itself in form” underwrites not only Pound’s poetic practice, but also his
considerations of art writ large. “We might come to believe that the thing that matters in
art,” he explains, “is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or
radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying” (LE 49). Emotion is the
radically physical “force” that expresses itself through substantial or essential rhythmical
form. As it turns out, the language of a given line is the outcome of aesthesis, rather than
the epistemological site of discursive interpretation.

Pound begins an important essay on Remy de Gourmont by vilifying Henry James
for conducting “interpretations of society” and, in contrast, Pound champions de
Gourmont’s insistence upon “permanent human elements” that “are not the results of
environments or of ‘social causes’” (LE 339-40). Today, Pound’s interest in de Gourmont
strikes one as theoretically naïve, yet it is precisely the problem of culturally mediated
subjectivities that his poetics seeks to displace. In de Gourmont, Pound finds a working
methodology that articulates physiological sensation to the energy or emotion that
informs poetic rhythm. “Where James is concerned with the social tone of his subjects,
with their entourage, with the superstes of dogmatized ‘form’, ethic, etc.,” he notes,
“Gourmont is concerned with their modality and resonance in emotion” (LE 340). Rather
than a social condition, the “modality” of the subject is an existential bodily condition.

For Pound, poetics begins with the physical substantiality of the material real:

Yet it is quite certain that some people can hear and scan “by quantity,” and more
can do so “by stress,” and fewer still feel rhythm by what I would call the inner
form of the line. And it is this “inner form,” I think, which must be preserved in
music; it is only by mastery of this inner form that the great masters of rhythm – Milton, Yeats, whoever you like – are masters of it. (SP 38)

While this is indeed the sentiment of a youthful Pound in “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,” the mature Pound of the Pisan Cantos, for instance, similarly insists on feeling rhythm by “inner form.” In one of his most lucid descriptions of the Pisan Cantos written for base censors at the DTC in Pisa, Pound maintains that “The form of the poem and the main progress is conditioned by its own inner shape, but the life of the DTC passing OUTSIDE the scheme cannot but impinge, or break into the main flow” (qtd. in Ezra Pound and His World 88). Such a “feeling” of rhythm is grounded in aesthesis, which gives rise to noesis or intellectual apprehension. “There is no intelligence,” Pound bluntly states, “without emotion” (LE 420). There is no emotion, of course, without perception. And, for Pound, perception is interpretation.

You Cannot Look at Zero Fish

Pound tells us that his ABC of Reading is “impersonal enough to serve as a text-book,” but it reads more as a pedagogical text that, akin to The Cantos, initiates the reader into the founding principles of Poundian poetics (12). Pound states at the outset of the first chapter that “No man is equipped for modern thinking until he has understood the anecdote of Agassiz and the fish,” which runs thus:

A post-graduate student equipped with honours and diplomas went to Agassiz to receive the final and finishing touches. the great man offered him a small fish and told him to describe it.
Post-Graduate Student: “That’s only a sunfish.”
Agassiz: “I know that. Write a description of it.”
After a few minutes the student returned with the description of the Ichthus Heliodiplodokus, or whatever whatever term is used to conceal the common sunfish from vulgar knowledge, family of Heliichtherinkus, etc., as found in textbooks of the subject.
Agassiz again told the student to describe the fish. The student produced a four-page essay. Agassiz then told him to look at the fish. At the end of three weeks the fish was in an advanced state of decomposition, but the student knew something about it. (17-18)

Agassiz, the Swiss born scientist who, in the main, did much of his major work in the United States toward the mid-nineteenth century, directly and substantively informed Pound’s poetic practice. The student in this example can know nothing of the fish from textbook definitions, taxonomies, and so forth. While Agassiz’s instructions to “look at the fish” indicate an empirical stance, to Pound such instructions involve a kind of Comtean scientficity, only with the caveat that metaphysical speculation is grounded by, rather than replaced by, scientific method. Today, we know that the absolutely objective investigation of phenomena through the collection of empirically measured evidence is untenable, yet, as I have argued, Poundian aesthesis does not rely upon the mere observation and collection of data to produce knowledge. The student who finally does “look at the fish” can know “something about it,” yet such knowledge is on a par with hearing the rhythm of a line by either quantity, or stress. When Pound insists on empirical observation, he ultimately insists that one perceive the “inner form” of the “actual thing,” to recall Stein. In other words, Poundian poetics collapses the orthodox epistemological distinction between vision on the one hand and production on the other, assuming that, while a priori essences (“inner form”) of objects do indeed exist, it is the vision—or rather, the image—of such essences that aesthesis produces. Put differently, vision and production are not merely coextensive, but a concurrent unity. As we will see, it this kind of concurrence that informs the poetics of Olson, only with the twist that essence is at one with the produced or constructed image of the real.
In her introduction to *Machine Art: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years*, Maria Luisa Ardizzone argues that Pound opposed the syllogistic logic of dialectic with biological logic, or rather a logic that takes emotions as the “sensuous basis for intelligence” (27). A seemingly tautological phrase, biological logic “insofar as it is proper to the living, presides over both knowledge and written language” (27). In attempting to reduce the many to the one, inferential syllogistic logic is decoupled from the aesthesis of this biological logic that values, first and foremost, the plurality and diversity of organic form. “Syllogistic relation does not exist between natural phenomena,” Pound asserts in the Addenda to *How to Write*, and his protest turns on the point that syllogistic relations produce “a four-page essay”—or “school” as Stein frames it—contra naturam (112). “The arts, literature, poesy,” we hear in “The Serious Artist,” “are a science, just as chemistry is a science. Their subject is man, mankind and the individual. The subject of chemistry is matter considered as to its composition” (*EW* 234). While Nietzsche famously announced the death of God, Foucault, on the other hand, famously announced the death of Man in which Pound unsurprisingly takes interest, yet one significant problem with his strict focus upon the ontology of language—“what language is in its being” as Foucault says—is found in a somewhat apt source, considering Pound’s insistence that the arts are indeed “a science.” (*The Order of Things* 382).

In his 1921 lecture “Geometry and Experience,” Albert Einstein points out that “As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality” (*Ideas and Opinions* 233). Considered as a total discursive system, natural language suffers the same unfortunate fate as mathematical
language. As far as the laws of language refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality. Poundian poetics attempts to know the real through an inductive organismal perception, rather than through a set of deductive, syllogistically formulated concepts that are only contingently inscribed upon either the organism—not the idea of Man—or, on the other hand, the physical cosmos. One cannot look at zero fish, which is as much to say that one can look at neither the idea of fish, nor the idea of Fish, both of which amount to a theoretical “school.”

“He is not even compelled to be logical,” Pound says of poets in “Patria Mia,” “I mean logical with the sort of logic one expresses by a series of syllogisms” (116). We tend to take as given that language is a social institution, either the deictic property of specific articulatory acts or, more generally, constitutive of a speculatively discursive knowledge. Poundian poetics, which took Confucius as “the greatest social philosopher who ever lived,” refuted the theoretical function of dialectic that produced not merely logical constructions, but more importantly the idealist decoupling of not only language, but also knowledge from the body that underwrites Western metaphysics (MA 145).

“Plotinus resembled someone ashamed of being in a body,” said Porphyry of his master and, while Poundian poetics did not inherit such a shameful psychology, it did inherit the Platonic problem of the body outlined in the Phaedo:

Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord and battles, for all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth, and it is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved, which compel us to acquire wealth […] It really has been shown to us that, if we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself (15).

Such is the apocalypse of pure knowledge desired by the radically Platonic philosophy that underwrites both Cartesian subjectivity and a Cartesian pure mathematics. Rather
than subscribe to a form of dialectic that immediately idealizes the value places of subject and object—value places that make thinkable “the soul by itself”—Pound develops his ideogrammic method, prompted by his reading of Ernest Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry.*

**Those Flowers I Have Actually Seen: Pound, Zukofsky, and “Dame Philoserfy”**

Ultimately outlined in *The ABC of Reading,* Pound’s ideogrammic method replaces the dualism of discursive methodologies with juxtaposed concrete images to collectively constitute one essential relation shared between them. A methodology predicated upon juxtaposition demonstrated to Pound how he could not only concisely and dynamically use images, but also fragments of narrative, quotations, allusions, and so forth. In this manner, *The Cantos* draws upon the formal resources of the graphical qualities of Chinese ideograms. Jacques Derrida comments:

> The natural tendency of *theory*—of what unites philosophy and science in the *episteme*—will push rather toward filling in the breach than toward forcing the closure. It was normal that the breakthrough was more secure and more penetrating on the side of literature and poetic writing; normal also that it, like Nietzsche, at first destroyed and caused to vacillate the transcendental authority and dominant category of the *episteme:* being. This is the meaning of the work of Fenollosa whose influence upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. (*Of Grammatology* 92)

Although I have argued, along with Pound, that the “first break” occurs with Whitman, the rupture that concerns Derrida has to do with the static metaphysical category of being that underwrites the logocentric “transcendental authority” clearly exemplified by the classical (and rightly medieval) trivium that conditions both contemporary literary theory and criticism: grammar, dialectical logic, and rhetoric. To rewrite one term of this nexus
is to rewrite them all and, from as early as his Imagist years, Pound challenges the humanist trinity of systemic idealities that prefabri cate a mechanics of language, produce knowledge dialectically and, ultimately, serve to persuade. Addressing rhetoric in a morally condemning tone, for instance, Pound states outright that “to coerce the acts of another is evil. Every ethical thought is of slow growth; it has taken at least thirty years to suggest the thought that the desire to coerce the acts of others is evil” (SP 195). His own issues with the dualism of good and evil aside, Pound displaces the desire for rhetorical coercion with the desire for emotive rhythmicity in verse. “When this rhythm, or when the vowel and consonantal melody or sequence seems truly to bear the trace of emotion with the poem,” Pound notes in “The Serious Artist,” “we say that this part of the work is good” (LE 51).

The implicit claim of Poundian poetics for an ideogrammic method is that it provides the resources to displace dialectical methodologies. Each ideogrammic model enacts the relations between things rather than merely representing things in an ideal temporal order, which Fenollosa implies in his discussion of verbs: “Their power lies in their recognition of nature as a vast storehouse of forces. We do not say in English that things seem, or appear, or eventuate, or even that they are; but that they do (29). To recall William James, relations between things are as real as things themselves. What is more, syllogisms not only represent the reality of relations, but also generalize those relations in a squarely linear manner. Ideogrammic apposition supplies Pound with an alternative to the temporally linear logic that Stein, for instance, circumvents by utilizing non-Euclidean principles.
In his discussion of Fenollosa’s influence on Poundian poetics, Ian F. A. Bell insightfully observes that *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* “enabled Pound to advance the argument that ‘poetry agrees with science and not with logic’. What underpinned this argument was a version of the turn-of-the-century shift from Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry to field-theory physics, electrodynamics, and claims for a fourth spatial dimension. Pound valued Chinese script for its resistance to what he called the ‘tyranny’ of logic” (*From Energy to Information* 116). “Valid scientific thought consists in following as closely as may be the actual and entangled lines of force as they pulse through things,” Fenollosa claims and, in doing so, he connects contemporary scientific thought to poetry: “A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one” (10). “The eye sees” being and becoming at once, in other words, and the Poundian image emerges from the process of aesthesis intensively attentive to the rhythmical feeling of—not in—a spatiotemporal continuum. For Stein as it is for Pound, the generative immediacy of experience constitutes the rhythmically sensual relations that underwrite their poetics.

Dialectics will separate out being and becoming as distinct ontological categories and only then synthesize their relationship. It is the foundation of linear intellecction. Grounded by aesthesis, however, Pound’s poetics perceives both being and becoming at once, while, at the same time, realizes the material actuality of relations between things. Akin to the poetics of Whitman and Stein, Poundian poetics resonates with the “self-luminous” fluency of immediate experience for which William James argues in *Radical
Empiricism. Through “insisting in a general way that the immediately experienced conjunctive relations are as real as anything else,” we find James “resisting certain first steps of dialectics” (48). The experiential continuum of time and space in its immediate flux is “but another name for feeling or sensation,” James explains, and it is such direct perception of sensation that marks Poundian poetics.

Interestingly, Louis Zukofsky makes this precise point to Pound in a letter dated 1935: “And you say, ‘What the hell do you know, or have to say? Man’s matter has got to be gathered by perception / etc waal, advice no use to them as don’t want it’,,” he writes, “So-o-o! Unless Dame Philoserfy misleads me, we must have both gathered our matter by perception” (P/ Z 167). Much has been made of Zukofsky’s project by Language Poets in recent decades, but crucial to consider is how Zukofsky grounds the process of writing what is arguably the most musical and seemingly language-oriented 80 Flowers with perceptive activity. In her important study Reading Zukofsky’s 80 Flowers, Michele L. Leggott notes Zukofsky’s notebook entries that outline the project:

Plan. Beginning at 70 to finish for my 80th birthday a book of songs called 80 Flowers.

Substance. Only those flowers I have actually seen and whatever botany I can learn in 10 years.

Form. 8-line songs of 5-word lines: 40 words to each poem ground out of and condensing my previous books. (12-14).

“Look at the fish,” says the personae of Pound. While Zukofsky interestingly distinguishes between form and substance, the point is that the musical condensation of his corpus is exclusively grounded in the perception of flowers—“those flowers I have actually seen”—rather than merely the representative language of flowers. “I don’t mean that the best music may not be made, and probably has been and is made in the middle
register,” Pound comments in “Machine Art,” “I am talking of the awakening of interest. This usually starts from an unusual perception or stimulus” (MA 75). From an empirical point of view, the creation of art begins with “the awakening of interest” by an “exotic” or “unusual perception” that is, in itself, always complete.

In his critique of grammatical structure, Fenollosa observes not only that “a thought can not [sic] be the test of its own completeness,” but also that, because “acts are successive, even continuous,” “no full sentence really completes a thought” (11). To put Wittgenstein in an intuitive way, there is always something more to say because there is always something more to describe. It is also worth noting that Fenollosa takes issue, in a Poundian manner, with the idealistic subjectivity of grammatical constructions. In the articulation of subject and predicate, the grammarian falls back on pure subjectivity. We do it all; it is a little private juggling between our right and left hands. The subject is that about with I am going to talk; the predicate is that which I am going to say about it. The sentence according to this definition is not an attribute of nature but an accident of man as a conversational animal (11).

While this passage sounds suspiciously akin to Pound’s criticism of Whitman, Fenollosa uses the term “subjectivity” to indicate the humancentric contrivance of sentence structure itself. Which is as much to say that the very question of quidditas or “whatness” founds itself upon an analytic interrogation of concepts through the use of the copula, which privileges discursive questions over perceptive activity. To borrow Viktor Sklovskij’s phrase, the stone is made stony by its general essence or quiddity. Pound, on the other hand, is interested by the particular essence of the stone—its haecceity, in other words, or rather its own essential identity. Rather than the distortion or “making strange” through grammatical subversions deployed by Russian formalism, however, Poundian
formalism sought clarity, unity, and order.¹ The site of “an unusual perception or stimulus” is not first and foremost the poetic text as a product, but rather the process of aesthesis itself. Pound will thus insist on the mot juste, the precise word that enacts the particular haecceity or “inner form” of the “actual thing.”

In his insightful study of Stan Brakhage, R. Bruce Elder notes the similar trajectories of art on the one hand and science on the other. Just as “a scientific model provides insight into the relations that exist among items in the world,” Elder explains, “artistic metaphors illuminate reality by furnishing us with new insights into the sensible flux of which we had hitherto been insensate. Like a scientist, then, an artist constructs models…that reveal hitherto undisclosed relations and associations” (The Films of Stan Brakhage 156). To Pound, a scientifically empirical consideration of perceptible objects is a way to avoid social and thus political error. In the empirical flow of “sensible flux” there is neither contradiction nor paradox, only the uncertainty of what may happen next. Yet Poundian poetics encounters, along with the “artistic science” of historical context, the problem of assuming the totalities of man, language, and cosmos. To this point, Fenollosa argues that poetry “agrees with science and not with logic,” in that the ideogrammic method produces an activity of relations that constitute a total system (28).

Lawrence W. Chisholm:

At the heart of the I Ching stood bold single images, calligraphic transformations of the 64 hexagrams whose interpretations offered guides for living amidst the flux of the world. These images, or ideograms, provided a medium through which man could link himself to the heavenly and material realms. Here was vivid support for Fenollosa’s philosophical idealism and for his recognition of organic flux as well. (Fenollosa 219)

¹ For an extended discussion of Sklovkij’s notion of imagistic defamiliarization or “making strange,” see Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine by Victor Erlich, especially pp. 176-78.
² For an extended discussion of Needham, Kenner, and Leibniz see Ezra Pound and China by Zhaoming Qian, especially pp.55-58.
The *I Ching* purportedly contains *all* the potentials of what can happen in the cosmos. Considering Fenollosa’s insistence on the incompleteness of discursive thought, the observation is indeed ironic. Akin to Pound’s material essentialism, that of Fenollosa depends upon the totality of the cosmos exemplified by the *I Ching*. As the “medium through which man could link himself to the heavenly and material realms,” language becomes both an ontological and epistemological site. “The forces which produce the branch-angles of an oak lay potent in the acorn,” Fenollosa explains, “Thus a nerve, a wire, a roadway, and a clearing-house are only varying channels which communication forces for itself. This is more than analogy, it is identity of structure” (22). The identity of structure is understood as an objective a priori identity guaranteed by the universal structure of the One, the “heavenly” totality of the cosmos that, like Whitman, Pound assumes. The poet can feel the “inner shape” or *haecceity* of things through aesthesis and, subsequently, “man could link himself to the heavenly and material realms.” The imagistic ideogram supplies Pound with the formal constitution of a poetic methodology designed for objectivity, however, which did not go unheeded by Fenollosa: “Such a pictorial method, whether the Chinese exemplified it or not, would be the ideal language of the world” (31). It is such an ideal language that Pound is after.

**Poetics, Mathematics, and the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness**

“Naturally, this is nothing new to philosophers—that there must be a link between the existence of mathematics and the question of being,” Alain Badiou points out in his magnificent *Being and Event* (7). True, and this question of an articulation between the
identity of mathematical structures and those of ontology was nothing new to the poets of late modernism, either, especially to Pound. If we consider *The Cantos* as even loosely structured after the *Divine Comedy* of Dante—and I do—then we would do well to consider Pound’s mathematical framing of the poem, which takes its cues from none other than Dante himself:

The *Commedia*, as Dante has explained in the Epistle to Can Grande, is written in four senses: the literal, the allegorical, the anagogical, and the ethical. For this form of arcane we find the best parallel in the expressions of mathematics. Thus, when we are able to see that one general law governs such a series of equations as $3 \times 3 + 4 \times 4 = 5 \times 5$, or written more simply, $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$, $6^2 + 8^2 = 10^2$, $12^2 + 16^2 = 20^2$, etc., expresses the common relation algebraically $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. When one has learned common and analytical geometry, one understands that this relation, $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$, exists between two sides of the right angle triangle and its hypotenuse, and that likewise in analytics for the points forming the circumference of any circle. Thus to the trained mathematician the cryptic $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ expresses:

1st. A series of abstract numbers in a certain relation to each other.

2nd. A relation between certain abstract numbers.

3rd. The relative dimensions of a figure; in this case a triangle.

4th. The idea or ideal of the circle. (*SR* 127)

The insistence on formal thinking strikes one as obsessive, but Pound does go on to explicate all of the expressions of circumference. Our discussion focuses on the “ideal of the circle,” which is also the *topos* of ethical circumscriptions. “In a fourth sense,” Pound explains, “the *Commedia* is an expression of the laws of eternal justice” (*SR* 127). In other words, the mathematical formalization of the “ideal of the circle” expresses, in essential part, *Eidos* or Form. At the same time, however, one can abstract an allegorical interpretation out of the same linguistic structure. In other words, the so-called “laws of eternal justice,” which Pound would ultimately understand in Neoplatonic-Confucian terms, are *relationally* encoded in the formal structures of natural language. “Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics,” Pound explains in an earlier passage of *The Spirit of*...
Romance. “which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for the human emotions” (14). Such inspirations, so to speak, were effectually abstractions, translated into the terminology of Neoplatonism and keyed into a critical aesthetics that circumvented what Wimsatt and Beardsley would term the affective fallacy in The Verbal Icon. Paradoxically, Pound considered the origin of such inspiration the end to which the ostensible serious artist aspired. More to the point, telos was not only an axiomatic or self-evident proposition, but also the foundation of an ethically inflected metaphysical formalism. The “laws” for “human emotions,” or rather the “laws” for the just management of desire, are expressions that assume—and are thus dependent upon—the One.

Of course, such a position goes against the American grain, as it were, of vers libre, which sought to break from the ideal Form of the pentameter, the tour de force of desire management throughout the history of the classical literary tradition. In the 1929 edition of The Spirit of Romance, Pound includes a postscript that takes its epigraph from the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi and, in an essay on Brancusi first published in The Little Review (1921), Pound clarifies his position on both Vorticism and, more importantly, “formulae” or equations: “I don’t mean to imply that vorticist formulae will ‘satisfy’ Brancusi, or that any formula need ever satisfy any artist, simply the formulae give me certain axes (plural of axis, not of ax) for discrimination” (LE 441). His qualification of plurality here is interesting on two immediate counts. First, Pound attempts to semantically close down “axes,” which is quite in line with the poetical scientificity of clear definitions. Second, and more importantly, he stresses plurality, which, in Pound’s case, amounts to an affirmation of multiple essentialities that stand as
eternal points of orientation “for discrimination,” rather than for the logical distinctions
by which rationalism must live. The “equations for the human emotions” and the
formulae for “certain axes” do not equal one another, of course, but they are both
squarely implicated in the structure of an ideal language.

“As the mathematician is to science so is the poet to the world’s consciousness,”
we hear in “The Wisdom of Poetry,” but only after Pound inquires into the relationship
between geometry and consciousness:

What the analytical geometer does for space and form, the poet does for the states
of consciousness […] By the signs \( a^2 + b^2 = c^2 \), I imply the circle. By \((a-r)^2 + (b-r)^2 = (c-r)^2\), I imply the circle and its mode of birth. I am led from the
consideration of the particular circles formed by my ink-well and my table-rim, to
the contemplation of the circle absolute, its law; the circle free in all space,
unbounded, loosed from the accidents of time and place. Is the formula nothing,
or is it cabala and the sign of unintelligible magic? The engineer, understanding
and translating to the many, builds for the uninitiated bridges and devices. He
speaks their language. For the initiated the signs are a door into eternity and into
the boundless ether (SP 362).

Ever the astute student of temporality, especially in aesthetical terms, Pound directly
treats the problematic of spatiality, cavalierly mixing ontological and mathematical
languages. In his rewriting of the Neoplatonic universe, and in quite the radically Platonic
way, Pound worries at mistaking abstraction for concretion, which is why he begins with
particular objects, such as the circle of the inkwell, and abstracts or extracts a theory from
them. In other words, the eternal idea of the circle emerges from concrete objects, not as
a genie would arise out of the inkwell, so to speak, but in gradations of abstraction that
ascend “into eternity and into the boundless ether.” Whitehead, who performed a
magisterial rewriting of the Platonic universe himself in *Process and Reality*, termed such
a “mistaking the abstract for the concrete” the fallacy of misplaced concreteness in

*Science and the Modern World* (50-51).
It is important to note that, to Pound, the belief in the completeness of the cosmos, or rather the natural world, *should*—as an ethical imperative—mirror the belief in the completeness of particular mathematical formulae abstracted out of the natural world. Hence, Pound states in his famous Cavalcanti essay that the “medieval philosopher would probably have been unable to think the electric world, and *not* think of it as a world of forms. Perhaps algebra has queered our geometry” (*LE* 155). Abstractions of abstractions and so forth constitute the algebraic world, in which concrete materiality has no place. Such a *paradiso* or utopia—“utopia” literally means “no place”—is a world detached from the real, a Nowhere Land of symbols that function to create closed abstract forms of mathematically unified beauty contingently articulated to inkwells, tabletops, or anything else.

On the other hand, Poundian geometrical space gives concrete reality a place to exist. Without this space, the poet cannot actively achieve higher orders of abstraction to “engineer” or construct an ideal language structure of common signs that always already express the *mot juste*. Aptly enough, Pound speaks of such constructivity as a kind of translation, whereby the individual poet transforms the abstraction of all abstractions—“eternity”—back into the concrete structure that undergirds not merely reality, but the reality of an ethically just society. It is a dizzying idea. Just as we saw that *telos* was understood foundationally, we also see that the outcome of such a society is translated into its foundation, wherein the One comes full circle, so to speak.
Leibniz’s *Characteristica Universalis* and the Cherry Tree

Joseph Needham’s magisterial study, *Science and Civilization in China*, provocatively argues that Western scientific thought and practice were inflected by Chinese representations of organic continuity and natural organization in the seventeenth century. Jesuit translations of the twelfth century neo-Confucian Chu Hsi were, in Needham’s account, available to another thinker important to Pound, namely Gottfried Leibniz. He enthusiastically observes that the influence of Chu Hsi marks “a better understanding of the meaning of natural organization” in the West (291). With a similar anxiousness at influence, Hugh Kenner remarks at some length on Needham’s “remarkable hypothesis, which attributes European organicism, via Leibniz’ Jesuit friends of the China Mission, to neo-Confucian *Li* and the school of Chu Hsi: the same Chu Hsi (A.D. 1130-1200) who created the text of Confucius translated by Legge and Pauthier and Thoreau and Pound” (231).² Ostensibly, Needham’s hypothesis proves even more remarkable, articulating “all modern investigations in the methodology and the world-picture of the natural sciences” through “Hegel, Lotze, Schelling and Herder to Leibniz” (qtd. in Kenner 231).

The phrase “all modern investigations” should give us pause, however, when we consider Pound’s suggestion that “Leibniz was the last philosopher who ‘got hold of something’, his unsquashable monad may by now have been pulverized into sub-electrons, it may have been magnified in the microscope’s eye to the elaborate structure of the solar system, but it holds as a concept” (*GK* 74). If we take Pound at his word, then the question of influence is not as much at issue as to why Pound taps Leibniz rather than,

---

² For an extended discussion of Needham, Kenner, and Leibniz see *Ezra Pound and China* by Zhaoming Qian, especially pp.55-58.
say, the “modern investigations” of Thoreau who, in Walden, tells us that “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads,” which is as direct and as clear as any statement found in Pound’s Confucius, despite Thoreau’s arguably impish delight in the duplicity of “over our heads” (331).

What Leibniz “got hold of” was the structural unity of the monad, which Pound suggests when he says “it holds as a concept.” Although his career may be inflected by a humanist organicism, and I think that it is, Pound is a rigorous system-maker par excellence. Organic growth, to Pound, has everything to do with structural integrity and a sensibility of wholeness that assumes the telos of unified and coherent order. We find a kind of Poundian monadology written in his translation of the Chung Yung: “The celestial and earthly process can be defined in a single phrase; its actions and its creations have no duality…There is no measuring its model for the creation of things” (Confucius 183). The point here is that, speaking particularly of structure, Pound emphasizes the necessity of clear definitions through the empirical unity of transcendence and immanence in a singly continuous and creative process that does not suffer rationalist “duality.” Indeed, as we have seen, Pound highlights the direct perception of sensation in its empirical continuity. Pound’s organicism turns on the Jamesian point that the continuum of time and space in its immediate flux is “but another name for feeling or sensation.”

The Leibnizian monad is attractive to Pound precisely because it constitutes an organically unified relationship between the individual and society, or rather, put in starker philosophic terms, between the one and the many. Ardizzone:

Following Fenollosa’s precedent, Pound asserts the necessity of naming the “thing” not in the “abstract” but by articulating its various components. At the
same time, he precisely defines the necessity of leaving intact the intrinsic unity of the thing. For Pound, the convincing example seems to be that of the Leibnizian monad, which furnishes an example of something at once one and many (plural). (23)

At the conclusion of the “Great Bass” section of *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound offers us the insight that “*Gaudier, Great Bass, Leibniz, Erigena, are parts of one ideogram, they are not merely separate subjects*” (75). In other words, he formulates a structural unity—Ardizzone uses the phrase “intrinsic unity”—akin to both ideogram and monad, just as he does in Canto CIV, conjoining a nexus of lexicographers with Webster, Voltaire, and Leibniz: “*Hence Webster, Voltaire, and Leibnitz / by phyllotaxis / in leaf-grain*” (763). Pound presents this triad as embodying, together, the mathematical principles that govern the organized organic growth—the ordered and coherent arrangement, as it were—of leaves upon a stem that is decidedly not *contra naturam*. Moreover, this ideogrammic confluence of thinkers is underwritten, both literally and figuratively, by Pound’s now infamous axiom which appears several lines later in the canto: “*No science without clear definitions.*” The clearly articulated structural principles that govern the growth of the natural world should, in their ostensible objectivity, also govern the growth of the individual and, in turn, an intrinsically ethical society.

Although, Poundian semiotics—and I use the term “semiotics” very loosely here—holds that scientificity is a matter of perspicuity. Thus, the problem for Pound is the unification of structures of knowledge that would, ultimately, constitute social construction *au fond*. Speaking of ideogrammic methodology, Fenollosa argues that “a pictorial method” that “agrees with science not logic” would prove “the ideal language of the world” (31). To Pound, such an ideal language is both ideal and real, transcendent and immanent, general and particular, abstract and concrete, “*celestial and earthly*” in one
cosmologically creative process wherein the common signs of language perspicuously constitute not merely social order, but, more importantly, an organically shaped world order.

The idea of an ideal language is nothing new. It should come as no surprise to note that Leibniz engaged in his own project of developing an ideal or universal language, the ubiquitous notion of which—I hasten to add—informed Gottlob Frege’s concept writing or Begriffsschrift, which founded the axioms of modern set theory at the turn of the century. Leibniz’s dream was to develop a characteristically common language or, as he called it, a characteristica universalis based on the principle of universal perspicuity that could replace a range of natural languages as the universal medium of social exchange. In discussion of this characteristica universalis, Bertrand Russell remarks that Leibniz “thought that the symbolic method, in which formal rules obviate the necessity of thinking, could produce everywhere the same fruitful results as it has produced in the sciences of number and quantity” (Critical Exposition 169). In effect, such an ideal language would isomorphically reflect the structure of reality, while establishing an ultimate clarity to epistemological structures. In other words, Leibniz’s universal language necessitated the organic unity of an indestructible, individual, and simple essence.

In a letter to Antoine Arnauld, Leibniz writes that such a unified and individual essence “requires a complete, indivisible and naturally indestructible entity, since its concept embraces everything that is to happen to it,” and that, moreover, this unified and individual essence is “a soul or substantial form after the example of what one calls self” (Leibniz-Arnauld 93). Interestingly, the substantial subject of Pound’s biological logic is
indeed “what one calls *self;*” rather than, of course, a socially constructed and thus politicized subjectivity that, because it is a rational construct, does not allow for the immediately immanent reflection of the One or the structural unity of all structural unities. Such a program requires universal perspicuity.

In mathematics, a clearly developed symbolism is a necessary assumption and, as such, this assumption informs both Leibniz’s infinitesimal calculus and his universal language program. The substantiality or essentiality of form is autonomous, save only for an ethically necessary harmony or concurrence with the One. Moreover, the symbolic and thoroughly symmetrical reflection of the structure of reality is predicated upon not only the principle of perspicuity, but this concurrence as well. This form of essentialist symbolism, it is important to note, does not concur with Yeatsian symbolism, the sociopolitical subjectivity of which Pound protested at length. To do calculus is not merely to compute symbols, but it is, more saliently, the work of substantial form—the soul or “what one calls *self;*”

Obviously, the Leibnizian dream of a universal language went unrealized, but not for want of consideration. Be that as it may, Leibniz never committed to an extended schematic description. William and Martha Kneale elaborate:

How exactly Leibniz wished to construct his *characteristica universalis* is not clear…but he probably thought of it most often as a script in which the non-formal notions would be represented by signs other than words. Sometimes he says that it would be like algebra, and sometimes that it would be an improved version of the Chinese ideographic system. (*The Development of Logic* 328)

The goal for Leibniz was to create a perspicuous language based on an ideal causal structure of natural languages. “Leibniz agreed with Descartes that there exists a *lingua universalis* underlying all speech,” Nino B. Cocchiarella explains, “and that such a
language represented the form of human reason” (The Philosophy of the English Speaking World 27). In a letter to Hiob Ludolf, Leibniz writes that he would not “disagree very much with those who, learned in the ancient languages of the world, believe that many languages have developed from the same source. But as far as Chinese, the American Indian, and the African languages are concerned (languages which, might I say, I do not command), they differ from ours completely in vocabulary, though not necessarily in structure” (Liebniz-Ludolf 22). Semiotic quiddity was thought to bind all natural language structures predicated upon the first cause or hypostasis of Aristotle, which we know as the One. Once formalized, such an essential identity would perspicuously order “the ideal language of the world” when written, which Fenollosa understood as a plurality of “universal elements of form” (6). Such writing or, in this instance, computation would silently produce contemplative graphemes to stabilize and regulate world order through the equity of conduct. Even if one did not have good will towards the other, in other words, the clarity of the computation would show substantial rightness uninflected by ruptures of power in sociopolitical domains. A world order issued from the One through the constructive activity of substantial subjects would synchronize the metonomies of totality—self, nature, language, history, and so forth—to constitute a universally perfected reality. In short, Leibniz conceives of a universal symbolism that underwrites ethics. Leibniz and Pound consider writing an ethical practice in this regard.

Leibniz, again akin to Pound, located the essentialities of form in Chinese ideograms, the intuitive symbolism objectively corresponding to the structure of reality. “Of course you can see it’s a horse,” Gautier-Brzeska declared after studying ideograms.
In an editorial note to *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, which as we recall attacks syllogistically inferential logic, Pound writes:

> Gaudier-Brzeska sat in my room before he went off to war. He was able to read the Chinese radicals and many compound signs almost at pleasure. He was used to consider all life and nature in the terms of planes of bounding lines [...] A few weeks later Edmond Dulac, who is of a totally different tradition, sat here, giving an impromptu panegyric on the elements of Chinese art, on the units of composition, drawn from the written characters. He did not use Professor Fenollosa’s own words—he said ‘bamboo’ instead of ‘rice’. He said the essence of the bamboo is in a certain way it grows; they have this in their sign for bamboo, all designs of bamboo proceed from it. (31)

Needless to point out, Pound and Leibniz diverge on the matter of syllogistic logic, but they meet at the common point of pictorial or imagistic essentiality. In line with both Fenollosa and Pound, Leibniz indeed understands—perhaps through his study of ideograms—that “the cherry tree is all that it does.” Without the predicated reason of nature, which is an ethically inflected essentialist proposition to say the least, the structural unity of the monad simply does not “hold.” When decoupled from the material structure of reality or nature, as it were, the pyramidal schema of logical classes had only to justify its own *a priori* categorizations, rather than how such collectivities functioned in the material structure of reality, if they did at all. If poetry were to agree with science rather than logic, as Pound held, then such a transcendent hierarchy had to emerge from the immanent domain of bamboo trees, cherry trees, or any other object of experience, including *human individuals*. In this sense, Pound does not place objects and subjects into the universal rationalist containers known as nature on the one hand and, on the other, society.

Plato understood this epistemological problem all too well, which, in a fantastically thorough yet decidedly elementary study of Platonic philosophy, Paul
Friedländer discusses from a different perspective: “Dianoia, the world of particular sciences, lies between pure knowledge, or the world of ideas, and mere opinion, or the world of fleeting appearances. Without the proportion of the elements, without the harmonious system of the forms of being and knowledge, without the metaxy of the soul, without the realm of the ‘demonic’, heaven and earth would break asunder” (Plato 3). For Pound, “the world of particular sciences” is the empirical construction site of knowledge, as it is for Plato, only with the caveat that, unlike Platonic rationalism, that world is at once “the world of fleeting appearances” out of which “the world of ideas”—the formula for the circle, for example—emerges through the activity of aesthesis. If we recall, Plato considers the ideal Form of the cherry tree more real than the actual cherry tree. To Pound, the reality of the cherry tree’s substantial form is empirically felt. If we translate the ancient Greek term dianoia as meaning “through thought,” then Pound’s “world of particular sciences” is known through the actual activity of aesthesis, rather than through rational intellectuality or pure noetics. In short, one accesses such a world of substantiality through empirical feeling, out of which Pound could construct an ideogrammic ideal language that reproduced no discursive division between “heaven and earth.” In arguing against the copula and insisting on the predicate activity of the real, Fenollosa does not discern the problem with which Pound would eventually struggle, however.

In his discussion of Leibniz in The Fold, Gilles Deleuze remarks, insightfully I think, that “the predicate is a verb, and that the verb is irreducible to the copula and to attribute, mark the very basis of the Leibnizian conception of the event” (53). God eventually ghosted grammar, as He did all other ideal forms and their isomorphisms. It
was a ubiquitous problem. Understood categorically, the verb is indeed eventual and processual, indicative of the action of the ideogram perceived by Fenollosa, Pound and, as Deleuze points out, Leibniz as well. Yet the essentially objective consistency of the verb—the set of predetermined functions for the verb, in other words—does not hold as a concept, to recall Pound’s phrase. “The preestablished harmony, that is, the ultimate consistency of the universe, was guaranteed by the existence of God—which Leibniz famously proved,” Vladimir Tasić observes in Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought, but he also notes Kant’s response: “The celebrated Leibniz is far from having succeeded in what he plumed himself on achieving” (72). Kant is right. The predicate of the unified monad could only justify itself through its own self-evidence or self-referentiality, which, as we will see, leads to a devastating paradox in the work of Frege.

Later in his study of Leibniz, Deleuze remarks that “the soul and the body, each in its fashion or following its own laws, expresses a single and same thing, the World” (119). The telos of telos—or, writ large, the end of “the World”—initiated the crisis of Poundian poetics. What happens if there is no a priori, essential reason contained by the cherry tree? Or the essential identity of any other object that constitutes “the World,” including Ezra Pound himself? Articulated through predication, the dualism of origin and outcome threatens to undo itself. Such an undoing would prove that of the substantial subject—the soul or “what one calls self” —and the body, at which point haecceity becomes a mere trope, subsumed and ultimately subverted through politicization, whereby “heaven and earth would break asunder” through the systemically failed self-evidence of the One, the self-evidence that predicates not only all that the cherry tree does, but also all that it can potentially do.
**Pound, Frege, and the Crisis of Self-Reference**

Seen in the context of Frege’s mathematicological work, we can come to a fuller understanding of Pound’s search for an ideal language, an essentialist natural language that would formalize a non-Cartesian “place for the full Eιδος” (Eidos) and, thus, exemplify the structure of all possible structures (*PC* 81.127). The metaphysical topology of “the World” would give place to the ultimately complete Form—a coherent cosmolology constituted by essential structures of thought—which would, in turn, determine the real construction of culture. It is important to note that what Pound required was not the description of the Form that all virtues have in common, as it was for the development of Platonism, but rather the actual inscription of that Form. The “celestial and earthly process” would, in Pound’s estimation, find its absolute measure or “absolute rhythm” in the measure of all measures (*LE* 9). In mathematicological terms, such an absolute measure is the class of all classes.

Frege is commonly understood as one of the most powerful formal thinkers of the nineteenth-century. His overall project is well beyond the scope of easy summary in our present discussion, but what concerns us here is the rupture of his logicist project, which understood collectivities—or sets, as it were—as primitive forms. Fregean logic attended not to natural language grammar, a critical inquiry into which Pound was predisposed, but rather to primary units of mathematical function. Ultimately, Frege’s project was to derive an algebra from logic, but we should focus upon the symbolism of his *Begriffsschrift* or ideal language—which is also commonly termed *ideography* in the work of both Leibniz and Frege—the clarity of which was, in the history of ideas, theretofore unrealized.
Frege developed his ideal language to clearly represent both the logical structure of conceptualization and the material structure of reality, which would consequently realize both completeness and precise reasoning. Like Leibniz, Frege distinguished between objective thought and what he called a thought *tout court*, or rather a publically expressed conceptual content. Although we can take issue with such a distinction, such ostensibly objective thought implies Leibnizian substantial form and, of course, thought *tout court* squarely indicates both the socialization and attendant politicization of expression. In a brilliant essay that compares the ideal language programs of Leibniz and Frege, “Frege, Leibniz and the Notion of an Ideal Language,” Eike-Henner W. Kluge explains:

To that extent [to the extent of accessibility] this objective conception of thought was comparable to the Platonic notion of Ideas or to the Leibnizian notion of ideas in the mind of God which somehow embodied the structure of reality. Therefore when Frege stated as the aim of his *Begriffsschrift* or conceptually perspicuous notation that of “peindre non pas les paroles, mais les pensées”—a direct quote from Leibniz—he was actually announcing the intention of constructing an ideal language that reflected the logical structure of this objective realm of thought, not that of private mental processes. Consequently his overall aim was in complete agreement with that of Leibniz (147-48).

The notion that one could construct such an ideal language that reflected radically Platonic essentialities was held by Frege, Leibniz, and Pound. To distinguish between them, we can think of the Fregean-Leibnizian project as a top-down, rationalist model on the one hand and, on the other, the Poundian project as an empirical, bottom-up model. As Heraclitus once famously said, however, the way up and the way down are one in the same. While Frege and Pound obviously differed in their formalisms, they not only believed in the totalization of the cosmos, but their respective projects depended upon it as well. In a discussion of Frege, Michael Beaney notes: “To say that there is one God,
for example, is to say that the concept of God is uniquely instantiated; and the important point here is that such construals enable number statements to be formalized purely logically” (The Frege Reader 5). To instantiate is to substantiate and, thus, an ideal language would substantially exemplify the One that, in Pound’s case, is founded upon “absolute rhythm.” Despite Pound’s invectives against logic, he, like Frege, assumed that one could formalize the One.

As it turned out, formalization as a process encountered the devastating problem. Quite unlike Leibniz, Frege thought he had accomplished the dream of an ideal language, but his theorization of extensions of concepts as objects would reveal the problem that Pound encountered at the D.T.C. at Pisa—namely, that the objective haecceity of the substantial subject fortified against political subjectivism was consistently and perspicuously unrealizable. Both Frege and Pound assumed that the soul or “what one calls self” was not only an objective unity, but that, moreover, it symmetrically reflected the objective unity of the cosmos as well. One stood for the other, just as the objective unity of any ideal language would symmetrically reflect that of nature. From different perspectives, each encountered an unjustified and unjustifiable belief in totalization.

In 1902, just as the second volume of the Grundgesetze, Frege’s major life work, was about to appear in print, he received a letter from Russell, who pointed out a fundamental flaw in the extensions of concepts as objects. Of course, we now know this flaw as the Russell Paradox and, in its most familiar form, in terms of classes. Don Byrd explains:

It had been known since the Greeks that certain abstractions or essences—such as the essence of the consistent liar—were paradoxical, but they had seemed only logical curiosities. When, in the seventeenth century, the essences were emptied out, however, and signs took their values not from concrete instances of
distinguished objects but from relations with other signs in the formal calculus, the self-referential objects covertly appeared in the very foundations of logic (94). When the value of signs was separated out from the empirical structure of reality, the assumption was that the relations of signs would still adequately represent that reality. To determine the value of signs by describing the relations between them, within a given system of either grammar or logic, will always already present the paradoxical and oftentimes antagonistic relationship between singularity and collectivity, or rather between the one and the many. Fregean symbolism had achieved a degree of perspicuity that at once produced and presented the crisis of self-reference within a system designed to totalize extensive collectivities. At bottom, Russell realized that one needed to ask whether the class of all classes either includes itself or not. If it does, then it does not. If it does not, then it does. The rationalist project of Fregean formalism was ruptured by this paradox that could only find a provisionally legislative or political solution. Frege proscribed the application of concepts to their own extensions, which is as much to say that he proscribed the very crisis of self-referential contradiction to ultimately prescribe his logicism.

The Fregean notion of an ideal language is implicated in, and predicated upon, the ontological necessity of natural language structures, since logic and such language structures are not distinct. Frege attempted to inoculate his logical formalism against grammatological subjectivization and its attendant paradoxes precisely because no ideal language—nor any rigorously rational cosmology—could contain contradiction. Upon considering Russell’s Paradox, it is said that Frege replied “arithmetic totters.” To say so admits the natural language paradox of “This statement is false” known by the ancient
Greeks, but to say so is also to overlook empirical reality. Frege himself trembled, not mathematics.³

On the other hand, I have argued that Poundian poetics was, unlike Frege’s rationalist program, not only empirically founded, but also insistent upon the knowledge of the real through aesthesis. As I have also pointed out, however, Heraclitus’ maxim that the way up and the way down are one in the same, which highlights why the respective formalisms of these thinkers encounter Russell’s Paradox, amounting to not only the ultimate systemic failure of humanism, but also, and more important to our discussion, the systemic failure of systematicity. The only “place for the full Eιδος” (Eidos) was literally utopia—no place at all. Put differently, the Enlightenment’s myth of a universal rationality, which guaranteed the meaningfulness of existence, evidenced its status as myth. Even the cogency of a poetics that produced “equations for the human emotions” could not solve the problem of an ultimately self-referential Logos or Eidos. Such ideogrammic equations would produce only speculation, infinitely deferring the speculation of all speculations, a crisis evidenced by the vast amount of Poundian criticism published since the turn of the millennia alone. Pound believed that the “celestial and earthly process” would find its absolute measure or “absolute rhythm” in the measure of all measures, which depended upon not merely the notion of “the World” as a unity, but its reality, necessary for any complete and coherent cosmology. Without question, the idea of such unity was thinkable to Pound, but, to twist Stein’s heurism, systematicity is not a thing to feel.

³ I am indebted to the poet Douglas Rothschild for this point, which, in conversation, he shrewdly pointed out.
We tend to attribute Pound’s failures to the development of his fascism and, although I do not disagree with such an assessment, we have seen that his poetics—perhaps a poetics of fascism, to recall Paul Morrison’s excellent book—underwent a systemic failure due to a teleology that functioned as both origin and outcome in his poetics. Teleology was axiomatically predicated upon objective essentiality, at once the concrete and empirical foundation and the transcendentally disembodied dissolution. One could read the history of Western culture as the development of representative structures charged with the uniting of these two domains. Neither mathematicological structures nor natural language structures could show that “the gods exist,” as Pound insisted, which meant that the essences which animated dianoia—the domain of particular sciences and that of Platonist daemons—could not exist a priori. In Leibnizian terms, substantial form or “what one calls self” could no longer be assumed prior to its realization.

The idyllic telos of Poundian poetics ultimately relied upon an unjustified essentialist autonomy that, in The Pisan Cantos, led the “ego scriptor” Pound to script a semiotic drama that was “wholly subjective” (PC 74.8). The substantial subject became, in the end, a politicized subjectivity, emptied of a priori quiddity and haecceity alike. We need go no further than Richard Sieburth’s erudite introduction to The Pisan Cantos, specifically his thorough account of Pound’s arrest and incarceration in Pisa, to find an example of such politicization:

Unceremoniously relieved of his shoestrings, belt, and necktie, and handcuffed to a huge MP for transport, Pound was incredulous: “I don’t understand it,” he said to Arrizabalga. “Do they know who I am?” The latter merely replied: “Yes they do, Mr. Pound.” (xii)

Pound’s question is not rhetorical. While the United States military—“they”—had not officially charged him with any crime, the casting of Pound’s identity as a traitor rather
than as a genius is at stake. As William M. Chase aptly points out, “the life and energy of *The Cantos* is bent to the struggle of reforming society and to achieving a kind of earthly paradise free of economic and political poisons. Ezra Pound did not see himself as marginal or irrelevant to the important life of the world—indeed, he was convinced that he had turned up the answers to the problems of the world” (141). Ironically, what Pound “turned up” was the most devastating paradox to any system of totalization, and it was this problem that exposed the crisis of accurately representing reality:

I don’t know how humanity stands it
with a painted paradise at the end of it
without a painted paradise at the end of it (74.14)

In *The Pisan Cantos*, Poundian poetics realizes the paradisal as an indeterminate ideality, mere phantasmagoria produced by predication “in the mind indestructible” (74.8). Importantly, Pound notes that

nothing matters but the quality
of the affection—
in the end—that has carved the trace in the mind
dove sta memoria (76.35)

Such “affection” does not merely denote an emotional state. At “the end” of any process, what matters, to Pound at least, is “the quality / of the affection,” or rather the essential alterability of being at one with the activity of altering being. His organic poetics, however powerful, could neither escape the system nor the systematicity of discourse:

“To communicate and then to stop, that is the / law of discourse / To go far and come to an end” (*PC* 80.72). As I have argued, Poundian poetics went as “far” as a poetics could go, not merely “to an end,” but rather to “the end of it,” at which point both Pound and Frege realized, at the limits of formalization, that “paradise” is both present and absent—
or, to say it in academese, that the One is both present in its absence yet absent in its presence, a flickering Absolute that has absolutely no place on Earth, but only indeterminately speculative “in the mind indestructible.”

From a mathematical perspective, Poundian poetics realized that the attempt to totalize the cosmos, which is at once an attempt to totalize the self on the one hand and nature on the other, leads to sets of infinities containing sets of infinities, and so forth, with only a deferred determinism to the origin of all sets legislating completeness and coherency. This mathematical practice of couching infinities in other infinites, otherwise known as one of the founding principles of set theory devised by Georg Cantor, allows for the manipulation of infinities as though they were real numbers. Mathematicians could subtract from infinity, for instance, without altering the identity of infinity. The mathematician David Hilbert put the new situation into perspective: “No one shall expel us from the paradise which Cantor has created for us” (qtd. in Mathematical Thought 1003). Cantor’s paradise was so because it was ideal par excellence. Not only was such paradise no place, but neither was “the World” unified by discourse. To recall Friedländer, heaven and earth split asunder. Pound’s dream of “the circle free in all space, unbounded, loosed from the accidents of time and place” proved, indeed, mere dream, a construction of the mind ultimately detached from concrete reality. Knocking on the phantastic “door into eternity,” he found the lights on but nobody actually home. An answer to the crisis, however, would emerge from the Office of War information in Washington, D.C., in the form of an unlikely poet.
CHAPTER 3

The Olsonic Postmodern:
Cosmopoetics and Empirical Constructivity

A Serious Character of the Post-West

Olson finished *Call Me Ishmael* the first week in August, 1945, just days before the bombing of Hiroshima. In the same year, he penned the following note on Pound:

“He is a fascist, the worst kind, the intellectual fascist, this filthy apologist and mouther of slogans which serve men of power. It was a shame upon all writers when this man of words, this succubus, sold his voice to the enemies of the people” (*O/P* 16). While these are not only harsh words but, to many, quite accurate as well, my point is that novice writers generally do not speak with such vitreous cogency. Olson is no exception. With *Call Me Ishmael*, which Pound read in manuscript and spoke of approvingly—with the caveat that Pound did not particularly think highly of Melville—Olson emerges as a writer in his own right. On the other hand, we find Pound belittling Olson: “Another crack: ‘I thought you might be a serious character when I read that labor-saving device of yrs on H. Melville. But that was 2 yrs ago, bro’” (*O/P* 103). Two years later Olson outlined his now famous proposal for projective verse, not only establishing himself as “a serious character,” but also, and more importantly, establishing an open field poetics that explicitly addresses the “relation of man to experience,” which, in turn, constitutes “how he conceives his relation to nature” (*CP* 247). While the terms “man,” “experience,” and “nature” recall those of the humanist tradition, specifically the New Critical literary tradition freighted by the logocentric goods of Platonic morality, Olson’s project is
grounded by the refusal of just such a tradition, which itself amounts to more than merely an aesthetic program.

In *The Special View of History*, a bricolage of lectures and notes that Olson delivered at Black Mountain College in 1956, which Ann Charters subsequently edited into book form in 1970, he claims that “a period has closed in which any known previous vocabulary applies” (48). The period that “closed” like a Yeatsian box-lid was the literary and thoroughly textual modernity of Eliot and Pound, who I name because Olson himself taps them in his well-known *Paris Review* interview with Gerard Malanga. He insists that “Eliot and Pound were after something rather different than us who came a little later,” (183). It is precisely the end of modernity as a period that distinguishes high modernist projects from those that emerge in the American sixties, which Marjorie Perloff terms a poetic of “strenuous authenticity.” Such a poetic, she observes, stresses “a self as natural, as organic, and as unmediated as possible,” a list that excludes an important fourth term: the precise description of objective observation, the scientifi city of which, as I have argued, is squarely Cartesian (*Radical Artifice* 20).

After all, it is the physicist Werner Heisenberg, the work of whom Olson notably draws upon, who outlines a problem with description in physics after the discovery of quantum mechanics. He writes in *Physics and Philosophy* that “no language existed in which one could speak consistently about the new situation” (174). In light of Olson’s insistence in “Projective Verse” on developing a “stance toward reality outside a poem as well as a new stance towards the reality of a poem itself,” it is no coincidence that his observation about language and that of Heisenberg have everything to do with the immediate and generative experience of reality. For Olson, “the new situation” is one in
which the viability of a classical literary tradition determined by humanist rationalism comes to an end and, along with it, the representative mode of scientific objectivity where the “observer himself remains outside the picture frame” (*Radical Artifice* 21). Such a “new situation” is that of the postmodern.

As Olson uses it in his letters to Robert Creeley, the postmodern is decidedly not a period per say, yet the term indeed marks an epistemological shift. “The first half of the twentieth century,” Olson writes in 1951, was “the marshalling yard on which the modern was turned to what we have, the post-modern, or post-West” (*O/C* 241). The “modern was turned,” Olson writes, not *overturned*. As I have argued, the modernist insistence on direct perception runs throughout American innovative poetics, and it is precisely this insistence on aesthesis that Olson appropriates. In *The Idea of the Postmodern*, Hans Bertens acknowledges that Olson was the first postwar American to use the term postmodern in a significant way, although Bertens frames Olson’s project—and, thus, his understanding of the postmodern—squarely in discursive terms (20-22). By and large such a view is unsurprising, as simply a cursory review of writing on the postwar rise of orality in literature, spearheaded by William Spanos in the early 1970s, shows a tendency to understand orally-based poetics in terms of a Heideggerian theorization of *logos* as speech. Interestingly, it is historian Perry Anderson who, in *The Origins of Postmodernity*, usefully situates Olson’s use of the term postmodern within the larger sphere of global politics (7-12). If the “modern was turned,” then, for Olson, it is decidedly away from the crisis of self-reference that marks Pound’s project.

Olson sees Pound as the “ultimate image of the end of the West”: “He’s no easy man. He has many devices. And he’s large. I’m not sure that, precisely because of the use
he has put nostalgia to, and the way he has used himself, he has not made of himself the ultimate image of the end of the West” (CP 147). Pound’s trial notably influences “This is Yeats Speaking,” in which Olson suggests that “Grandpa” Pound is an explicitly problematic precursor to a nascent generation of writers, an assessment with which W.C. Williams strongly agreed. “You are the antithetical men, and your time is forward,” Olson writes with a surety that Yeats himself assumes in his prose, “the conflict is more declared, it is for you to hold the mirror up to authority, behind our respect for which lay a disrespect for democracy as we were acquainted with it. A slogan will not suffice” (CP 144). Ralph Maud insightfully remarks that the disorganized drafts of the piece “confirm what difficulty Olson had as a writer in facing the political issue that Pound’s actions had posed. As a back-room politician he would have known in real-politic terms what to do that was possible to do; however, the duty to be scrupulously moral in words, within the polis of his fellow writers, left Olson almost tongue-tied” (What Does Not Change 42). Almost. It would do us well to recall, with Maud, that “The Kingfishers,” as a pointed response to Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” was indeed “moral in words” and decidedly written in “real-politic terms.” It was American democracy that went slouching toward Bethlehem—and the rest of the world—after the war.

Olson holds in contempt both postwar imperialism and the democratic ideals that underwrite it. He does so not only in “This is Yeats Speaking,” which is dated 1946, but also a year earlier in Call Me Ishmael: “For the American has the Roman feeling about the world. It is his, to dispose of. He strides it, with possession of it. His property. Has he not conquered it with his machines? He bends its resources to his will. The pax of legions? the Americanization of the world” (CP 66). Whitman’s vision for democracy proves as
disposable as the very machines of American industry that do the disposing. While Olson is often read as a New Dealer whose project responds to the atrocities of the war with a loss of faith in the political efficacy of humanist ideals, in particular with the rise of the Truman administration, we can also read his project as a response to the emergence of American postwar imperialism, which itself marks an end to the prospect of democratic “vistas,” for democracy becomes a ubiquitously rhetorical veil for “the Americanization of the world.” His vision is on a par with what Frederic Jameson accurately describes as “the worldwide Americanization or standardization of culture, the destruction of local differences,” and “the massification of all the peoples on the planet” (*The Cultures of Globalization* 57). Olson sees the problem of Americanization in terms of not only the political and geopolitical features that underwrite the nation state, but also, when he speaks of “the Roman feeling” of ownership, the issue of cultural dominance that underwrites American exceptionalism on the one hand and, on the other, the dangers of an unchecked nationalism.

By 1945, Olson found himself in the historical position to see the United States control just over half of the global GNP, as well as the majority of both agricultural surpluses and economic reserves. As David Harvey rightly observes in *The New Imperialism*, the “US emerged from the Second World War as by far the most dominant power. It dominated technology and production. The dollar (backed by most of the world’s gold supply) was supreme, and its military apparatus was far superior to any other” (49). Olson sets out to reconfigure the foundational humanist terms “man,” “experience,” and “nature” precisely to avoid playing into the devastating logic of Americanization that they power. In this sense, his is indeed a “new” American project.
As I have argued, the sense of Olson’s use of the term postmodern is inflected by the emergence of postwar US imperialism on the one hand and, on the other, the decline of Pound. I also touched upon the atrocities of the war, the politics of which undoubtedly shook Olson considerably. Perhaps the best place to begin an inquiry into how such atrocities inflected Olson’s work is with the aptly titled “La Préface,” which was written circa 1946. Although he began to develop his sense of the postmodern in Call Me Ishmael, it is in “La Préface” that Olson begins to reconstitute the terms “experience,” “man,” and “nature”:

Put war away with time, come into space.
It was May, precise date, 1940. I had air my lungs could breathe.
He talked, via stones a stick sea rock a hand of earth.
It is now, precise, repeat. I talk of Bigmans organs
he, look, the lines! are polytopes.
And among the DPs—deathhead

at the apex of the pyramid. (TCP 46)

Even at this early stage of his writing career, Olson understands space in terms of n-dimensional geometry, each line constituted by multiple planes that also serve to shape the physical quantity of stones, sticks, rocks, or soil—in other words, the natural world. The lines “are polytopes” in that they indicate a formally independent, asymmetrical variety of surfaces. Another way to say this, of course, is that a polytopical line is at one with a variety of topics or subjects that themselves indicate rhythmical changes in the body registered in breath. “I had air my lungs could breathe,” Olson says. Experience, man, and nature are decidedly entangled. Such a view of the polytopic leads to a consideration of the history of English meter on the one hand and, on the other, the politics of symmetry. We will discuss the former first.
Either an extended return to George Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesie*, or a discussion of John Tompson’s meticulous study *The Founding of English Meter* would presently take us too far afield, but suffice it to say that Philip Hobsbaum, in a concise contemporary guide to classic metrical forms, uses a particularly apt trope to explain the fundamental distinction between the ideality of metrical pattern and the experienced reality of language use that underwrites classical prosody. “Metre is a map,” he explains, “rhythm is a land” (*Metre, Rhythm, and Verse Form* 7). This kind of rationalist thinking about classical prosody belies Olson’s polytopical line. In this brief passage from “La Préface,” communication is grounded by interactions, which apparently occur between Olson and Italian artist Carrado Cagli. As it turns out, communication itself is radically physical, spatial, and thus dynamic. In other words, the phrase “a hand of earth” suggests that the body, the earth, and the communicative gesture are entangled with one another. In a sense, such “a hand of earth” is as natural a language as one can use. The image is not one of fear in a Donnean “handful of dust,” as it is in “The Waste Land,” but rather one of communicative good will. The soil is a useful communicative tool to that specific empirical instance, analogous to sticks, stones, and signs.

The more important point, though, speaks directly to the classical distinction made by Hobsbaum. This opening passage does not lead to a centered temporal subject that conditions the metric and thus serves to contain or embody the meaning of signs through their relationships in a given line. The classical Cartesian view of cartography (“metre is a map”) is foundationally referential, whereby the map is an ideal pattern of “a hand of earth.” And it is worth noting that *vers libre* or free verse, practiced by traditional and innovative modernists alike, breaks from this idealist doctrine of regularity in
metrical pattern on the one hand, as we have seen with Whitman’s metric, yet, on the
other hand, retains a relationship to referentiality, whereby a priori essences are still
embodied in classical things, as we have seen with Pound’s metric. W.C. Williams
perhaps provides the clearest articulation of this modern assumption when he declares, in
an early poem entitled “Paterson,” that there are “no ideas but in things” (CP I.263). “La
Préface” is indeed a prologue—as the present is prologue—to Olson’s explicitly
cartographic writings in The Maximus Poems, wherein we find, in a postmodern sense,
that the form of the map is an extension of rhythm:

125 paces Grove Street
fr E end of Oak Grove cemetery
to major turn NW of
road (MAX I.145)

Cartographic forms are directive and, as Robert Von Wallberg notes of this passage from
Maximus, “the map moves” (The Scholar’s Art 131). When Olson directs us to “Put war
away with time,” he also directs us to put the modern in its place, so to speak, which is
precisely his point about discourse in “Human Universe.” As is evident, the modern
conception of “time” will no longer suffice, for it is this conception of time as a
continuous and linear flow of past into future that sustained Western metaphysics for
over two millennia. The polytope creates a postmodern space of plurality, wherein the
map is as dynamically asymmetrical as the natural world. In other words, the map and
the land occur not merely at the same time—such a phrase is too dusty—but rather they
are spatially entangled instances of an empirical present. Of course, so is the writer. “You
are nothing,” Olson insists in his aptly titled Last Lectures, “but a cartographic instance”
(16).
All this leans in on the violence, confusion, and despair of “war,” which inevitably leads to displacement, an uprooting from the historical foundations of Western culture that, as it turns out, is the “deathhead / at the apex / of the pyramid.” As we recall, Heraclitus once famously remarked that the way up and the way down are one and the same. In the “post-West,” there is no longer a way up to the One or the way down to the Many, but rather a spatially open future for “the new born,” as Olson later writes in “La Préface”:

Mark that arm. It is no longer gun. 
We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead 
crossed stick, wire-led, Blake Underground

The Babe 
the Howling Babe (TCP 47)

Those who people the “post-West” are born into the process of displacement, and to understand this postmodern situation is to “come into space.” If one is a displaced person—“among the DPs,” as it were—then the question turns upon the point of how, precisely, one is displaced. For Olson, such a displacement is constituted by “man” rationally separated out from “nature,” which is as much to say that individuals who empirically construct the social suffer a conceptual divide from not only their material conditions of daily existence, but also from the intuitive meaning of that existence. If the way up to Enlightenment—to godhead, in the sense of divine essence—proves the same as the way down to the multitudes displaced by the atrocities of war, as it was for Pound, then we are displaced persons who must survive “the massification of all the peoples on the planet.” In a reversal that ultimately refuses the symmetry of all symmetries, Olson sees the “deathhead” rather than the godhead, which, as it turns out, proves both the nadir and “the apex” of Western rationalism in a stroke. One is “born not of the buried but
these unburied dead” who exemplify how rationality can and does generalize and thus dehumanize existence on a massive and terrifying scale. “When man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale,” Olson points out in “The Resistance,” what is at stake is no trope: “It is his body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature, repeated in each act of birth” (CP 174). In the post-West, ideas or the essences of things are no longer situated in things. Such an “absolute” is resituated as the physical body, which is both natural and social in a stroke.

There is No Frame

It was as managers of life that the Truman administration politically justified the use of atomic weaponry, and this ethical antinomy of not merely life taken in the name of death, but, more saliently, life taken in the name of death on a theretofore unrealized mass scale, exposes the ubiquitous doctrine of symmetry as a foundational crisis of Western rationalism. While logics of a priori conditionality play into this doctrine of symmetry, Michel Foucault does make a useful observation. “The atomic situation is now at the end point,” he says of biopower, “the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual’s continued existence” (History of Sexuality 137). He continues:

But the existence in question is no longer the juridical existence of sovereignty; at stake is the biological existence of a population. If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life. (137)
Foucault has a point. “If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers,” however, then it is not foremost because “power is situated and exercised at the level of life,” but because, rather, such deployment of such power is guaranteed by the rational necessity for symmetry. The theoretical language of postmodern critique ubiquitously takes linguistic play, parody, and indeterminacy as critical techniques to disrupt or subvert dialectical power relations and, in doing so, critique tends to overlook the kind of physiological power—“power is bone muscle nerve brain”—to which Olson’s sense of the postmodern speaks (CP 174). Be that as it may, one can indeed rationalize this “level of life,” as Foucault says. The legitimization of taking mass life to ensure mass life relies upon the assumption that life and death are distinct concepts, cleanly separated from one another through dialectical processes guaranteed by the grand philosophic symmetry that, as we saw in “La Préface,” irredeemably—and, in an empirical sense, determinately—failed to demonstrate its continued viability. That is, if the generalized myth of rationality, indeed, was ever viable.

The bombings of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki shook Olson’s investments in the philosophic foundations of Western rationalism, and his renewed postwar relationship with Cagli, who had accompanied Allied army units in Buchenwald, also “brought home the reality of the holocaust to Olson,” as Peter Anastas recalls (“Charles Olson In Gloucester”). Olson was quite aware of the ease with which rationalism could politicize not only the human body, but also the entire range of human existence. From the outset, he sought to develop a different kind of biopower—specifically, the power of life on a physiological level that eschewed the airy metaphysical doctrines of vitalism on the one hand and, on the other, a reductive biological framing of the human organism and its
place within the biosphere. At stake for Olson is the development of an empirical
cosmology, or rather what I term a *cosmopoetics* in my preface, which, among other
things, requires not a philosophic *weltanschauung* proper, but rather the particularization
of one’s *imago mundi* through the generative immediacy of experience. Unlike his
predecessor Pound, Olson eschewed totalization and its attendant coherency, instead
allowing the construction of knowledge through empirical entanglements with the
particularities of given environments. Olson’s is not a process philosophy, but rather a
process poetics—a *cosmopoetics* that empirically rather than always already in rational
terms constructs a sensual image of the world.

In his Beloit lectures, Olson asks “how do you, how as a person, not only as a
poet, does one live one’s own image, rather than use it simply for writing—which has
been a three hundred year problem in English and now is broken. And we now are
determined to make our image of a union of ourself” (34). Pound famously marks
Whitman’s metric as the first ostensible “heave” against idealist conceptions of measure
and, likewise, Olson marks Melville’s experience of space as the first ostensible “heave”
against idealist conceptions of geometry, anticipating Pound’s issues with rationalizations
of space, yet without an a priori weight levied against the image. Which is as much to
point out that Pound not only produces images, but that they are also used “simply for
writing.” A Poundian aesthesis proves squarely aesthetic in this respect. The question of
how to “live one’s own image” is decidedly a question of method, a question of process
that attempts to circumvent the conditioning of empirical knowing by the vicious
dialectic at the core of not merely Western thought in a panoramic sense, but, more
saliently, at the core of postwar capitalism’s “Americanization” of the world. To recall
Guy Debord’s important book *The Society of the Spectacle*, the image becomes “the ultimate form of commodity reification” and nothing more (*Signatures of the Visible* 15). While the co-option of imagistic representationality by consumer culture may seem outdatedly McLuhanesque, it is the generalization and commodification of the image that leads Olson to the conclusion in “Human Universe” that “Spectatorism crowds out participation as the condition of culture” (*CP* 159). To recall Perloff, such “spectatorism” has everything to do with the objective observer who “remains outside the picture frame.” There is no outside to the frame because, of course, *the frame is part of the empirical picture*. Which is as much to say that, traditionally speaking, there is no frame. This is a point to which we will return.

In April of 1950, Olson wrote to Francis Boldereff: “i am most close to you, as i said, in the bone, in night & the cloth of dreams, in that wood we make the hidden shapes we know so little about illuminating even to our secret selves” (*O/B* 304). As Olson later recounted to Boldereff, he experienced a dream in which Pound, of all messengers, relayed the following heurism: “of rhythm is image / of image is knowing / of knowing there is / a construct.” Out of such a “cloth of dreams,” then, Olson cut the poem “Experiment In Form,” which he included in the letter:

What we do not know of our selves, of who it is who lies
coiled or unflown
in the marrow, in the bone, hidden
from our own knowing
(of rhythm is image,
of image is knowing,
Olson later redacted this piece into “ABCs (2).” And while he recalls this same heurism in “Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself,” he also discusses it at length in the Beloits. Subsequently, Butterick includes the lecture version in *Maximus III*:

```
an actual earth of value to
construct one, from rhythm to
image, and image is knowing, and
knowing, Confucius says, brings one
to the goal: nothing is possible without
doing it. It is where the test lies, malgre
all the thought and all the pell-mell of
proposing it. Or thinking it out or living it
ahead of time. (III.190)
```

It may seem ironic that the figure of Pound would offer such an oft-revisited formulation to Olson, but, despite his widespread demonization after the war, Pound still stood as one of the most powerful formal thinkers of innovative poetics and, as the “ultimate image of the end of the West,” he obviously looms psychically “large” for Olson. As I have argued, however, while the practice of construction in these passages strikes one as grounded by Poundian poetics, specifically by the insistence upon rhythm as initial to any constructive process, the persistence of empirical writing practices throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is nothing new on the one hand, but, on the other,
news that indeed stays more than merely proverbial news, if only due to the practicality of discursively aligned poeties both within and outside of academe today.

The arguably key feature of a non-discursive constructivity lies in the heurism that a “construct” or structure emerges not from a mediating episteme, but rather from a form of knowledge conditioned by rhythmically informed perceptions of the real. To construct an “actual earth of value” requires an empirically direct interface and exchange with what Stein terms “a thing to feel,” the thing-in-itself that, on the one hand, exists entangled with a given environment and, on the other, is not always already mediated by the humanist discursivity that underwrites consumerist processes that generalize “a thing to feel” into an abstraction available for reification. On the latter point, Jameson comments that “the new model car is essentially an image for other people to have of us, and we consume, less the thing itself, than its abstract idea, open to all the libidinal investments ingeniously arrayed for us by advertising” (Signatures of the Visible 12). As Olson writes in “I, Maximus of Gloucester to You,” which opens Maximus I, “o kill kill kill kill kill kill / those / who advertise you / out)” (8). Written circa 1950, the first poems of Maximus treat “spectatorism” in like manner:

As the people of the earth are now, Gloucester is heterogeneous, and so can know polis not as localism, not that mu-sick (the trick or corporations, newspapers, slick magazines, movie houses, the ships, even the wharves, absentee-owned (MAX I.10)

Or, even more overtly:

colored pictures of all things to eat: dirty postcards
And words, words, words all over everything

No eyes or ears left
to their own doings (all
invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses
including the mind, that worker on what is
And what other sense
made to give even the most wretched, or any of us, wretched,
that consolation (greased
lulled (MAX I.13)
The consolation prize of viably sustainable and inventive life is neither philosophy nor poetry, but rather a preformed and desensitizing culture of representative homogeny, produced not only by the “words, words, words” that relentlessly and repetitively textualize a landscape, but also by an ideal image of human equity: one of standardization, regularity, and complacent order. An earthly heterogeneity proves an alternative to representative “mu-sick,” such an illness virally contracted—and I mean “virally” as a trope, of course—through technologies deployed by culture to promote ostensible differences that are ultimately harmful semblances, the dialectic of which serves to obscure its necessity for symmetrical relations.

Alternatively, it is not “the thing itself” upon which Olson focuses, but rather the experience of “the thing itself,” since one’s experience is the site of constructed meaning. Later in Maximus I, he recalls W.C. Williams:

there is no other issue than
the moment of
the pleasure of
this plum,

these things
which don’t carry their end any further than
their reality in
themselves (I.42)
Olsonic poetics breaks from the rationalist tradition altogether while, at the same time, he develops a progressive insistence on particularly lived experiences at one with the specific rhythms of life. Things are “their reality in / themselves,” the percepts of individual experience felt through aesthesis, which should recall Whitman’s dictum that “each thing exactly represents itself.” Things are ostensive of themselves. And it is “these things”—“the moment of / the pleasure of / this plum,” for instance—that “don’t carry their end any further than” their own frame that, rightly speaking, proves no frame at all. As Olson notes in “Projective Verse II,” which, written circa 1957-58, attempts to further refine his thinking in his well known “Projective Verse” essay, a poem “carries in itself the evidence of what it isn’t, as well as what it is. Thus acquiring to itself much more the power of power outside as well as, by this intensification of its own knowledge itself, its own power” (PV II 26-27). The “frame,” in other words, is decidedly not a set of concepts placed around a text to rationalize our experience of it. Following the trope of the frame in painting, Olson continues: “I am talking about the painting of the painting, how do you paint it, when the frame is not the limiting factor it once was. How do you write the poem to stay in – even though it has to, to be itself” (PV II 27). The frame, for Olson, emerges from “the painting of the painting,” or rather, the frame emerges from the writing of the writing.

That Which Exists Through Itself: Autopoiesis and Identity

In his introduction to Olson’s Selected Writings, Creeley notes that “meaning is not importantly referential” (9). The important point is that referentiality or embodied meaning immediately admits the conceptual ordering of phenomenal spacetime and,
consequentially, admits the conceptual ordering of individual sensibility or self-
identity. “‘That which exists through itself is what is called meaning’. And even that word
meaning is, I think, very—I’m reading from a translation of the Chinese, as you prob—
many of you, many of you, especially, may know” says Olson in his Beloit lectures, “the
word, of course, in Chinese is that word which I would like to avoid mentioning, but it
rhymes with the man who also, to whom that is attributed. And we have that word in our
language as ‘how’, if you get my string of rhymes” (61). Why is Olson so
uncharacteristically coy? By hedging on the invocation of the Tao, Olson also hedges on
the invocation of Taoism as it informs Neo-Confucianism, specifically the doctrine that
human conduct has a rational basis. Not to play into the ostensible fallacy of authorial
intention, but Olson arguably intends to use the first line of The Secret of the Golden
Flower in his own particular way, in accordance with his own sensibility that is decidedly
not bracketed by a totalized cosmos dependent upon the assumption of the One. Olson
took “the thing itself” as its own measure, the event of which he terms Okeanos. Consider
“Maximus, From Dogtown I”:

The sea was born of the earth without sweet union of love Hesiod says

But that then she lay for heaven and she bare the thing which encloses
everything, Okeanos the one which all things are and by which nothing
is anything but itself, measured so (MAX 11.2)

In Olson’s cosmology, the figure of Okeanos is the Titanic rather than Olympic event of
autotelic measure. When Olson draws upon Richard Wilhelm’s translation of The Secret
of the Golden Flower, he indicates that self-structuration is constitutive of pragmata or
“know how”: the inquiry into events and quantities in the universe of organism that does
not depend upon a rationalized totality to the cosmos, as Olson outlines in “Maximus, from Dogtown IV”:

The problem here is a non-statistical proof: Earth ‘came into being’ extraordinarily early, #2 in fact directly following on appetite. Or as it reads in Norse hunger, as though in the mouth (which is an occurrence, is ‘there’, stlocus (MAX II.163-64)

The “stl” cluster of the early Latin term “stlocus” eventually reduces to “locus,” not only a topos or place, but also, and more importantly, a center of control. As Olson writes, such a center “is an occurrence”—recall “the moment of / the pleasure of / this plum”—or rather an eventual appetition that amounts to the actuality of libidinal “hunger.” As Charles Stein notes in his erudite and compelling study, The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum, the “locus” of Okeanos amounts to “the principle of self-identity” (12).

In a later passage, Stein elaborates:

Statistical generalization, Olson tells us in a number of his essays, is the final methodology derived from the intellectual revolution initiated by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It is characterized by the decision to found truth in generalization, and to diminish the value of concrete particular experience as “the locus of discovery.” The term “the statistical” sums up the ontology which Olson opposes consistently in his prose and verse. It is that which would overcome “appetite” or “Hunger” (real libido) as that to which action must be obedient….(54)
The equity of life value and thus of meaning does not so much inhere in a noun as it does in a concretely active person or place—both of which amount to things in themselves. As early as “Project Verse,” Olson explains that open field poetics involves “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature…and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects” (CP 247). In other words, life value inheres “inside any one of us as an individual,” the identity of which one empirically eventuates rather than grammatologically predicates, the latter of which depends upon both self-identity and language, among other things, as metonymies of totality.

Olson, from Last Lectures: “So we can move from probability / (which is bullshit) / to possibility / (which is dogma, which is belief) / You’ve got to lose yr identity—precarity / You’ve got to fall back into the world” (17). The sense of probabilistic “identity” Olson outlines is that of a discursively constituted subjectivity, a grammatologically predicated a priori selfhood that makes a clear distinction between ideologically constituted representations of the world on the one hand and, on the other, the ostensibly objective world. To “fall back into the world,” one must exist in the state of unpredictability or “precarity.” To “lose yr identity” is part of the process of empirically eventuating actual self-identity, which Olson considers a prospective outcome of what Stein terms “concrete particular experience” that appeals to its own actual occasion rather than to a totality that universally conditions a probabilistic, generalized, and “Americanized” future. In a word, what Olson calls “bullshit.”
Interestingly, biological theorists Humberto Maturana and Franscisco Varela term such an “internal project” of self-structuration “autopoiesis.” In *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, they usefully argue for the purposeful—and thus meaningful or valuable—organization of living systems, “the possession of an internal project or program…realized in and through their structural organization” (85) and, in doing so, they supply us with not only a sense of autopoiesis that resonates with Olson’s overall project, but also with insight into the matter of embodiment that is so crucial to our discussion. Olson’s methodology should not suggest the development of a referential system of either subjective or objective essences in a statistical universe precisely because such referentiality depends upon the One as the origin or organizing center of coherence. The One is the metaphysically original “frame.”

Put differently, consider Derrida in *Writing and Difference*: “Nevertheless, up to the event which I wish to mark out and define, structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin” (278). When Derrida writes of “structurality” he means the structure of all structures as such. The One or the Logos is structure as such, the ultimate principle of organization and control in the West—in either its theological or philosophical manifestations. Alternatively, we have seen that, to Olson structure is what is called the meaning and, as a physical event, it lacks the rationalist prerequisite of a coherent structuralism and its essentialist doctrine of the embodiment of meaning—the Word in the flesh, meaning in the graphical mark of the text, and so forth. To recall Creeley, then, meaning is not importantly referential, and the question of method is the question of
pragmata in a particular environment of performance. The method to deal with the problematic at hand will emerge processually through the individual’s “internal project.” In *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, Maturana and Varela write that language “was never invented by anyone only to take in an outside world. Therefore, it cannot be used as a tool to reveal that world. Rather, it is by languaging that the act of knowing, in the behavioral coordination which is language, brings forth a world” (234). It is through attentive activity that the world lives, which is decidedly not a human-centric prospect in that people, language, houses, trees, cars, flowers and so-forth all constitute—or rather, create together—the network of lived relations Maturana and Varela call “a world.”

In a conversation with Herbert Kenny, dated 1969, Olson eerily describes our own contemporary situation:

Kenny: You mean you think that we need that element of danger for our best character?

Olson: Well, I wouldn’t say it’s the nature of danger but it is the nature of perception, of attention, yes. Which is a spiritual condition. You could put it, intensity. I mean, the amount of slackness today, the laziness, the lackness, the limpniness, is all in the fact that you don’t *need* attention any more, you don’t need your perceptions any more. It’s all taken care of for you by the environment of your automobile, your house, of the economy, of the money system. In fact, there isn’t any money, there’s credit. In fact, it’s worse. I mean this is a crazy sort of post-nature, post-natural thing that the species has gotten into. So, who cares? I mean, o.k., have another species. I just happened to have *liked* that species that’s called man. (*MU* II.170)

Such a “species”—*Homo sapiens*—has nothing to do with the idea of Man that Foucault critiques. “I mean something I believe we possess crucially,” says Olson, “I think our body is our soul. And if you don’t have your body as a factor of creation, you don’t have a soul” (*MU* II.170). As an agent of creation, the physiological organism gives itself over
to the motivative world that impels the event of life. Olson goes so far as to conjecture that *Homo sapiens* and *Panthera tigris* are on a par in this respect: “You don’t focus your attention. Attention, which may be the source of our very existence as human beings!

One almost wonders about tigers, for example. They don’t have anything else to do! They are not involved with attention. They *are* attention” (*MU* I.59). While not a luddite, Olson’s point is that organisms are not technologies—to follow the familiar trope of the body as a primal technology—but rather that organisms come to know the world through an empirical rather than rationalized *techne*, as distinguished from the a priori conditionality of an episteme. In this sense, the “know-how” of *techne* and aesthesis are coextensive. Olson suggests that one does not merely develop attentive aptitudes through use, moreover, but rather that one exists *in-and-of* attention. He understands such dynamism in terms of a quantifiable “spiritual” intensity, and it is the spirit or soul, taken as the power of life situated at the biological level, that, interestingly, Homer terms *psyche* or breath. As I note in the introduction, so does William James:

Let the case be what it may in others, I am as confident as I am of anything that, in myself, the stream of thinking (which I recognize emphatically as a phenomenon) is only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing. The ‘I think’ which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the ‘I breathe’ which actually does accompany them. There are other internal facts besides breathing (intracephalic muscular adjustments, etc., of which I have said a word in my larger Psychology), and these increase the assets of ‘consciousness’, so far as the latter is subject to immediate perception; but breath, which was ever the original of ‘spirit’, breath moving outwards, between the glottis and the nostrils, is, I am persuaded, the essence out of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness. *That entity is fictitious, while thoughts in the concrete are fully real. But thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are.* (*Essays In Radical Empiricism* 19-20)

Given a cursory glance, this invective seems problematically confused about the relationship between the concrete and the abstract, the former ubiquitously taken as the
source of abstraction, as Pound and Whitehead, to name a pair of obvious examples, insist. From a rationalist perspective, the question is not only how “thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are,” but also, and more importantly, what such a conflation might mean. It is shrewd, indeed, to conceal the tautology of the phrase “Speculative philosophy” with the euphemism “Continental philosophy.” Be that as it may, from an empirical perspective, and especially from that of Olson, it is not so much that the abstract is never more than an extension of the concrete—we saw how such extensions of concepts led to a devastating paradox in Poundian poetics—but rather that thoughts and things are the same, or rather that every abstract essence is itself concrete or the physical. Abstraction is literally concretion, in other words, the latter of which is always already a process of particularization. Put differently, “our body is our soul.” Essentiality is fully physical. “We’re trying to catch up to Homer,” Olson explains in Last Lectures (22). We are now far afield enough from the philosophic assumptions of classical metaphysics. Of course, one problem is to not reduce the life process of breathing to an aesthetic category, which is how Olson’s insistence on the use of breath in “Projective Verse” is often cast. At stake is not only the emergence of breath and how it is used in definitive occasions of writing, but, rather, the question of emergence itself. In other words, how is emergence empirically constituted?

All the World’s Not a Stage: Emergence, Event, and Spacetime

“Entstehung designates emergence, the moment of arising,” Foucault reasons in his reading of Nietzsche, yet he goes on to qualify the temporality of “arising,” explaining that “emergence designates a place of confrontation but not as a closed field
offering the spectacle of a struggle among equals” (Language 149-50). In this way, emergence is a temporal and ultimately infinite site of dominations, yet, at the same time, “it is a ‘non-place’, a pure distance, which indicates that the adversaries do not belong to a common space. Consequently, no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice” (Language 150). While there is certainly something to be said about the disturbingly utopic constitution of struggles and dominations (as I note in the previous chapter, “utopia” literally means “no place”), my point is to suggest that this temporal character of Foucauldian emergence is not only inextricable from “struggle,” or rather the “play of dominations,” but also from the process of aufheben or sublation. Such a “play” leads to the obvious trope: “In a sense, only a single drama is ever staged in this ‘non-place’, the endlessly repeated play of dominations” (Language 150). Apparently, all the world is not only the dialectic, but also its only actor or agent “responsible for an emergence.”

The insistence that “only a single drama is ever staged” is telling. Foucault’s “sense” of emergence is profoundly formal in its abstraction, and it is this “sense” that decouples the specificity of spatial contexts from the temporality of emergent events. And, to follow the trope of the stage, it is useful to note that Foucault’s “sense” of emergence runs counter to what has become relatively common sense in the physical sciences, specifically the contemporary physics that Olson’s project engages, over the past century. By decoupling the temporal from the spatial, Foucault essentially assumes a Newtonian clockwork universe that is geometrically Euclidean.

In an intuitively written and insightful book, The Trouble With Physics, contemporary physicist Lee Smolin explains that, for Newton, “space and time
constituted an absolute background. They provided a fixed stage on which a grand drama
is played out. The geometry of space and time was needed to give meaning to the things
that change, like the positions and motions of particles. But they themselves never
changed” (44). Indeed, in Relativity: The Special and the General Theory, Einstein’s
description of the “stage” is analogous:

In this, the essential thing is that “physical reality,” thought of as being
independent of the subjects experiencing it, was conceived as consisting, at least
in principle, of space and time on the one hand, and of permanently existing
material points, moving with respect to space and time, on the other. The idea of
the independent existence of space and time can be expressed drastically in this
way: If matter were to disappear, space and time alone would remain behind (as a
kind of stage for physical happening). (164-65)

A Foucauldian theorization of emergence assumes that the “grand drama” of power
iterates the “play of dominations” on a fixed stage that takes space and time as
independent of one another. As we will see, Olson will not take space and time as
existing independently. Ann Charters explains that, for Olson, a “purely deterministic
philosophy of the universe, as in Newtonian physics, where physical space was
considered discrete, independent of the phenomena that occur in it, is meaningless” (O/M
15). As it turns out, Foucault’s stage is an “absolute background” so abstract that it is
both every stage and no stage at all. Comparing a Newtonian framework to that of
Einstein, Smolin observes that

Einstein’s theory of general relativity is completely different. There is no fixed
background. The geometry of space and time changes and evolves, as does
everything else in nature. Different geometries of spacetime describe the histories
of different universes. We no longer have fields moving in a fixed-background
geometry. We have a bunch of fields all interacting with one another, all
dynamical, all influencing one another, one of which is the geometry of spacetime.
(44)
Immediately striking is how Smolin invokes “spacetime,” whereby space and time are combined to form a single continuum. In 1905, when Einstein introduces the notion of spacetime in his special theory of relativity, Western thought realizes that the actor and the stage processually change one another through interactivity in a single spacetime continuum. Which is as much to say that the actor and the stage are inextricable from Smolin’s “bunch,” a term that is deceptively uncritical yet arrives at the crucial point that every actor, as part of this “bunch,” has a common interest with the physical world: the events of change that emerge through interactivity.

Olson is deeply interested in such interest, which he discusses in his essay “Quantity in Verse, and Shakespeare’s Late Plays.” He argues that, in the late plays, “Shakespeare is no longer a Humanist in which Nature and Man are separate,” by which he means that the Shakespearean dramatic line evidences a quantitative vernacular measure rather than an accentual-syllabic measure, the former of which attends to the particular durations of bodily and thus spatially voiced syllables (Collected Prose 271). Comparatively, one could make a similar argument for the verse of Sir Thomas Wyatt, albeit before the metric was generalized for inclusion in Tottel’s Miscellany. Considering Olson’s claim from a different point of view, one can also point out that contemporary textual scholarship on Shakespeare has compellingly argued that the texts of the plays are not as fixed and stable as Olson presumes. Be that as it may, in focusing upon a passage from Henry VIII, he articulates phrasal voicing and quantitative measure to the question of spacetime, not to the canonical authority of the single author we know as Shakespeare:

To sum up, then: “by violent” (which is only 1 accent and 4 syllables) already shows for the the weave of accent, quantity, breath which makes prosody the music it is: and here is a very close music, sharp, long and stopped, all in a small
space of time, reflecting the truth that it is, that this art, when it is at its best, is powerful just because it does obey space-time. (CP 274)

The Newtonian assumption that “Nature and Man are separate” is analogous to the independence of space and time, only with the caveat that “Nature” is the empty stage upon which the idea of Man performs an existential “grand drama.” For Olson, the ostensible stage of the world is dynamic rather than a “fixed background.” His insistence on “the weave of accent, quantity, [and] breath” recalls the closing paragraph of his oft-cited “Projective Verse” essay, wherein he argues that “a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs” (CP 249). For Olson, dramatic action begins not merely with the body, but with the body entangled with the spatiotemporal dynamics of its environs. Such dynamics, of course, are radically rhythmic. Every act by an actor is an empirical interaction with the specifically lived rhythms of the environs with which they are entangled and, in this sense, every act is a dramatically emergent event that “does obey space-time.” The question, however, is what constitutes such an act of obedience.

“We’re trying to regain the primordial instancy of the event,” Olson states in Last Lectures (19). On the one hand, such “instancy” has everything to do with Foucault’s designation of emergence as “the moment of arising.” On the other hand, we have seen that such a Foucauldian designation is dialectical and thus squarely discursive. While Olson’s qualification of “instancy” as “primordial” may be construed as a gesturing towards the impossibility of the genealogically traced origin that Foucault so powerfully critiques, Olson’s use of the term has more to do with the biological sciences than with the Western metaphysics both he and Foucault find philosophically problematic. By
“primordial,” Olson indicates that the immediate and unmediated experiential knowledge of “the event”—and, more specifically, the emergence of events in a spatiotemporal continuum—belongs to the earliest stage of development of an organism. As Olson argues in his well-known essay “Human Universe,” “discourse has arrogated to itself a good deal of experience which needed to stay put,” and that “the primordial instancy of the event,” as he says in Last Lectures, “needs now to be returned to the only two universes which count, the two phenomenal ones, the two a man has need to bear on because they bear so on him: that of himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets” (CP 156). The quantitative vernacular measure that Olson locates in the late plays of Shakespeare is the measure not merely of projected breath, as an actor will project a phrase, but also, and just as important, the spatiotemporal events of words as they emerge in an empirical present. The actor, the stage, and the language are all integrally emergent elements of the spacetime continuum.

Quantitative measure recommits poetics to “the primordial instancy of the event,” a pre-Platonic “instancy” that does not assume even a primitive form of the dialectic as necessary to the process of ordering experience. As Altieri rightly notes in “From Experience to Discourse,” Olson “stresses the non-discursive quality” of his poetics (179). It is useful to additionally note that in The Special View of History, which collects a lecture series Olson delivered at Black Mountain College in 1956, he evidences such a form of evental emergence by drawing substantially upon the scholarship of the classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison, in particular her aptly titled study Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion. Harrison supplies for Olson a point of articulation between myth and narrative, which he terms “mutho-logos, the practice of life as story”
(21) “A mythos to the Greek was primarily just a thing spoken, uttered by the mouth.” Harrison explains in a passage from Themis cited by Olson, “Its antithesis or rather correlative is the thing done, enacted, the ergon or work” (328). More pointedly, Harrison discusses “the thing done” in the introductory passages of Ancient Art and Ritual:

The Greek word for a rite as already noted is dromenon, “a thing done”—and the word is full of instruction. The Greek had realized that to perform a rite you must do something, that is, you must not only feel something but express it in action, or, to put it psychologically, you must not only receive an impulse, you must react to it. The word for rite, dromenon, “thing done,” arose, of course, not from any psychological analysis, but from the simple fact that rites among the primitive Greeks were things done, mimetic dances and the like. It is a fact of cardinal importance that their word for theatrical representation, drama, is own cousin to their word for rite, dromenon; drama also means “thing done.” (35)

Dromenon and mythos are here linked in a correlative relationship. In interpreting Harrison, however, Olson takes this linkage one step further, explaining that “things said are things done,” or rather that mythos and dromenon are strongly homologous terms, rather than merely resonant (SVH 22). In other words, both terms at once constitute “the primordial instancy of the event,” a sense of emergence that, to recall Olson on the practice of projective verse, is bodily and thus spatially situated “where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs.”

But ancient Greek culture is not the only source of linguistic information for Olson. In a dated yet erudite book, Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meaning, Michel Bréal notes the Latin etymology of “primordial”: “The weaver gave to the Latin language the words which mean ‘to begin’: ordiri, exordium, primordia. Ordiri, was to arrange the threads of the warp for making the woof” (126). When Olson observes in Henry VIII “the weave of accent, quantity, breath which makes prosody the music it is,” the articulation of “primordial” to the activity of weaving is not lost on an accomplished
student of Latin such as Olson. To “regain the primordial instancy of the event” is to take a proactive interest in a spatiotemporal continuum that, moment of arising to moment of arising, forms the existential fabric of not merely creation, but of the Creation. “There are laws,” Olson states at the outset of “Human Universe,” and his prosody sets out to “obey” those of “space-time,” rather than those of discourse. And it is interesting to note that the Latin roots of “obey” variously mean “to listen to,” “to hear,” and so forth. As Gerrit Lansing explains in his foreword to *Charles Olson: Maximus to Gloucester*, “one of Charles’s most common expressions was ‘I hear you’ when the quality of your own articulated attention matched his and the sound was true. Always he listened intently to what you offered. And attention to his own thought, rephrasing it and explicating it so as better to be understood” (x). This kind of Olsonic interest reestablishes the value of empirical attention to emergent events, to the *dromenon* and *mythos* at once. Of course, Lansing points out what Olson’s close listening to Shakespeare evidences: the act of articulation is always already an emergent interaction.

**All is There For Feeling**

If space does indeed “come large,” as Olson notably claims at the outset of *Call Me Ishmael*, then the dialectic, in the history of Western thought, appears as equally large and decidedly “without mercy” (*CP* 17). There is always a theory and, along with it, the “theoretic grubbing” that prompts Olson to insist that rhythm underwrites a constructive aesthesis. As I have argued, a doctrine of space predicated solely upon its own internal logic is primarily one of description, rather than one of physical, quantitative measurement. Since the mathematical work of Kurt Gödel, we know that the former is
always already incomplete, while the latter term is alternatively finite and complete in itself precisely because it does not rely upon any metonymy of totality—Language, Self, God, Nature, and so forth—for meaning. Representations of space require a disengagement from the physical experience of the unfolding events that constitute the dynamic fabric of space and time, which approximates, in other words, Georg Cantor’s transfinite paradise: a space that is no space at all. And in such a conceptually utopian space, quantities can mean anything—in fact, to recall both Kant and Aristotle in a stroke, the geometry of space has an essence, but no nature. It is a realm of potential conditions and formal causes only retrospectively articulated to the material structure of reality.

In “Against Wisdom As Such,” which in an earlier form appears as a letter to Robert Duncan dated 1953, Olson paraphrases Novalis: “He who controls rhythm / controls” (CP 264). Such control is over a process-oriented construction that allows one to “live one’s own image” as it emerges from the particularity of perceptive interactivity with an environment. Knowing becomes prospective, rather than retrospective, as traditional formulations of wisdom dictate. The Sophia who haunted logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics—to name the five categories of classical philosophy—turned out to be a ghost in the Platonic machine of narcissistic disciplinarity. Philosophy taught Sophia about herself and only herself in a rigorously dialectical fashion. And, like any such ghost, she had an essence, but no nature. Sophia was squarely temporal and, of course, equally temperamental, harnessed only by ideal formations that underwrote the One. Needless to say, for over two millennia Western culture deployed such ideal formations to conceptually discipline the contingencies and asymmetries that lurked in the physical dynamism of Heraclitean flux.
In the opening chapters of *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson asks us to consider “whaling as FRONTIER, and INDUSTRY. A product wanted, men got it: big business. The Pacific as sweatshop. Man, led, against the biggest damndest creature nature uncorks. The whaleship as factory, the whaleboat the precision instrument” (*CP* 26). Although Olson states that economics is not one of Melville’s explicit concerns in *Moby-Dick*, the industrial character of the Pequod arguably emerges from a close reading of the novel, yet what becomes evident is that *Call Me Ishmael* stands as a record of Olson’s particular experience of reading Melville on the one hand and, on the other, that Melville understands space, time, and nature as homologous terms. Together they indicate a radically physical and asymmetrical cosmos. The physical structure of the earth and the organized activity of making goods implicate one another, and the “big business” that New Dealers viewed as the cause of the Great Depression is one devastating consequence of such an implication. As a mobile extension of nation state, the whaleboat becomes the same kind of thing as the idea of Man proposed by the Enlightenment. The Pequod is a facilitative technology, and the identity of place—“sweatshop,” “factory,” and so forth—extends with the machine of industry in the name of linear progress.

As an allegory for “how man acquires the lost dimension of space,” however, *Moby-Dick* displaces the squarely temporal and thus linearly progress-oriented center of humanism and replaces it with the quantitative structure of spatiality coupled to temporality (*CP* 76). “Time was not a line drawn straight ahead toward future, a logic of good and evil,” Olson says of Melville’s sense of time, “Time returned on itself. It had density, as space had” (*CP* 88). Timing is a matter of physical feeling, perceptibility and emotion both implicated in the actual flux of change. If rhythm is substantial, then the
ethereal imagination of Romantic consciousness undergoes change as well. When “Melville’s imagination was at its own proper beat,” he was able “to live one’s own image,” the rhythm of which proved specific to acts of perceptive knowing (CP 18). In his intricate parsing of Moby-Dick, Olson discovers that the Poundian dictum of producing images overlooks that image is as processual as quantitative rhythm.

“The process of image,” Olson explains, “cannot be understood by separation from the stuff it works on. Here again, as throughout experience, the law remains, form is not isolated from content. The error of all other metaphysic is descriptive, is the profound error that Heisenberg had the intelligence to admit in his principle that a thing can be measured in its mass only by arbitrarily assuming a stopping of its motion, or in its motion only by neglecting, for the moment of the measuring, its mass” (CP 162). The movement away from referential systems of knowledge, wherein things obtain their meaning through discursive relationships to other things, appears evident. The notion of a reciprocity between knowledge of position and knowledge of momentum gives rise to Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, and the key point for Olson is that an instrument of measurement will alter the state of what is being measured—and, implicitly, the inverse—or else one must assume an objectivity that admits a merely descriptive representation. “Rhythm is position,” we hear in Last Lectures, the perception of which is itself motile, accumulatively moving “instanter” (LL 6). “Art does not seek to describe,” Olson flatly states, “but to enact,” and such enactments necessitate the quantitative measure of not simply breath, as is often said of the first section of “Projective Verse,” but, more importantly, they require the quantitative measurement of themselves, which
begins with the rhythmical perception of spacetime, and to which the individual is integral (CP 162).

Much has been made of Olson’s use of Heisenberg in The Special View of History, and one can consequentially overlook that the Heisenberg limit—also known as the Uncertainty Principle—makes its first, albeit limited appearance in Call Me Ishmael. Here, Olson does not speak of American power in terms of industrial production and global expansion, but rather he claims that our power is simply QUANTITY. Without considering purpose. Easy too. That is, so long as we continue to be INGENIOUS about machines, and have their resources. // Or you can take an attitude, the creative vantage. See her as OBJECT in MOTION, something to be shaped, for use. It involves a first act of physics. You can observe POTENTIAL and VELOCITY separately, have to, to measure THE THING. You get approximate results. They are usable enough if you include the Uncertainty Principle, Heisenberg’s law that you learn the speed at the cost of exact knowledge of the energy and the energy at the loss of exact knowledge of the speed. (CP 63-64)

Measurement is valued over a conceptualization of space, and it is from the dynamism of rhythm that images emerge. In other words, Olson observes a shift in the spatial status of the image. As we know, Enlightenment thought generally took the imagination as either that which produces or reproduces a representative image of the world in the mind, a notion that underwrites Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy and Discourse on Method. It is through reason that our images of reality are given order, pattern, and meaning. Olson develops a decidedly different view in his study of Melville. The imagination is reimaged as the physical site of perceptive organization. If the “process of image cannot be understood by separation from the stuff it works on,” then such a process is inextricable from knowledge of the real. “All is there for feeling,” and Olson’s “all” is everything that one can potentially experience in a given environment of knowing
Anticipating his use of Novalis in “Against Wisdom As Such,” Olson asserts in “Human Universe” that “he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe” (CP 162). When the imagination constructs an image, functioning “at its own proper beat,” it functions through the rhythmical orders of feeling that emerge with continuous experience, the daily processes of aesthesis. To possess rhythm is to process rhythm, and to possess “the universe” means to feel through one’s own images of reality.

**Negative Capability and the Science of the Imaginary**

In a letter dated 1817, John Keats explains to Benjamin Bailey that “Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect—by [for but] they have not any individuality, any determined Character. I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self Men of Power” (Selected Letters 35). To Olson, Melville is a “Man of Genius” in Keats’ sense, whereas Ahab indeed displays the “determined Character” that constitutes “Men of Power.” As we have already seen, Olson contrasts the imaginative capacities of Genius and Power: “History was ritual and repetition when Melville’s imagination was at its own proper beat. // It was an older sense than the European man’s, more to do with magic than culture. Magic which, in contrast to worship, is all black. For magic has one purpose: compel men or non-human forces to do one’s will. Like Ahab, American, one aim: lordship over nature” (CP 18). Ahab’s is an imagination that envisions the complete mastery over nature and, as a “Man of Power” par excellence, his character is underwritten by the Enlightenment ethos of individuality and the magnanimous desire to dominate space. In other words, the whale is not God, but “SPACE.” (CP 17). A humanist imagination of space, held by the
classical literary tradition, constitutes the antinomy of perfection achieved through
annihilation, the devastating dialectic of which should recall our previous discussion of
biopower. Such an imagination of space has everything to do, in other words, with

*rational* power. David Harvey brings the issue into clear view when he points out that the

Renaissance revolution in concepts of space and time laid the conceptual
foundations in many respects for the Enlightenment project. What many now look
upon as the first great surge of modernist thinking, took the domination of nature
as a necessary condition of human emancipation. Since space is a ‘fact’ of nature,
this meant that the conquest and rational ordering of space became an integral part
of the modernizing project. The difference this time was that space and time had
to be organized not to reflect the glory of God, but to celebrate and facilitate the
liberation of ‘Man’ as a free and active individual, endowed with consciousness
and will. (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 249)

“Like Ahab, American, one aim,” Olson observes, “lordship over nature.” Harvey is right
to point out the Renaissance foundations of the Enlightenment project and, in fact, this
ostensibly American condition manifests itself in Melville’s Ahab, the historical “Man of
Power” underwritten by the Enlightenment ethos of emancipation and the magnanimous
desire to dominate space. Olson considers the “liberation of ‘Man’ as a free and active
individual” a problem that turns on the matter of imagination, which, as Harvey
highlights, is founded upon Renaissance conceptions of space and time. Why, though,
does Olson insist that imagination has “more to do with magic than culture”?

Admittedly, Olson’s description of magic is understated, but his observation is
quite clear. In his thoroughly erudite study *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, Ioan P.
Couliano makes a number of significant points about the history of magic that pertain to
our present discussion. Usefully, Couliano speaks of magic as “a science of the
imaginary”:

Insofar as science and the manipulation of phantasms are concerned, magic is
primarily directed at the human imagination, in which it attempts to create lasting
impressions. The magician of the Renaissance is both psychoanalyst and prophet as well as the precursor of modern professions such as director of public relations, propagandist, spy, politician, censor, director of mass communication media, and publicity agent. (xviii)

This description of the Renaissance magician—the scientist of the imagination, if you will—should recall McLuhan’s now dusty insistence that, after the second world war, technological advances made it possible to “get inside the collective public mind”: “Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now” (EM 21). In one way, such an exposé still proves necessarily insightful, yet, from a different perspective, however, Olson’s valuation of organismal life and the construction of an image of that life by individuals who resist the cultural project of homogenization through regulatory processes of socialization should strike us as importantly relevant to our contemporary cultural situation.

Couliano goes on to explicitly articulate magic to science, both of which, he rightly claims, characterize imaginative needs. He argues that a transition from a society in which magical thought dominates to a predominately scientific society marks a change in the status of the imaginary, but that, conversely, magical thought continues to underwrite scientificity. Insofar as Olson’s insights are concerned, we find that the scientific rationalism of Enlightenment thought that underwrites the character of Ahab is not so purely extricable from its magical foundations, in that the bottom function of magic is not necessarily to first and foremost coerce, but rather to give meaning to experience. Even in the Renaissance, such a divide was not as stable as one might assume, which we find exemplified in Giordano Bruno’s numerous insistences that his mnemonic
system, as Francis Yeats discusses in her important study *The Art of Memory*, was squarely scientific in practice.

Not to make of him a straw man, but Foucault’s discussion of magic in *The Order of Things* focuses on a different yet related aspect of the relationship between experience and meaning. He points to the hermeneutic “resemblance” between signifier and signified in the sixteenth century, the fate of which is hermetically sealed:

> It was this same necessity that obliged knowledge to accept magic and erudition on the same level. To us, it seems that sixteenth-century learning was made up of an unstable mixture of rational knowledge, notions derived from magical practices, and a whole cultural heritage whose power and authority had been vastly increased by the rediscovery of Greek and Roman authors […] The world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know must therefore be to interpret: to find a way from the visible mark to that which is being said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant within things. (32)

In that the search for meaning is to discover resemblance, this Foucauldian view takes magic and erudition as hermeneutic in essence. Articulated to hermeneutics is semiology, in that the search for the laws that govern the relationships between signs is to realize the likeness of things. Finally, of course, the “grammar of being is the exegesis of these things” (29). As Couliano clearly and quite cogently shows, the history of magic does not reduce down to the ontology of language, yet Foucault has a point, in so far as we acknowledge that out of “an unstable mixture” of rational knowledge and magical practices, the latter of which are not always already exegetical, emerges a circumscription of magic by discursive practices that found the humanist logic of power, a logic that both impels Ahab and supplies his experience with dialectically produced *representational* meaning. As I have previously argued, Ahab is a Cartesian.
In Melville, Olson finds a Keatsian “Man of Genius” who understands an integral rather than conflicting relationship of space and time, in that perceptions are immediately organized by the imagination as they emerge—which is what Olson means by “its own proper beat.” In other words, rhythm is specific to not merely bodily processes, such as breathing, but also to the consequential emergence of image. Such a specificity of rhythm should, in Olson’s estimation, give rise to a specificity of image. Unlike Kant, who considered an a priori conceptual schema necessary to order and thus understand perceptions—which amounts to an a priori intuition of space in the Euclidean sense, despite Kant’s important point that one must seriously consider the problem of empirical observation—Olson suggests that imaging not only depends upon the position of the observer, but that it arranges perceptions through quantitative rhythmic experience as well. If “rhythm is position,” then it is also one’s situation.

To outline the situation “of those who have a proper self,” Olson fittingly draws upon Keats, most memorably at the outset of *The Special View of History*: “I mean Negative Capability. When a man is ‘capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’” (16). To “lose yr identity,” as we recall, means to exist in the state of “precarity.” In this light, Olson importantly comments upon the term “irritable”: “The emphasis here is irritable, which is man’s tease to know by stopping. (Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle applying right here, you can’t stop.) And he can’t: if he stops it he gets a half, which will turn out to be only his proper self or his ego or Character, an imposition, POWER” (42). While Olson echoes Keats’ letter to Bailey with the phrase “proper self,” he importantly points out the analytical problem of “stopping,” or rather, to give merely one example, the abstraction of an
arbitrary object out of the spatiotemporal continuum to measure a variable. In its retrospectivity, such an abstraction is articulated to discursive analysis. One is reminded of Olson’s insistence on immediate and direct perception in “Projective Verse” that he gleans from Edward Dahlberg. The referentiality of dialectic assumes that such a “stopping” or abstraction of the arbitrary is, paradoxically, necessary. Negative capability is important to Olson because it allows a state of being that empirically accesses its own continuity of spacetime.

**Alterrorization: Dialectic and the Problem of the Subject**

In his 1963 review of Eric A. Havelock’s *Preface to Plato*, Olson observes that “what was different about the poetry of Homer, and of Hesiod, to which Plato did take objection in order the better himself to support his own invention of another *episteme*, of his belief in a dialectic of Socrates’ order, and...a new sense of metaphor which becomes, in Aristotle (cf. the *Poetics* 1457) a part or parcel of the Plato-Socrates generalization system” (*CP* 355). He explains—and rightly, I believe—that this “generalization system” was made possible by the “whole slip to discourse, deliberately mounted to supply an education and State as the result (cause-and-effect) of an artificial ‘person’ and an equally shrunken *socius* (company) ended up in Hegel, and in Marx-plus, the modern liberal companionship” (*CP* 358). For readers unfamiliar with Olson, such statements may seem dislocating, off-putting, or both. Havelock’s self-admittedly radical interpretation of the *Republic*, however, which argues that the development of discourse displaces the once dominant mode of functional Greek pedagogy located in pre-Platonic poetry, supported
Olson’s own research. And while Olson’s interpretation of “the Plato-Socrates generalization system” may strike one as eccentric, it is indeed purposeful. Hegel:

Dialectic, it may be added, is no novelty in philosophy. Among the ancients Plato is termed the inventor of Dialectic; and his right to the name rests on the fact, that the Platonic philosophy first gave the free scientific, and thus at the same time the objective, form to Dialectic. Socrates, as we should expect from the general character of his philosophising, has the dialectical element in a predominantly subjective shape, that of Irony (The Logic 149).

Olson implicitly insists that dialectic, as the method of conceptualization that underwrites the “free scientific” and ostensibly “objective” systematicity of humanist discourse, not only rationally divides the individual from the generative immediacy and particular experience of the sensual world, but also, and just as importantly, produces the problematic of alterity and, thus, that of the power over the symmetrical Other. In short, rationality itself alterorizes everything with which it comes in contact. There is no solution to the problem of the subject precisely because the default mode of conceptualization, whether rationalist or counter-rationalist, produces the problem in the first place, the first instance, with the first logical distinction that creates the symmetrically empty value places of subject on the one hand and object on the other.

Havelock himself succinctly outlines the problem:

[T]he poetic state of mind is for Plato the arch-enemy and it is easy to see why he considered this enemy so formidable. He is entering the lists against centuries of habituation in rhythmic memorised experience. He asks of men that instead they should examine this experience and rearrange it, that they should think about what they say, instead of just saying it. And they should separate themselves from it instead of identifying with it; they themselves should become the “subject” who stands apart from the “object.” (Preface to Plato 47)

Both Havelock and Olson observed the radical split between subject and object that informed the theoretical foundations of the modernist “quarrel” with subjectivism, as Olson maintained:
It is no accident that Pound and Williams both were involved variously in a movement which got called ‘objectivism’. But that word was then used in some sort of a necessary quarrel, I take it, with ‘subjectivism’. It is now too late to be bothered with the latter. It has excellently done itself to death, even though we are caught in its dying. (CP 247)

For Pound, the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry plays itself out in the pages of his work. By 1950, Olson arrives at a distinctly different understanding of the subject than his literary predecessors, avant-gardes and humanist literati alike. “We have lived long in a generalizing time,” Olson writes a year later in “Human Universe.” He specifies: “Greeks went on to declare all speculation as enclosed in the ‘UNIVERSE of discourse’. It is their word, and the refuge of all metaphysicians since—as though language, too, was an absolute, instead of (as even man is) instrument” (CP 156). As I previously note, the problem of “objectism”—an early, prospective alternative to modernist “objectivism”—is “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature...and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object” (CP 247). Today, we are all too familiar with the magnanimous proclamations of the end of Man, yet “man,” as Olson uses the term here, means *an organism*, rather than a fixed ontological container in which to place a logical type.

Olson’s overall project refashions a notion of organismal interactivity with one’s material environment in contemporary versification, a process wherein the physiognomy or the outwardly apparent gestural landscape of poetic performance, grounded by the very rhythmicity of change itself, does not suffer a divide from situational physiologicality or the very way that living things function in a particular environment.
At bottom, such a notion premises not only his oft-cited “Projective Verse” essay, but also the arguably denser and more complicated later writings, an obvious example of which we find at the onset of “The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought” (1969), wherein Olson sketches a nexus of terms that construct his poetics: “experiential: phenomenological, perceptual, actionable” (CP 368). The ideal value places of subject and object not only determined the rationalization of the Greek mind, but also, and more importantly, the divide between them situates the two in an irreconcilably antagonistic and ultimately *alterrorizing* relationship. In recollection of Heraclitus, Olson writes:

The sea was not, finally, my trade.
But even my trade, at it, I stood estranged
from that which was most familiar. Was delayed,
and not content with the man’s argument
that such postponement
is now the nature of
obedience (MAX I.52)

Any examination and subsequent act of causal arrangement creates a delay or deferral in time. An “irritable reaching after fact and reason,” as Keats says (which is “man’s tease
to know by stopping,” to recall Olson) ultimately amounts to an estrangement “from that which was most familiar”; namely, the particularity of physical, concrete reality known through aesthetes. Rather than “just saying it,” classical Greek culture utilizes a theretofore unrealized robust system of abstractions to “just think it.” Empirical forms of knowing are separated out from the ideal Forms, and rationalism is thus charged with the reconciliation of its own ostensible categories of existence to give meaning to experience. More to the point, however, a discursive consciousness begins to mediate reality on a systematic scale and, hence, the subject is subjected to an estrangement from the possibility of immediate and affective sympathy with the world. Greek culture recedes
from “a whole way of life” significantly informed by the situation of poetic performance, a way of life that understood the sensible world through itself sans preformed idealities, the most devastating of which is neither grammar nor rhetoric, but dialectic.

“No matter what it amounts to, mystery confusion doubt, it has a power, it is what I mean by Negative Capability,” Olson explains, “Keats, without setting out to, had put across the century the inch of steel to wreck Hegel” (CP 120). Negative capability is the final nail in the Hegelian coffin, so to speak, “the inch of steel” that, to somewhat mix my metaphors, sabotages the industrious engine of the dialectical machine. Yet such negativity—the “capability of being in uncertainties”—is not philosophical skepticism. Olson insists that Hegel “takes what is condition as result, instead of leaving it, as Keats does, penetratium. And as result, creates out of it the positive. One could see this moment of passage here precisely the moment of Keats’ insistence and rejection. And crucial to post-Modern man” (SVH 43). The Hegelian condition of negativity is taken as a result through processes of sublation:

In contradistinction to mere Skepticism, however, philosophy does not remain content with the purely negative result of Dialectic. The skeptic mistakes the true value of his result, when he supposes it to be no more than a negation pure and simple. For the negative, which emerges as a result of dialectic, is, because a result, at the same time the positive: it contains what it results from, absorbed into itself, and made part of its own nature. (The Logic 151-52).

For his part, Olson compellingly observes that the power status of positivity constructs the very condition of Western culture, as Hegel describes how such a condition viciously maintains its own circularity in a closed system of logic. Marx would ultimately locate such a logic in the deep structure of capital accumulation.

In “Notes for the Proposition: Man is Prospective,” Olson discusses what Melvillean space can achieve, the topology of which is constituted by nature, society, and
deity. The notion of society concerns us here: “The gains of space are already apparent…Man as object, not man as mass or economic integer, is the buried seed in all formulations of collective action stemming from Marx. This seed, not its tactic which merely secures it votes or coup d’etat, is the secret of the power and claim of collectivism over men’s minds” (3). This “secret of the power and claim of collectivism” is not so secret to Whitman, as I have argued, considering that the biologicality of the individual underwrites his vision of the democratic collective in Democratic Vistas, as well as the entirety of Leaves of Grass. Be that as it may, for Olson this Melvillean spatiality recoups the power of organismal life in its raw form. Such power is not that of the Keatsian “Man of Power,” the humanist ideal of the idea of Man, but rather the power to exist as part of the continuity of spacetime events as they unfold. It is the capability to perceive, in a state of uncertainty, events that may or may not happen next. Rather than metaphysically speculative, the “mystery” turns out to be spatiotemporal change, which one can actually feel in a non-grammatical mood of actual potential. To recall both James and Foucault in a stroke, an empirically continuous “energetic living” has nothing to do with a discursive “grammar of being” that parses essentially meaningless subjectivities who are always already alterrorized. To put yet another twist on Stein’s locution, the “grammar of being” is “not a thing to feel.” It is a metaphysical representation and nothing more. The “capability of being in uncertainties” does, however, have everything to do with aesthetic.

Recall that history, Olson claims, “was ritual and repetition when Melville’s imagination was at its own proper beat.” Moby-Dick is a contemporary mythology “for a people of Ishmaels,” the first of which was Melville: “Melville went back, to discover us, to come forward. He got as far as Moby-Dick” (CP 19-20). Olson is the genealogical
extension of Melville’s Ishmael—“Call me Ishmael,” Olson famously states—in that an individual imaginary functions “at its own proper beat.” Of course, Pound insisted that rhythm must have meaning, which Olson would have found articulated in Eric Havelock’s discussion of Homeric prosody in *Preface to Plato*: “It is the essential genius of the rhythmic record that its units of meaning are like vividly experienced moments of doing or happening” (185). Olson discovers that there is no a priori “essential genius” of rhythmic meaning and that, moreover, such records are not “like” anything other than themselves. If the changes of rhythmic experience constitute the real, then negative capability is necessary to process such a situation of precarity.

“We Americans have nothing but our personal details,” Olson writes to Cid Corman, “Don’t let anyone fool you, any poet, any body. There is nothing but all the details, sensations, facts which are solely known to Cid Corman…Because Corman to Corman is ZERO. / what you don’t know is, that that is as it is for anyone / but the pseudo-whatever: / that we begin with ZERO—are O” (*LFO* 120). Olson’s insistence on the physicality of zero (“any body”) should recall Stein’s fringe of possible forms activated through the intransitive “operations of daily life.” The “thing to feel” is perceived in all its particularity through aesthesis. It is zero, understood as an uncertainty limit, that allows for the negativity of negative capability to occur. In other words, Corman constitutes his own limits of empirical knowing—there is no frame, as it were—which is exactly the methodological point that Olson makes in “The Present Is Prologue”:

I find it awkward to call myself a poet or writer. If there are no walls there are no names. This is the morning, after the dispersion, and the work of the morning is methodology: how to use oneself, and on what. That is my profession. I am an archeologist of morning. And the writing acts which I find bear on the present job are (I) from Homer back, not forward; and (II) from Melville on, particularly himself, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lawrence. These were the modern men who
projected what we are and what we are in, who broke the spell. They put men forward into the post-modern, the post-humanist, the post-historic, the going live present, the “Beautiful Thing.” (CP 207)

If we are all Ishmael, then “the work of the morning is methodology: how to use oneself, and on what.” The attentive individual becomes the archaeologist of the present, “the going live present,” immediately informed by a future in the form of archaic postmodern events, events that implicate the individual in willful and attentive acts of imagination, which, significantly, have everything to do with the system of capital that proposes an alterrorizing dialectic between the individual determining the use of the system and, on the other, the system determining the individual for use. The question of “how to use oneself, and on what” is as empirical as it is pragmatic, as grounded in its spatiality as it is fluxing in its eventual temporality. The question requires the investigation of constructive activity in the moment of its event.

Remember the Violets: Olson and Whitehead’s “Vectors”

“Nothing was now inert fact,” Olson notes in his assessment of Riemannian space, “all things were there for feeling, to promote it, and be felt; and man, in the midst of it, knowing well how he was folded in, as well as how suddenly and strikingly he could extend himself…he was suddenly possessed or repossessed of a character of being, a thing among things, which I shall call his physicality. It made a re-entry of or to the universe. Reality was without interruption” (CP 121). Such a “re-entry of or to the universe” smacks of Whitehead, of course, who explains: “Feelings are ‘vectors’: for they feel what is there and transform it into what is here” (PR 87). The importance of Whitehead to Olson is not merely the “re-entry” of physical quantity into the universe,
but, more importantly, that physical quantity is vector and not scalar. “So one gets the restoration of Heraclitus’ flux translated as, All things are vectors,” Olson says in his 1956 Black Mountain lecture, “Or put it, All that matters moves! And one is out into a space of facts and forms as fresh as our own sense of our own existence” (O/M 85). In the same lecture, he cites Process and Reality on the difference between the vector and scalar. It would do us well to consider the full paragraph:

But the philosophy of organism attributes ‘feeling’ throughout the actual world. It bases this doctrine upon the directly observed fact that ‘feeling’ survives as a known element constitutive of the ‘formal’ existence of such actual entities as we can best observe. Also when we observe the casual nexus, devoid of interplay with sense-presentation, the influx of feeling with vague qualitative and ‘vector’ definition is what we find. The dominance of the scalar physical quantity, inertia, in the Newtonian physics obscured the recognition of the truth that all fundamental physical quantities are vector and not scalar. (PR 177)

Generally speaking, quantum physics takes a vector as a state of affairs. Speaking more particularly, Olson finds in Whitehead the recognition of feeling at one with quantity. Put differently, the physical universe displays both affect and effect at once, which has been aptly termed “æffect” (Keane 442-445). The material or inertial structure of the real is observed and, thus, measured in accordance to the Heisenberg limit, yet it would be disingenuous to read Olson’s work as merely an allegory of Whitehead’s Process and Reality. In the same Black Mountain lecture, we find Olson’s own caveat emptor:

Mind you, be careful here. Remember the violets. A philosophy, even of his [Whitehead’s] order, or because of his order, a philosophy, just because it is a wind-up, it does seek, as he says, to be so water-tight that, “at the end, in so far as the enterprise has been successful, there should be no problem of space-time, or of epistemology, or of causality, left over for discussion,” form, in the sense in which one means it as of creations, can have no life in such a system. It is like the moon, without air. Or a mother. It has had to be like Whitehead has to find God as wisdom to be, “a tender care that nothing be lost.” The creation of form by man could hardly let this statement of his operative growth cover him just because he is not God…(O/M 88)
Ironically, Whitehead recognizes the same problem with the illusion of philosophic omniscience in *Process and Reality*: “European thought is represented as littered with metaphysical systems, abandoned and unreconciled” (14). In other words, Olson importantly discovers in Whitehead “Heraclitus’ flux translated as, All things are vectors,” yet, at the same time, he does not accept Whitehead’s organic philosophy wholesale precisely because “form, in the sense in which one means it as of creations, can have no life in such a system.” Traditional philosophy invested itself so deeply in the importance of a discursive subject-predicate proposition—predicating a concept of the object, that is—that it never took into account that perception, entangled with a particular environment or perceptual field, is already an awareness of objects. And such an awareness, of course, underwrites an empirically founded constructivity.

In “Equal, That Is, To the Real Itself,” Olson recalls the heurism he receives from Pound, yet qualifies its meaning: “As the Master said to me in the dream, of rhythm is image / of image is knowing / of knowing there is / a construct. It is rather quantum physics than relativity which will supply a proper evidence here” (*CP* 124). Quantum physics terms the collapse of a vector into a single and stable classical state after observation a wave-function collapse. A change in vector states—a change in position, or rather a rhythmical change initiated by observation—supplies Olson with the “proper evidence” for an empirically founded constructivity that exceeds mere aesthetic concerns.

Later in the essay, Olson recalls Melvillean space:

Finally, to take the possibilities here suggested, at their fullest—the actual character and structure of the real itself. I pick up on calm, or passivity, Melville’s words, and about which he knew something, having served as a boat-steerer himself...He says somewhere a harpoon can only be thrown accurately from such repose as he also likened the White Whale to, as it finally approached, a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness is his phrase. Likewise, in handling Ahab’s
monomania, he sets up a different sort of possible man, one of a company which he calls the hustings of the Divine Inert. I am able to stress the several aspects of Melville’s thought on this because, note, in each case the feeling or necessity of the inert, or of passivity as a position of rest, is joined to the most instant and powerful actions Melville can invent: the whale itself’s swiftness, Ahab’s inordinate will, and the harpooner’s ability to strike to kill from calm only. The inertial structure of the world is a real thing which not only exerts effects upon matter but in turn suffers such effects. (CP 124-25)

Interestingly, Olson points out that the “structure of the real” is not apathetic, but rather the physical character of a body, by which it either remains at rest or continues moving in a line unless acted upon. The observation is curious, if only because Olson suggests that Melvillean space feels itself and, of course, that “a different sort of possible man” is negatively capable of knowing “the feeling or necessity of the inert” as it is “joined” to the “instant and powerful actions” that themselves constitute change. Such perceptive feeling—what I have termed aesthesis—initiates “instant and powerful actions” that are at one with the changing structure of the real. What is real is felt.

In Proprioception, Olson notes that “the process is not continuous / [pattern] / but takes place by steps, / each step being the emission or absorption of an amt. of / energy called the quantum” (CP 191). As we recall, James asks: “Should we not say here that to be experienced as continuous is to be really continuous, in a world where experience and reality come to the same thing?” (RE 31). Such a “step” indicates a wave-function collapse initiated at the Heisenberg limit by observation. While it seems that Olson goes back on his word when he suggests a discontinuity of process, each “step,” while discrete, is a rhythmic unit produced by the interaction between spacetime and the organism who measures. In other words, “we are the process” of such creation, as Olson writes in “I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master”:

We’ll to these woods
no more, where we were used
to get so much, (Old bones
do not try to dance

    go still
    now that your legs

    the Charleston
    is still for us

    You can watch

It is too late
to try to teach us

    we are the process

    and our feet

    We do not march

We still look
    And see
    what we see

    We do not see
    ballads

other than our own. (*TCP 320*)

One structure or construct of knowing “steps”—or leaps, to use the more familiar term—to the next. In the excerpt above, one phrasal and thus rhythmic unit “steps” to the next, as with “It is too late / to try to teach us // we are the process / and our feet // We do not march.” Such leaps are not logical but intuitive. Such is the character of empirical continuity, in that the actuality of life—the actuality of feeling through the rhythmical step from “and our feet” to “We do not march,” for instance—marks the condition of *continuance.*
It is interesting to note that, in 1951, British physicist David Bohm discusses such an event in *Quantum Theory*:

Yet, the basic thinking process probably cannot be described as logical. For instance, many people have noted that a new idea often comes suddenly, after a long and unsuccessful search and without any apparent direct cause. We suggest that if the intermediate indivisible nonlogical steps occurring in an actual thought process are ignored, and if we restrict ourselves to a logical terminology, then the production of new ideas presents a strong analogy to a quantum jump. (170)

Although all of this may seem far afield from the oftentimes limited view of literary studies, the transition from one structure of knowledge to the next has everything to do with the structurality that Derrida famously takes to task in *Writing and Difference*. As it turns out, such structurality is Newtonian in essence. The One or the Logos is structure as such, the ultimate principle of organization and control in the West—in either its theological or philosophical, religious or secular manifestations. “I happen, as a poet,” Olson says, “to be interested in what is the old word, I think, for creation as structure—which is the word cosmology” (*PT* 13). As he uses the terms here, neither “creation” nor “structure” are bloodless abstractions dependent upon the Abstraction of all abstractions. In other words, Olson’s notion of “creation as structure” stands *independently from the metaphysical imperative of cosmological totality*. The One is both atemporal and aspatial, or rather as Olson puts it, “like the moon, without air.” Totality is “without air” not only because it is entirely conceptual, but also because *totality must logically prove its own first assumption of itself*. Olson’s project articulates an animate, interactive “cosmology” of feeling—in short, a *cosmopoetics*—that rejects the figures of totalization deployed by Western metaphysics for over two millennia. His is a project that never exceeds the physical world to the point of it being an ethical rather than moral imperative. It is not a matter of what one has the right to do, but rather, in other words, *what is right to do*. 
When You Know What You Feel or Do:

Origin, Animation, and the Mesocosm

In 1969, Olson wrote his nearly illegible essay “The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought,” in which we find:

So I am back to the animate, plant-or-animal—‘perception’ sense—of the freshness in time of the narrative or history as a tone or mode & so activeness of, for a human being, ‘Creation’: that there is no ‘knowledge’ of the crucial (axial-tropistic) sense of anything, including the “Universe” of the “Self,” except by this ‘Time’ phenomenon of freshness which Animateness, in and by itself, as initial of experience. And so—anti-Newton, and anti-Einstein—of History. (CP 369)

Although post-Newtonian physics gave Olson much to use, the statistical indeterminacy inherent in the Copenhagen interpretation would not do for his project. We can say the same, of course, for the equally obsessive necessity for the One in the work of both Einstein and Whitehead. As I have argued, attention is “initial of experience,” and it is attention that corresponds to what Olson terms “Animateness.” As the motive force of animation, attention intervenes between classical and quantum reality, also known as the Copenhagen problem, which finds its source in the subjective consciousness of the observer. Physics, in either its classical or quantum modes, assumes some form of Cartesian and thus thoroughly dialectical subject. Recall what Olson says of attention in “Under the Mushroom” to answer a comment from the audience: “You’re already saying it too subjectively. You don’t focus your attention. Attention, which may be the source of our very existence as human beings!” (MU I.59). In other words, physics assumes the assertion of a subjective ego-system, the very psychic system that Olson, as early as Call Me Ishmael, sought to refuse. Dialectical method remains the ghost in the Platonic machine of science. The alternative is to see that animation is quantitatively evental and asserted though constructive aesthesis. To Olson, a vector of feeling is an actuality that
continually or animatedly leaps in spacetime, for organisms, as existents, amount to such vectors or states of affairs. And to be sure, a vector is not a representation, at least as Olson uses the term, but rather the situated status of actual spatiotemporal events.

Later in the piece, Olson cites Whitehead: “God is the aboriginal instance of this / creativity, and is therefore the aboriginal condition which qualifies its action” (CP 369, PR 225). Olson then rewrites him: “The Animate is the aboriginal instance of activity, / and is therefore the aboriginal condition which qualifies / (limits, in the event or ‘History’ sense—‘Time’ sense.” In the sense that Olson uses it above, animation is the power of life “in and by itself” on a biological level. Animation amounts to nothing less than autopoiesis or self-organization. While Olson relied on relatively dated quantum theory, he did, however, anticipate contemporary views of spacetime, as Smolin demonstrates in his insightful essay “The Self-Organization of Space and Time”:

In any system which qualifies as a universe—that is, any system that is closed with respect to the system of causes—mechanisms of self-organization will play a key role. There is a fundamental connection between a system being causally closed and the usefulness of mechanisms of self-organization in understanding it.

Universe could refer equally well to the physical Universe, the biosphere, a closed ecosystem, an economy or a society. The concept of self-organization is therefore relevant to economics, political and legal theory, as well as to the natural sciences.

The principle that there is nothing outside the Universe has two important consequences. The first of these is that there is no external organizer. This is an uncomfortable idea for human beings, because we are accustomed to making things. When we see something organized we wonder who made it and how it was made. (1081)

Like Smolin, Olson does away with “God” as the source of creative value. On the other hand, importantly, Olson attempts to keep the physical universe, the biosphere, ecosystems, and so forth, decidedly open. On the one hand, existents are autonomous autopoietic systems, yet, on the other hand, existents are openly entangled with the
phenomenal elements of their environments. Rightly speaking, what constitutes a cosmos for Olson is actually closer to a “mesocosm,” or more rightly a “mesocosmos.”

At the outset of The Poetics of the Common Knowledge, Don Byrd explains a “mesocosm”:

We have languages and bodies—macrocosm and microcosm, themselves only parables. We are too often missing the mesocosm—the dense locale of the common, that is absorbed by the exaggeration of symbolism, on the one hand, and by mere biology, on the other. (2)

As it is for Olson, for Byrd such a mesocosm is not a dialectical construct, not one of phenomenology, but rather “the phenomena of spirit which are common” (2). Consider Olson’s Last Lectures: “we are walking in the middle ground – / creation as cosmology” (16). Such a mesocosmos is an empirical “middle ground” open to the actual potentials of creation that, in their commonality, are available to anyone for use.

Interestingly, what Olson returns to in this late yet crucial “essay”—one can only use this term to denote an activity, I believe—is his early reading of Essays on a Science of Mythology, which he mentions throughout The Chiasma, or Lectures in the New Sciences of Man. In particular, I think of C. Kerényi’s “Prolegomena,” in which he discusses a primordial or aboriginal sense of space and time. In his discussion of origin, which immediately relates to our earlier discussion of origin, Kerényi unpacks the notion of arche, which I take to mean measure: “The ἀρχαί are as numerous as the elements composing man’s world, including man himself. He has his own ἀρχαί, the ἀρχαί of his organic being from which he continually creates himself” (8). In this sense, arche is a character or quality that, as we have seen, folds into quantitative reality as an outcome or consequence of the Heisenberg limit. As it turns out, “The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought” is yet another route for Olson that leads away from theological
and philosophical doctrines of embodiment and towards an altogether different kind of
secularity that “loses nothing of the divine,” to recall Proprioception, and gains a creative
mesocosmic middle-ground available to all. Kerényi:

Keeping to the spatial concept of an ideal midpoint in man we can say: at that point where the abyss-like ἀρχή of the germ opens, the world itself breaks in. The world itself speaks in the images of origination that stream out from it. The mythological “fundamentalist” (Begründer) who, by immersion in the self, dives down to his own foundations where everything is an outflowing, a sprouting and springing up—“original” (ursprünglich) in the fullest sense of the word, and consequently divine. (9)

In April of 1969, Gerard Malanga met Charles Olson in Gloucester to conduct an
interview for The Paris Review. Olson would ultimately not live to see the exchange
printed, as he died in January 1970, several months before the issue was released. In a
return to this interview, however, we find a number of salient remarks couched between
Olson’s questioning of Malanga’s questions, remarks that strike one as suddenly as type
or typos, which, as Olson discusses in his Beloit lectures, “characterizes all creation”
precisely because they impress our individual sensibilities (PT 55). When Malanga asks
how a poet can tell “whether he has established something for himself that will take him
further in his work,” Olson gives a sober response: “I don’t know. Belief, conviction,
experience. The decision, the suddenness—whatever it is, whatever the initial thing that
is the exact opposite of the universal. The whole living thing of creation is that moment
when you know what you feel or do” (195). As we recall, Olson’s imperative was to go
“down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from,
where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence
is, all act springs.” Breath has its beginnings, its origin, in the “midpoint” of which
Kerényi speaks. The poet “dives down to his own foundations where everything is an
outflowing, a sprouting and springing up” of what Olson terms “the initial thing that is the exact opposite of the universal.” *Dramatic form is coincident with content, not the coincidence of content.* Needless to point out, to “know what you feel or do” in this sense has nothing to do with Aristotle’s dramatic arc of action, which amounts to a theory of objectively continuous and decidedly linear time disconnected from inertial space. It is a question of the open origin and, thus, the originality or “novelty” of any individual *as a consequence of the radical spatiality of attention.* “Projective Verse” is not about breath.

The question of origin turns, indeed, on spatiality, as Duncan points out when he points to “the point of origins, the beginning that must be just here where we are about to originate” (*A Prospectus* 2). Origin is origin precisely because it is *open,* not a closed foundation, but rather a source from which “all act springs,” from which a “sudden decision” emerges, and from which one functions as readily as one breathes. The point of orientation is not logocentric structurality, but rather a bodily measure that emerges from an individual point of origin. As we have seen, Olson effectually tells Corman that this point is termed “zero.” Empirically speaking, it is not so much that form is never more than an extension of content, but that form *does not importantly exist* as anything other than such an extension. Such an empirical view of origin does not, in other words, require a beginning to logically legitimize itself with an end and, thus, bring itself to a teleologically predetermined close. If the “grammar of being is the exegesis” of such entirely conceptual “things,” to recall Foucault, then one is sentenced to perform hermeneutics upon an arbitrary grave containing the spirit of the letter so-called.

Olsonic mythology, grounded by aboriginality, is an evental form of lived reality structured in the instance of its quantitative and thus intensive experience. One feels
through dramatic passages that presage future events—that which is on the fringe of
perception, to recall James—and such vectoring takes its power from motility, rather than
mere etiological causality. Kerényi again:

The practice of this immersion in mythological fundamentalism and the
result of such practice is that, our eyes having been opened to the images that
stream out of the ‘ground’, we find we have returned to the place where the two
ἀρχαί—absolute and relative—coincide. The ἀρχή of the germ, or, as a modern
writer puts it, the ‘abyss of the nucleus’, opens out there, and there, we must
presume, is the mid-point about which and from which our whole being organizes
itself. If we consider this purely internal aspect of our life in spatial terms, then
the ideal spot where origination and our knowledge of the origins are identical can
only be this central breach-point. Going back into ourselves in this way and
rendering an account of it, we experience and proclaim the very foundations of
our being; that is to say, we are ‘grounding’ ourselves.

This mythological fundamentalism has its paradox, for the man who
retires into himself at the same time lays himself open. Or, to put it the other way
about, the fact that archaic man is open to all the world drives him back on his
own foundations and enables him to discern in his own origins the ἀρχή κατ’
ἐξοχήν, the origin. (8-9)

The “central breach-point” should immediately recall the Heisenberg limit that initiates
wave-function collapse at the instant when the absolute Newtonian universe and the
relative quantum universe coincide. And it is at this juncture—this topos of in-between
situatedness, this “middle ground,” this mesocosmos—that “our whole being organizes
itself” as an autopoiesis. As Olson writes in Maximus III, “by your inner world you may /
dwell in the outer as well without / any loss of your being” (628). To use the phrase
conveniently, open field composition is open precisely because one “retires into himself,”
and such “repose” or “calm,” which Olson discerns in Melville, enables one to “discern
in his own origins the ἀρχή κατ’ ἐξοχήν, the origin.” The ἀρχή κατ’ ἐξοχήν (arche kat’
exochen) amounts not to a metaphysical God, the Logos, or the One, but rather to
“Animatedness” or the entire open field of spatially living attention in which, through
which, and as which organisms exist particularly, meaningfully, and eventfully.
When Olson rewrites Whitehead, he also explicitly rewrites the social expression of mysticism that requires some doctrine of embodiment, either transcendent or immanent, philosophical or theological, and so forth. And it is in-between the classical-quantum realities that Olson’s postmodern sensibility dwells. Contemporary theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman explains the importance of such an in-between or mesocosm in his brilliant study *Investigations*, which takes its cues from not only Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, but also Erwin Schrödinger’s famous series of lectures *What Is Life?* Kauffman insightfully notes that “it is probably of more than passing interest that real living entities, cells, do straddle the classical-quantum boundary. One photon hitting a visual pigment molecule can beget a neural response” (149). He explains: “In short, real living systems straddle the quantum classical boundary. If there is a tendency of coevolving autonomous agents to increase the diversity of alternative events that can occur, then living entities must eventually hit the Heisenberg uncertainty limit and abide at least partially in the quantum realm.” To take this line of inquiry a step further, we can admit that Olson’s spatial field is an aboriginal vector field—a field of rhythmic magnitudes—that unfolds as an autopoiesis and undergoes change through the motive activity of attention.

Similarly, when Olson draws upon Whitehead’s notion that “all fundamental physical quantities are vector,” he suggests that individuals are indeed entangled with their given environments. One does not merely exist in an empty scalar environment, which is the classical view of nature, but rather one is an integral thread of the very spatiotemporal fabric of existence. Space and time, as Olson says, are “the saliva / in the mouth” (*Maximus* III.47). His is a vision of a world that abounds unboundedly with
organismal life. Equally important are both the local and, by extension, the global value of such life. As a result, animation that is an extant consequence of creative structuration and dependent upon its own internal processes opening unto a given environment does not depend upon the totalizing conditionality of the One or any of its metonyms. That said, such a view of animation does depend upon actual networks of empirical relations that constitute given environs and, moreover, such relations themselves are sites of information exchange.

We Are Our Emergencies: Information, Abstraction, and Lived Experience

Today, cybernetics seems a mere flash in the historical pan of Western ideas, the groundwork necessary for contemporary theorizations of information and communication. Although we can indeed read cybernetics—specifically the work of Norbert Wiener—as faddish and inconsistent, at the same time we can read such early information theory as a fairly lush and dynamic field of inquiry that, at the end of the day, lacked a rigorously developed philosophy. Olson was first introduced to Wiener’s Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine at Black Mountain in the form of prepublication proofs, which he subsequently glossed in “The Kingfishers,” as Ralph Maud notes (What Does Not Change 81). Olson would continue, however, to work at the problem of control and communication throughout his career, and it is precisely upon the point of information that such work turned. In particular, we distinguish information as the activity of content extended into, and thus constructing, its own particular formal structure. Interestingly, such extensivity is what we traditionally call abstraction. In other words, Olson understood information and abstraction as homologous terms and,
moreover, as I noted earlier, abstraction became a process of particularization, rather than that of generalization. The transition or “leap” from one structure of knowing to the next is a directed process of particularization, which itself proves an existential event that is the shared property, so to speak, of the organism and the specific environment in-and-of which that organism is an integral element.\(^4\) As we saw with Bohm, such a structural transition—what we define as structuration—does not depend upon the logic of an absolute totality to the universe, only that quantum “steps” can and do occur in their own particular nexus of continuous time and space.

Like the cyberneticists—Wiener, von Neumann, Beer, and so forth—Olson understood form as an extension of content, the consequences of which are both serious and numerable. Arguably the most important consequence, however, is that Newtonian reality took matter and energy as the two fundamental terms of totalization and, with the inclusion of information in Olson’s cosmology, we find that matter, energy, and information are the same kinds of things, all of which belong to the physically constructive process called reality. Put differently, information is attention articulated in communicable form because, without it, the classical description of the inertial universe remains intact and unassailable. If attention initiates structural transition—animation, in other words—then it is information that allows for such an initiation, since it is information that one processes through aesthesis.

If we reconsider the oft-cited passage from “The Kingfishers,” then we should also consider the oft-ignored couplet that leads to that gloss, as well as the passage that follows:

\(^4\) I specifically do not use classical terms such as “epistemology” for “structure of knowing” and “ontology” for “existential event” precisely because they not only indicate general metaphysical categories, but they also require the “-logy” suffix, which traces back to logos as a discursive term.
To be in different states without change
is not a possibility

We can be precise. The factors are
in the animal and / or the machine the factors are
communication and / or control, both involve
the message. And what is the message? The message is
a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time

is the birth of air, is
the birth of water, is
a state between
the origin and
the end, between
birth and the beginning of
another fetid nest

is change, presents
no more than itself

(TCP 90)

What should immediately interest us here is that the famous opening line, “What does not change / is the will to change,” itself undergoes a change in states, or rather a change in vector, which at once indicates an affective and directive transition. If differential states without change “is not a possibility,” then Olson suggests a moral imperative in the natural law of structuration, namely that a state or vector is particular to its phenomenal occasion of experience. “Into the same river no man steps twice,” Olson points out and, in doing so, he effectually postmodernizes Heraclitean flux through the introduction of cybernetic theory into the contexture of the writing. (TCP 89). And although it may seem obvious, it bears pointing out that Olson does not merely write about such theory. Rather, “The Kingfishers” enacts the instancy of informational content.

In The Human Use of Human Beings, Wiener gives a definition of information that is implicit in his earlier and more technical Cybernetics: “Information is the name for the content of what is exchanged with the outer world as we adjust to it, and make our
adjustment felt upon it. The process of receiving and of using information is the process of our adjusting to the contingencies of the outer environment, and of our living effectively within that environment” (17-18). Olsonic structure performs the emergency of conduct and control, each decision founded upon the unfolding of particular and quite non-linear informational events to which one attends with care and precision. Information is not only folded into the process of reality, but, more importantly, as the articulation of order information is evidenced in the instancy of rhythmic position. It is interesting to note that, in Last Lectures, Olson defines poetry as “the articulation of order” (25). With a change in the state of affairs, which again is both affective and directive, emerges a change in orientation and, as it turns out, such change “presents / no more than itself.”

That autopoiesis proves a recursive process should seem evident. For instance, each written word is itself so singularly a potentiated actual event that meaning or directivity depends upon how the overall written structure sequentially yet non-linearly unfolds in real time. “You shouldn’t know the words you use / until you use them,” Olson says, by which he suggests that an occasion of use activates inertial meaning (LL 20). As Wiener explains, he coined the term cybernetics from the Greek κυβερνήτης (kybernētēs), which means “steersman,” and one directs one’s own actions in particular environments of knowing based upon previously experienced events (11). Consider Olson’s gloss of Cybernetics in its original context:

The message is a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time—precisely what is called a time series by the statisticians. The prediction of the future of a message is done by some sort of operator on its past, whether this operator is realized by a scheme of mathematical computation, or by a mechanical or electrical apparatus. (8-9)
The prediction of messages occurs through feedback, the cybernetic term that opens the fourth section of “The Kingfishers”: “Not one death but many, / not accumulation but change, the feed-back proves, the feed-back is / the law” (TCP 89). Change in non-statistical or primordial vector states occurs through attention given over to the information received by the human organism and fed back into the system, a process that facilitates its own evental consequences.

Such consequences are unique. They do not play into the logic of repetition that reduces reality to a discursively repetitive clockwork mechanism. “In other words,” Wiener writes in The Human Use of Human Beings, “the organism is not like the clockwork monad of Leibnitz with its pre-established harmony with the universe, but actually seeks a new equilibrium with the universe and its future contingencies. Its present is unlike its past and its future unlike its present. In the living organism as in the universe itself, exact repetition is absolutely impossible” (48). Of course, this means that every lived experience of feeling—in other words, every vector—in the cosmos is unique. As we have seen, Stein makes this very point, in that “if anything is alive there is no such thing as repetition.” In Olson’s sense, the fact that “exact repetition is absolutely impossible” amounts to a natural law built into the moral structure of creative acts.

In light of our previous discussion of statistical reality, in fact, it is important to note that Olson decidedly omitted Wiener’s definition of event in “The Kingfishers.” As in quantum physics, events are phenomena, but Olson considers the representational and thus probabilistic vision of the universe obsolete. Consider Last Lectures:

We are on a new

a vertical axis –
the Primitive / Abstract

not the old –

the Classical / Representational (22)

If the “Primitive / Abstract” indicates the “primordial instancy of event,” then we cannot separate such instancy from affective and directive information, which, as I have argued, proves the very stuff of attention. Moreover, the particularity of information in the emergency of writing performance indicates that abstraction is a recursive process of particularization, rather than generally statistical. As evidence of animation, an actual event becomes for Olson that which ultimately determines organismal existence: “If we are determined / we are by the cruciality of events / So we can move from probability / (which is bullshit) / to possibility (which is dogma, which is belief)” (LL 17). To recall “Proprioception,” statistical reality is so much representational “bullshit.” It is not the real. It is an occasionally useful model of the real. The important point to consider, however, is that there is no information without the interactivity of sensation, or else one is left with inertial data—an unfelt quantity decoupled from any particularity of quality. In this sense, one can say that the primordial cosmos—the mesocosmos—senses itself. Needless to point out, “the cruciality of events” prove crucial precisely because, as distinctive experiences, they literally change the course of life. We are our emergencies.

In Olson’s work, what seems most interesting about an inversion of abstraction is the inclusion of information as a critical term in his cosmology. As Olson says in Last Lectures, one must “evaginate the Word” (9). Such evagation concerns “the exact opposite of the universal,” which does not entail a dialectical inversion of conceptual value places, as we might assume, but alternatively entails the particularization of
information as an abstract yet physical quantity of communicable form inextricable from quality. As an autopoietic system, the human organism—akin to the physical universe to which it is integral—continually processes information and, more important to consider, we find that such functionality amounts to abstraction as a process of particularization. Thus, we are not only our emergencies, but also abstract objects whose daily activities do not radically depend upon the support of a systematically totalized universe. The “vertical axis” of which Olson speaks indicates a “new” order of abstraction, an order of independence from the viciously paradoxical Platonic program that generally organized—and continues to organize—Western culture for more than two millennia.

Information subsists not in but as the communicable forms of interactivity that constitute particular environments of knowing.

Although Olson asserts that form is “the art of tensor” in his Black Mountain lecture on Whitehead, he most likely discovered the applicability of tensors in Hermann Weyl’s *The Philosophy of Mathematics and Natural Science*. Weyl explains that “the measuring of many physical observables (which are not scalar but vector or ‘tensor’ quantities, such as the metrical field) is possible only relative to a coordinate system thus arbitrarily introduced into the world” (144). On one hand, Weyl points out the problematic of coordination reduced to an arbitrary conceptual system of symbols. Moreover, Weyl articulates real vector or tensor quantities that are reduced to representations. The distinction Weyl makes between physical quantities and the mode of measurement should interest us here, as Olson himself understood that statistical reality was, rightly speaking, not reality at all but a representation or arbitrarily symbolized approximation of reality. As Weyl uses them as homologous terms, the process of reality
is vector and tensor, which suggests that there are consistent modulations in the interactive forms that we know as information. Although mathematics and physics tend to inflect the term “tensor” with particular meanings and uses in different contexts, the important point is that tensors are generally considered geometrical objects that exist independently of any frame of reference or representative symbol. There is no frame. If form is the art of tensor, then it is also, concomitantly, the art of real time state changes in-and-of a given metrical field. The empirical geometry of space, in other words, is dynamic. Physicists term the geometrical dynamism of state changes background-independent.

In stating his assumptions at the outset of Process and Reality, Whitehead notes that “it is presupposed that no entity can be conceived in complete abstraction from the system of the universe, and that it is the business of speculative philosophy to exhibit this truth. This character is its coherence” (3). Of course, Whitehead merely reiterates an assumption inherited from Platonic philosophy and, it should go without saying, neither this “truth,” nor, in turn, such systematic “coherence” are exhibited by any philosophy. As tensor forms, Olson’s writings achieve an order of abstraction that escape any general system of the universe—any fixed and absolute background—for they take affectivity and directivity not as representational concepts, but rather as radically phenomenal events in-and-of the transformative metrical field of our spatiotemporal world. The human organism, like the processes of writing or the processes of an ecosphere unfolding, proves the art of tensor as well. If form is never more than the extension of content, then rhythmical changes indicative of affective states extend from the interactivity of effective
information. Felt through aesthesis, such rhythmical changes inform the particularity of knowing the real. Being does event.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Henderson, Linda Dalrymple. *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in


Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *The Leibniz-Artaud Correspondence.* Ed. and trans. H.T.


Watten, Barrett. The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Politics.


