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The Clarity of the Modern: Or, the Ambiguities of Henry James and Wallace Stevens.

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THE CLARITY OF THE MODERN:
OR, THE AMBIGUITIES OF HENRY JAMES AND
WALLACE STEVENS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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by

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Preface

Just at the end of the nineteenth century, before “modernism” proper, Thomas Hardy published his short poem “Neutral Tones” (1898). It begins:

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
--They had fallen from an ash, and were gray. (13)

The poem enacts the title; whites and grays predominate--we imagine that even the “smile on your mouth” would be bluish-gray. So too, the poem’s own tone goes more towards neutral, resolute puzzlement than felt elegy. Life and death bleed into each other indistinctly: that smile was “the deadest thing / Alive enough to have strength to die. . . .” The gray, ambiguous neutrality is broken only by the last stanza— or is it?:

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,
And a pond edged with grayish leaves. (13)

The moment of clarity, the sharp insight about love that allows a memory to come to form, only gives back the same vague scene, and all resolves into the same dull tones--“a pond edged with grayish leaves.” The “grayish” is particularly flattening, as if even to predicate “gray” of the scene were to be too lucid, too expressive. Yet for all this, there is a steely, bright clearness to the poem, a “keen lesson” that is present in much modernist literature.
This dissertation attempts to show how Romanticism and modernism enact the dialectic between clarity and ambiguity. It started in an attempt to find a convenient way to frame some issues in philosophy and literature. The admittedly artificial opposition “clarity/ambiguity” was chosen to indicate a spectrum that seemed to appear in both literary texts and theory, both aesthetics and ethics, ontology and epistemology. Further readings soon indicated that perhaps these terms were not so artificial and reductionist as they first appeared. They each had a linguistic history and a certain small body of critical commentary; each had a life in the history of ideas. The ancients and medievals were aware of and commented on them; the American pragmatists expressed interest in ambiguity or “vagueness” in favor of its contrary clarity. What is more important, these terms—or things—appeared in literature, and it is here that this study focuses.

Chapter I traces a historical overview of the terms from Plato to Kant. Chapter II takes up the Romantic era, when the terms clarity and ambiguity are transvalued. Chapter III describes the modernist reaction to this transferal. This historical overview will be as responsible as possible within the author’s limitations. While it is admirable to preserve the singular qualities that inhere in each time’s language, and verboten to efface distinctions for the sake of one’s argument, history comes to us already effaced and re-imprinted. It

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would be pointless for me to outline a history of these terms if I thought there were no connections among their various incarnations. So when I do make connections, I endeavor to draw them loosely, and with the knowledge that while I argue that these connections are not accidental, they are certainly conventional and contingent.

Chapter IV examines Henry James' *The Ambassadors* in terms of how it enacts a tragicomedy of vagueness. Chapter V investigates Wallace Stevens' poems to determine what an aesthetics of clarity can mean in an age of a modern reality of decreation, and a short conclusion speculates on these possibilities of clarity.
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Abstract

Clarity, in all its various guises, was before the advent of Romanticism looked upon as an unquestioned focus of attention and irrefutable goal of human endeavor. Conversely, ambiguity was seen negatively: it was in language an obstacle to communication; in ethics, an indecisiveness failing action; and in ontology and aesthetics, a slovenly disorder. With Romanticism, this basic consensus regarding these terms ends. No longer an expression of censure, ambiguity is imagined as a liberatory force. Clarity, if attainable at all, is dismissed as mere rigidity. The works of Americans Henry James and Wallace Stevens embody and enact this tension and transferal between ambiguity and clarity to a singular degree. Henry James's *The Ambassadors* instances a tragicomedy of vagueness, while Wallace Stevens’ lyrics reimagine and reinstate clarity in a modernist age of decreation.
Chapter I. "Resolve me of all ambiguities"

Introduction

When in the Republic Book VII Socrates tells Glaucon and his audience "let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened," he gives the West both its main purpose and its governing metaphor (376). The drama of the "Myth of the Cave" seems to remain our drama. On one level, what has been thought of as the "enlightenment project” has been with us from the beginning, and in fact, forms one of the grounding metaphors, one of the foundation myths of what we have come to call the West. One might even observe that the persistence of this singular action of moving from darkness to light--of "enlightenment"--is sufficiently pervasive in our intellectual history, so self-evident as a pursuit, so central to human affairs, as to be completely irrelevant.

Yet what the "enlightenment project" uncovers is far from simple or even consistent, as poststructuralist criticism has indicated. Socrates’ "know thyself" falls as self becomes sub-ject; the divine as transcendent signifier is largely irrelevant to discourse; the very notion of "rationalism" itself is critiqued. What it means to lead a "life of the mind" is questioned, and the answers lend themselves to parody. And yet, notwithstanding the inevitable poststructuralist rejoinder and even a biblical admonition (does not St. Paul say we
see "through a glass darkly"?), the mind casts about in naïve hope of some sort of epistemological advance. It is this basic premise that informs my pursuit, that humans do not just want to know (classical) or to be enlightened (modern) but wish to fix their gaze on an object of clarity. The clarification of the moment, the time, the predicament, is the perennial and often painful object of desire.

**Clarification**

The notion of clarification itself has a rich and diverse critical history. As I shall show, it asserts itself first in antiquity as a part of dramatic structure (*catharsis*); in the middle ages as an element of beauty (*claritas*); later as an epistemological criterion (René Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas"); bound up in the name of a whole historical period ("The Enlightenment," in German "Aufklärung"); and lastly in the localized event of modernist "insight" (James Joyce’s "epiphany").

If these various "events" of "clarity" do not on first glance share a great deal of inner cohesion, our response to them has: for "clarity" as a concept has been universally approved, taken as a term of value, appropriated, valorized, and legitimized. And where "clarity" appears, the complementary concept of "ambiguity" also appears in tandem as a spoken--and sometimes unspoken--interlocutor. But if clarity has been accorded a certain privileged status, ambiguity has been
shunned, though accepted as a perhaps dissatisfying but unavoidable end-point.

But perhaps this neat dichotomy is somewhat of an oversimplification, and partakes in what Michael Levenson calls "the modernist urge toward dualistic opposition" (ix). For in Romanticism and modernity we witness something of a shift in perspective in both terms, and in this shift we arrive at the crux of the present analysis: the attempt to show, using Wallace Stevens and Henry James as two axes, that one of modernism's "projects" was to re-evaluate, even transvalue, both the idea of clarity and ambiguity, and that in this transvaluation lies embedded one of the central tenets of modernist aesthetics. Both Stevens and James (as tentatively emblematic of Romantics and moderns taken as a whole) manifest a contradictory impulse at once to clarify and to render problematic what may be termed an epistemology of aesthetics.

But to see how the terms of this opposition "clarity/ambiguity" shift in the Romantic era and modernity, it is necessary first to get a sense of how they have been used in history, to discover the variable shifts in meanings that the terms have undergone. This first chapter will survey some of the most salient characteristics through a selective history, instances that will help focus the discussion on how literary modernism ultimately employs these terms. The material covered in this chapter will include both general themes
and specific texts; the arrangement will be chronological, but will not be—at least primarily—a study of sources and influences. Therefore, though clarity and ambiguity appear in the disciplines of philosophy, history, and literature, here the emphasis will center in the end (though perhaps not in the beginning) on the relationship clarity and ambiguity have in the generation of an overall aesthetic.

In brief, this dissertation will give a history of the ideas of clarity and ambiguity; see how they are transvalued, so that ambiguity comes to define the literary in twentieth century criticism; read Stevens and James in terms of how they enact this debate; and finally ask what kind of clarity the aesthetic affords, and what kind of role the critic plays in rendering "the literary" clear.

Catharsis as Clarification

One of the foundation myths for Western philosophy is Plato's "Myth of the Cave," which firmly establishes the didactic power of the action of clarification. For Socrates,¹ to gain insight, to become enlightened, is at once simple and difficult, for the source of darkness is materiality. The body in particular, because it is material, is a fundamental epistemological obstacle for

¹ That is, Socrates especially of the Republic Book VII, the Phaedo, and Crito. I prescind here from any discussion of Platonic influence on Socratic thought, or vice versa, and use "Platonic" and "Socratic" interchangeably.
Socrates. The individual soul (psyche) therefore requires a dying to the world in order to achieve insight. This dying to the world is in the Phaedo called catharsis, and is the process of stripping away, of clarifying, those things which encumber the soul. Once freed from earthly distractions and concerns, the soul can ascend (or return) to partake of those things with which it has the most affinity, the ideas, or forms.

Plato's most famous student of course rejects Socrates' disdain for the body and the material world. Aristotle's meditation on friendship in the Ethics, the opening of the Politics ("Man is by nature a political animal" [1253a1]), his affinity for classification in natural science (On the Parts of Animals) all point to a concern for the workings of the world and culture lacking in Socrates. It is for this reason—in addition to their more obvious disagreements—that for an understanding of poetry Aristotle has been thought friendlier, and ultimately more authoritative, than Socrates.

It is perhaps appropriate then that the present discussion begins in the Poetics and particularly in its selection of Oedipus Rex as the stable foundation for the interpretation of all literature. The Poetics shows most vividly how one cultural institution, the Greek drama

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2 There is too a "constructivist" strain in Aristotle lacking in Socrates, one that accounts for his stressing the importance of cultural institutions (of education, for example) precisely because they are not a priori, but contingent and fragile. See Ethics Bk. I, Ch. 3-4.
played in Athenian theater, effects learning through art, through cathartic clarification.

*Catharsis* is usually translated as "purgation" (or "cleansing," or "release"). The word is full of resonance, emphasizing a tactile, visceral quality altogether characteristic of Aristotle. On one hand it seems oddly emphasized as a term, conveying little about the ostensible subject of the *Poetics*: the structure of drama. Rather, it seems to tell us about psychological events in the audience (in what is perhaps the first critical instance of a reader-response theory). It is for this reason (to redress the apparent misplacement of emphasis on the term) that Leon Golden writes that the one way of bringing the emphasis back to the internal workings of drama is to translate *catharsis* as "intellectual clarification." For this Golden claims etymological justification, and more importantly, structural necessity: for throughout the *Poetics* *catharsis* is the stated goal of tragedy, the imitation of an action that leads to learning.

This shift in emphasis from audience response to overall formational effect has considerable implication. Catharsis as clarification ties *mimesis* to the "final cause of tragedy" (Golden 146). The clarifying ability of art implicit in Aristotle's conception of *mimesis* is brought into relief when contrasted with the Platonic signification of the same term. John Jones is correct in
his assessment (in his On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy) that at the heart of the Platonic/Aristotelian disagreement regarding art is the issue of representation, an equivocation regarding mimesis. For Socrates (for example in Republic Book X), because artistic renderings are copies of things in the material world, which are in turn copies of the forms, they are twice-removed. This repetition does not clarify, but like a photocopy, only becomes duller the further it is removed from its original, its arché, the ideas. When there is mimesis occurring over time there is an inevitable deflection, a dulling of the representative quality of the image. For Socrates, artistic rendering is a movement opposite the enlightening ascent from the cave.

Aristotle can accept a role for artistic rendering—mimesis—because he rejects the ontological priority of the forms. While for Plato they are the fullest being, for Aristotle, they lack the actuality (energeia) that all "real" things should possess. In Jones's words, Aristotelian mimesis helps to see not the "heaven of real forms," but the "type," the "principle of indwelling form" in the real world (23). However, while Jones sees mimesis as the disjunctive between Plato and Aristotle on art, Golden claims that even Plato admits a role for mimesis in learning, in cathartic clarification. When the prisoner in the Myth of the Cave is led out, he is blinded by the sun, and must see the reflections and copies of things
before he can see the sun, the good itself. The images, 
the reflections of things aid him in seeing the thing 
itself. For Golden there seems little difference between 
mimesis in this type of learning and mimesis in art. 

Aristotle's rubric of tragedy emphasizes the 
intellectual enjoyment that one gets from seeing the forms 
of an action (praxis) revealed or clarified:

Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness 
is that in contemplating it they find 
themselves learning or inferring, and saying 
perhaps, "Ah, that is he." (4.5)

As Jones points out, it is not the character\(^3\) that 
Aristotle stresses; such concern with the "hero" is a 
personalistic Romantic importation. Nor is it the 
audience that undergoes catharsis. Rather, because the 
Poetics is clearly about dramatic structure, it must be 
the action of the drama that gets clarified, as the 
mimesis, the imitation, reveals the type in the 
particulars: for Plato, mimesis blurs; for Aristotle, 
mimesis clarifies.

Clari**f**ication in Oedipus Rex

The translation of catharsis as clarification makes 
sense in both the structure of the Poetics and in its 
relationship to both Platonic and Aristotelian 
configurations of mimesis. But this clarification of the 
subject forces a larger issue to the fore: the troubling 
presence of the ambiguous object concretized in the tragic

\(^3\) "... there is no evidence—not a shred—that Aristotle 
entertained the concept of the tragic hero . . . ." (13).
result. The dramatic clarification is necessary because the Greeks were aware of the tragic potential of ambiguity. The runic, the oracular, the occult holds a riddling fear, most obviously in Aristotle's main example, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The play at base is about Oedipus' too-public unfolding of the ambiguous Pythian oracle's true meaning.

Thebes lies under a plague, but Oedipus the king is confident in his ability to discover a cure for the city's woe. He had done so before, outwitting the riddle of the Sphinx. In the opening lines he shows himself sure of his political and epistemological positions. But further: Bernard Knox and others have pointed out that Oedipus takes for himself semi-divine attributes (159). It is to him, not directly to oracles that the supplicants come. Oedipus certainly accords himself a sort of divination when he not only insists that "I'm willing to give all / that you may need" (line 11), but also that "I have known the story before you told it / only too well" (59). In time, the play's action comes full circle to show Oedipus that he did not know as much as he thought he knew; in fact he finally sees that he is the referent of the "pollution grown ingrained in our land" and "that dead man's [Laius's] murderers" (97, 107). After blinding himself, Oedipus sees that his own curse was self-referential: "To this guilt I bore witness against myself" (1384).
To translate *catharsis* as clarification has of course much justification in the play’s vision/blindness imagery. Yet more importantly, the tragedy of Oedipus is clarifying in a particular way; it is the making clear to the characters and the audience what the gods want. It makes Oedipus’ usurpation of semi-divine stature more ironic; but here we find one of the many ironies of the play: why is what the gods want unclear? As a matter of fact, when Creon returns directly from the oracle he emphasizes twice within ten lines that what the gods say is clear:

King Phoebus in plain words commanded us to drive out a pollution from our land. . . . (97-98)

The God commanded clearly: let some one punish with force this dead man’s murderers. (106-107)

But of course this is not clear at all, for at least two reasons. Firstly, why the disjunctive? Why does it command either to drive/or to expiate by blood? Does Thebes (i.e., Oedipus) get to choose? Secondly, why not specify the pollution/murderer(s)? They could refer to “anyone” (just as the “some one” of line 106 *most likely* means the ruler of the city, Oedipus). Despite Creon’s insistence, the oracular pronouncements are vague by nature; if we are to believe the chorus, even the prophet

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4 The Greek words here imply that the oracle’s pronouncements are self-evident: “plain” is related to *ephanoi*, to show forth; “clearly” is related to *episteme*, to know.
Tieresias can get them wrong: "I know that what Lord Tieresias / sees, is most often what the Lord Apollo / sees" (284-285, emphasis added). And Creon, more politic if not less reaching than Oedipus, will take no chances when the favor of the gods is at stake. After the blinding, though Oedipus begs for exile (in fulfillment of the original oracular pronouncement), Creon demurs:

*Creon:* Be sure, I would have done this had not I wished first of all to learn from the God the course of action I should follow.

*Oedipus:* But his word has been quite clear to let the parricide, the sinner, die.⁵

*Creon:* Yes, that indeed was said. But in the present need we had best discover what we should do. (1438-1443)

In addition to being a good actor in the drama, Creon has been a good spectator. He has no interest in repeating through his own *mimesis* Oedipus' fate. Oedipus has learned painfully "what [he] should do"; Creon obviously hopes that the oracular pronouncement to come will be more clear about what he is supposed to do.

As Knox and others have pointed out, by showing that the ultimate authority is in the end vague, Sophocles protects the numinous nature of the gods from the rationalism of the incestuous Oedipus and Jocasta. (And further, as both Eric Havelock and Knox have pointed out, this new spirit attends the systematization of philosophic thought through the onset of literacy.) What the tragedy

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⁵ The Greek word here for "clear" is *edelothe,* to be manifest, again emphasizing self-evidence that in hindsight is surely ironic.
clarifies is the action of a life lived under the auspices of gods who are not clear on what they want, but who are clear on what they will. In the case of Oedipus Rex, they will the destruction of a man through his hamartia, where that term means less moral failure than intellectual misprision.

Aristotle’s use of Oedipus Rex implies that the play has gained a normative stature. In a sense, then, this movement from ambiguity to clarification appears to be the Ur-plot of all drama. One could object that this is already covered in the Aristotelian terminology of complication/resolution (Poetics Ch. 13). However, the terms are not identical, for these latter refer more specifically to the play’s internal dynamics; their status remains as a practical concern. The movement from ambiguity to clarification covers much more ground, and refers not to the inner workings of the play but to the outer workings of characters’ situation in respect to the cosmos.

The Stoics on Ambiguity in Language

"Ambiguity" has a Greek origin (αμφίβολος), from amphi + blema (to throw or cast in two ways), and came into English most likely through the Latin ambi + agere (to drive in two directions); it can also mean “encompassing”; “attacked on all sides”; “double-pointed”; “doubtful” (Liddell and Scott’s Greek—English Lexicon). Catherine Atherton remarks that Aristotle “seems to be the earliest
extant author to use 'ambiguity' in the narrow linguistic sense" (15). For example, in the Rhetoric, Aristotle notes that some laws need interpretation: "Or if a law is ambiguous, we shall turn it about and consider which construction best fits the interest of justice or utility, and then follow that way of looking at it" (1375b.10). In the Poetics, he explains ambiguity as one instance among several "critical difficulties" (Ch. 25). These examples and others Aristotle points out have a strictly linguistic meaning and are scattered throughout his works. Though Aristotle is aware of ambiguity, he does not present a systematic taxonomy. That project is left for the Stoics.

The ancients were aware of the distinction between a strict linguistic use of the term and the more "common-language" use of it, between an ambiguous term and, say, an ambiguous situation. Their interest in ambiguity was also a "practical" concern: for example, in rhetoric, in constructing sound arguments, persuading, etc. The Stoic formulation of a definition is typical in bringing these two concerns—linguistic and practical—together. The notion of "practical" must, writes Atherton, be widened to include—even primarily to mean—the ethical life. The Stoics share this linguistic concern, but their facility

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6 The example he gives is interesting: for laws to work they must be univocal. The possibility of multiple voices is precisely what Aristotle abhors in democracy, which he calls the worst form of government (Política Bk. 4. 4).
for system and desire for an independent, coherent thought
gave special importance to ambiguity and its role in the
life of the whole person. Atherton explains:

One of the central tenets of Stoic philosophy
is that the universe is a divine, rational and
coherent ordering. The Stoic god, who is also
providence and fate, is the immanent active
element in this ordering. . . . (51)

Our diminished understanding of the “Stoic” makes it
synonymous with “ascetic,” but it is above all a measured
and rational—not merely discomfited—life. And although
Stoic ethics are governed by rational principles, one’s
participation is hardly self-evident: “the path to virtue
is difficult, none the less, and exhaustive philosophical
training seems to be necessary” (52). This is because of
the existence of ambiguity:

If the information on which assent must be
grounded is insufficient, unclear, irrelevant,
or otherwise unsatisfactory, the danger arises
that a poor decision may be made. (56)

Such decisions of course affect one’s fortunes for good or
ill. Ambiguity is the enemy of ethical life and fortune’s
favor. The actual Stoic definition of ambiguity seems
artificially narrow:

Ambiguity is an utterance signifying two or
even more pragmata, linguistically, strictly,
and in the same usage so that several pragmata
are understood simultaneously in relation to
the utterance. . . . (135)

This narrowness of definition may appear at odds with the
importance of ambiguity’s role. The Stoic definition
exhibits both a faith in the mind’s capacity to encompass
reality and a realization of the potential for tragedy.
One must be attuned to the world precisely because it is similar to, and therefore open to mind; not to do so is to invite tragedy. That is why it is important to note, retrospectively, the lack of ethical tone in *hamartia*; it is more miscalculation, error, or frailty than "sin."

Preserving its non-moral character allows one to see the tragic potential in the failure to be correctly seated in a world that is ordered toward rational stability and connectedness. Again, Atherton writes:

> What distinguishes [the Stoic] conception of the cosmos is its pervasive, radical rationality: the reason that the world is knowable to any degree by the human mind is precisely that it too is by nature rational.

(404)

The Stoic definition of ambiguity is important for at least two reasons. It represents how the Greeks typically viewed their situation in the cosmos. Individuated human minds were related to a wider structure that remained intelligible despite what the gods will. In addition, it shows the important relation between linguistic experience and ethical life. It is because ethics and rhetoric are related to a reasonable *cosmos* that the elimination of linguistic ambiguity is paramount for the ethical stability that was the goal of Stoic philosophy.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* gives a representative instance of the classical attitude toward the danger of ambiguity. Agamemnon, home from the Trojan war, is killed by his wife Clytaemnestra as he bathes. Soon after, she triumphantly describes the scene to the chorus:
Thus have I wrought the deed—deny it I will not. Round him, like as to catch a haul of fish, I cast a net impassable—a fatal wealth of robe—so that he should neither escape nor ward off doom. (123)

The Greek word “casting-net” (αμφιβληστρον) is etymologically related to “ambiguity” (αμφιβολος): to be surrounded by a deadly garment, to be attacked on both sides, to be in doubt, driven in two ways, are all related. The dangers inherent in ambiguity would not have been lost on the audience. Ambiguity, like a casting-net, can “catch one up,” and “bring doom” to one’s ethical life.  

Augustine on Interpretative Abundance

Aristotelian and Stoic treatments of ambiguity were at core motivated by the forming of logically coherent and rhetorically persuasive arguments and countering others’ arguments. If one could interpret “rational discourse” (logos) (Atherton 41) so as to eliminate ambiguity, one could ultimately lead a rational and therefore ethical life. This discursive (internal to discourse) need was pressed into service as an aid in directing one’s life. With the spread of the Christian Church, a slightly revised version of this need was foregrounded: the interpreting of Logos, the word of God. We have already seen this function (the interpretation of divine word) in use as Oedipus and Creon interpret the oracles of Delphi.

7 J. P. Vernant’s essay on Oedipus Rex, “Ambiguity and Reversal,” though mentioning in passing Clytaemnestra’s trap, seems to miss this etymological connection (104ff).
Further, the interpretation of the word of God intensifies in the rabbinical tradition, though the midrash is a looser, more suggestive and imaginative exposition. But with the framing of the Bible—"the book of books"—interpretation takes on a preeminence it had not had previously. Exegetical energy is narrowed to one written text that is self-contained, all-encompassing, both alpha and omega. All history is collapsed in its narrative structure. It begins with the beginning, Genesis, and ends with the end, Apocalypse; it was therefore end-stopped, and will not be added to. Interpretation therefore self-consciously takes on heightened importance once it finds this centering text.

Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* was written as a handbook of how to interpret scripture. In codifying the interpretive process, it forms a middle way between the traditional rabbinical process of midrash and the Stoic system. It is perhaps because he is influenced by both Athens and Jerusalem, Hellenistic systematization and Hebraic midrash, that Augustine sees no necessary peril in multiplicity of meanings. "When, however, from a single passage in the Scripture not one but two or more meanings are elicited . . . there is no danger . . ." (3.27.38).

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8 Jacob Neusner writes in *The Midrash* that mere exegesis is not the goal of midrash: rather, reading was performative, "defined by a faith under construction and subject to articulation" (xi).

9 See John D. Schaeffer's "The Case of Book 4 of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*.
For both Aristotle and the Stoics, ambiguity leads to error in the form of fallacy or hamartia. For Augustine, ambiguity in the Scriptures gets subsumed into a systematic that is governed by caritas and transformed into a signal of divine grace:

For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways which other no less divine witnesses approve? (3.27.38)

Aristotle was aware of course of "metaphor," as is evident in other works. Already in his Poetics he addresses the causes of "ambiguity" in drama, but he passes over these phenomena without passing judgment on their potential literary value. Clearly, in Augustine there is the appearance of something new. Multiplicity of meaning is taken to be a sign of generosity and abundance rather than dangerous equivocation. Yet immediately a problem arises: in the absence of strict meaning, what actually governs interpretation? Augustine gives a determining criterion for scriptural exegesis:

Therefore in the consideration of figurative expressions a rule such as this will serve, that what is read should be subjugated to diligent scrutiny until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced. (3.15.23)

That is, in deciding which interpretation is the preferred one, one ought to have an eye to charity. It would be a mistake to take "charity" too lightly, and ascribe too little importance to Augustine's use of the term. For him it was central. Augustine uses caritas to describe the
entire network of relations that tie a person to an ordo amoris, an order of love.\textsuperscript{10} Reading is tied to the divine in at least two ways: ambiguity is seen as a sign of God’s generosity, and interpretation requires the exercise of charity. This reign of charity exists always in God, but is simultaneously brought about by the work of interpretation, the individual interaction with the word, an interaction that remains open to the interposition of additional meaning from outside of the interpretive rubric, from the reign of charity.

**Thomas Aquinas: Onto/aesthetic Clarity**

So far, ambiguity and clarity have operated in imperfect opposition to each other, where the one seems best defined as the absence of the other. Perhaps now however, some further delimitations can be put forward. Augustine re-evaluates ambiguity as an abundance of meanings which, instead of indicating human pitfalls, points to divine generosity. There is here some accordance in Augustine with Sophoclean ambiguity, for in *Oedipus Rex* the oracles display a multiplicity of meanings. Ambiguity in both texts at some level is associated with the mystery of the divine.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Augustine’s massive *City of God* can be seen as an attempt to render an explanation of history in terms of caritas.

\textsuperscript{11} Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* describes this cross-cultural notion of the “wholly other,” indefinable aspect of the divine as the “numinous.” Sophoclean and Augustinian ambiguity also emphasizes the immanent aspects of the numinous.
Two entangled yet distinguishable meanings of clarity take shape. To summarize, clarification is used as a governing metaphor to describe the process that has been the goal of Western intellectual life; this epistemological movement has been tied since Plato to the soul's ascendancy (which in the Phaedo is called catharsis), and therefore has ethical and theological ramifications. A second more specific meaning goes in the direction of aesthetics. As the term catharsis hints, and as clarity's status as a property of language in opposition to ambiguity indicates, this second meaning refers to clarity as associated with beauty. Augustine hints at the pleasure of the text as it unfolds its meaning and moves from figurative ambiguity to clarity: "The more these things seem obscured by figurative words, the sweeter they become when explained" (4.7.15). And yet clarity in this second sense takes ambiguity as a dialectical "other" rather than as merely the absence of "itself." Figurative ambiguity takes on significance as an interlocutor with clarity.

This second orientation of clarity towards aesthetics finds perhaps its fullest explication in Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 A.D.). The word claritas was used in ancient Rome variously to describe an element of good rhetoric, or earthly renown, or bright color. In fact, the term had some currency in medieval philosophy and theology, but was not the subject of much attention until
Thomas Aquinas. According to Umberto Eco, the non-existence of systematic investigations of this and similar aesthetic terms indicates not their irrelevance, but their omnipresence: "It was a natural and everyday fact of life that the world was conceived of aesthetically." For Aquinas himself, "it was something spontaneous, effortless and habitual" (Aquinas 116). This explains both the lack of systematic analysis and the vagueness of the word as it appears in medieval thought. There were a variety of meanings attached to claritas in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, some carried over from classical Rome: Eco delimits four types of clarity:

(1) light and physical color; (2) the light of reason that makes things known, lumen manifestans; (3) the shining forth of earthly renown; (4) the celestial glory of the glorified bodies of the blessed, Christ's transfigured body, and the objects when they are renewed at the end of time. (104)\textsuperscript{12}

Clarity before Aquinas shows itself to be largely in line with Platonic and Stoic thought regarding divine emanation. Conversely, clarity sometimes quite simply is associated with light and color. This is by no means a superficial or literalistic understanding: Eco offers the Gothic cathedral's stained glass as a typical expression of the role clarity plays in the aesthetic of the time--it marked off how important color was for an understanding of divine space. Similarly, in The Mind's Journey to God,

\textsuperscript{12} These distinctions follow the typical medieval fourfold level of interpretation: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, the anagogical.
Bonaventure associates light closely with divine emanation. Elsewhere, clarity is treated as the light emanating from a certain body's inherent ratio, proportion or form.\textsuperscript{13} Finally this fourth meaning ties clarity to apocalyptic renewal in the sense of ultimate clarification in judgment.

What concerns us here is how Aquinas narrows these broad materialistic and ontological meanings of clarity. Eco describes Aquinas's modification:

\begin{quote}
In thirteenth-century light metaphysics, clarity was not just an aesthetic concept, but a constitutive principle of reality. For Aquinas, by contrast, clarity had nothing to do with the objective structure of being or creation: he restricted its significance to the problem of beauty. (112)
\end{quote}

One of the features of Greek thought that Aquinas inherits and assumes is Aristotle's matter/form distinction. Original material, "prime matter," is shaped by substantial form. Beauty is the quality of "resplendence," the object when it has fulfilled its nature. This much of the notion of the beautiful is inherent in thought previous to Thomas. What Aquinas adds, however, is a crucial reference to the knowing subject. The beauty of an object's form discloses itself as clarity only in the presence of a perceiver. When a beautiful object is confronted by a viewer, Eco explains,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{13} Ratio and forma are often synonyms in scholasticism. Eco's gloss of ratio: "an almost untranslatable word, some of whose meanings are: reason; . . . intelligibility; definition; form; essence; . . . " (Aquinas 280).
\end{quote}
there is "a new and essential type of proportion, this time between the knowing subject and the object" (118). Eco arrives at a definition gleaned from Thomas's writings: "Clarity is the fundamental communicability of form which is made actual in relation to someone's looking at or seeing of the object" (119). Thomas's synthesis of the Hellenic philosophy and Christian doctrines narrows his implicit understanding of "clarity" such that two elements are encompassed here. His description of clarity is steeped in the tactile, lived experience of medieval life—as seen in the subject-relatedness of the aesthetic presentation (visio). But it is also perfectly rational in that it is a vision of the ratio of a thing. His work in this area is important here, for it draws together both the rationality of the formal system and the everyday experience embedded in medieval theories of color. To quote Eco once more: "The rationality that belongs to every form is the light which manifests itself to aesthetic seeing" (119).

Aquinas's formulation of clarity unifies two divergent meanings of the term: clarity as an ultimately rational perception of form and clarity as aesthetic moment. This interpenetration, tenuous as it is, incorporates a fundamental paradox. On the one hand clarity is radically ontological; it is a quality of the object's internal structure, in the object over against the knowing self. On the other hand, it requires for its
full expression a relationship to the self. In other words, the aesthetic visio of the form co-generates clarity. Clarity is ordained, ordered, and presented exclusively to the self. This formulation of the question—that there exists a dynamic interaction between subject and object in the aesthetic vision—is the crucial point prior to the ontological grounding of the aesthetic experience: form.

**Ockham and the Extension of the Proper Name**

For Thomas then, clarity was the aesthetic vision of an object judged to be beautiful. Clarity in turn was an element of, and dependent on, form. This description was subject to a contemporary debate concerning the ontological status of those forms. If a Platonic position were held, where an ideal “blueprint” determines individual actually existing things, then grouping objects based on similarity to that ideal would be easy enough. If however there were no ideal, but only actually existing things whose form could not be related to any universal standard, grouping the objects would be more difficult, if not impossible. The debate had two sides: the realists, who argued for the “real” existence of universal forms, and the nominalists, who denied any extra-mental existence to the forms.

William of Ockham (1285-1349) argued the nominalist position against the “realism” of Duns Scotus. It is the relationship between the one and the many that causes
Ockham the greatest problem: how could a substantial being be predicated of an (in principle) infinite number of existing objects? It is impossible: therefore "A universal is not a thing outside the mind" (35). Rather, the universal is a mental construct, a "thought-object"; "The case would be similar . . . to the activity of an artist" who sees likenesses and creates a picture (41). That is, the mind sees in particular things vague similarities, not self-identical, communicable forms. Things cannot share "natures"; when universals of natures exist, they exist not really, but only formally in the mind.

The consequence of Ockham's nominalism is quite revolutionary: all classifications become based on perceived likeness. Therefore, all names become proper names. When names become unmotivated, they become dependent on the will of the namer. In this system the "cause" of ambiguity is greatly furthered, for if there is no ground for naming, then the world becomes systematically atomized. With no clear criteria by which to group objects, each object becomes in effect like a new-born, waiting to be addressed by a freely choosing addresser. Power shifts from the named to the namer, from the creation to the name-creator. The nominalist position, therefore, while ostensibly motivated by the desire to preserve the freedom of God's will, actually abrogates to the individual psyche the power to address
creation. The individual person is more highly contrasted to and confronted with creation.

That is, the metaphysical basis for this fundamental interaction with the world—naming—becomes radically undercut. For Aquinas and previous medievals, seeing the form was a tacit act. As noted for Aquinas, seeing the form under the species of the beautiful was to see its claritas. With Ockham’s emphasis on the particularity of form, objects become increasingly discrete and disconnected from other objects. Form is no longer in concordance with ideas in the Platonic sense, or even with natura, as it had been in Aquinas’s Aristotelianism.
There is here a strange resurgence of Adam’s prelapsarian responsibility to name, with the added ambiguity that there can be no groupings, only discrete animals, each one awaiting its own proper name. The proper name supplants form.

Drawing a Clear Line with Descartes

For much of pre-nominalist philosophy the universal had been the guarantor of clarity; at some level, there was existence “as such,” free from the ambiguities of actual spatio-temporal existence. For Socrates and the Platonists, clarity presupposed a realm of ideas; for Scholastics like Aquinas, clarity inhered in forms of individual existing things. The nominalist challenge to both Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics signaled the evacuation of the grounds of clarity. With this
development, as Louis Dupré writes in *Passage to Modernity*, "Obviously, the trust in the essentially rational quality of nature that had supported traditional epistemology, has collapsed" (40).

René Descartes confronts this challenge to philosophy by taking clarity quite far away from its medieval formulations as an aspect of all being. For Descartes, clarity becomes a criterion of certain knowledge. This movement was prepared for by the skepticism of Ockham which made the form of a thing singular and discrete as opposed to representative and participatory. Yet its radicality is easy to miss, for the *cogito* in a sense contains nothing new. The history of philosophy contains many such arguments against skepticism based on the immediate grasp of an indubitable state of affairs. Thus it often seems that Descartes is pilloried for making the same distinction and fighting the same skepticism that Augustine had more than one thousand years earlier. Augustine’s arguments for certain knowledge from his *Contra Academicos* rely on disjunctive (one can be certain one exists or not) or on appearance-quality ("There is no deception"; "I know this appears white to me" [3.26]). Descartes’ formulation from the second Meditation is quite different; it depends on the supposition of a "highly powerful, and most cunning deceiver" from whom the only safe haven is "*Ego sum, ego existo*"; it is "necessarily true, so long as it is uttered..."
by me or conceived by my mind" (17). To see how these quests for certain knowledge are distinct, it must be seen how they go through the dismissal of form in Ockham. When form as a criterion of grouping is voided, then there arises a world whose sole identifying feature is the proper—and therefore unmotivated—name generated by the subject.

The ratio of a thing no longer discloses itself in concordance with the human mind as it had with the Stoics, for example, or in Aquinas' aesthetics. Rather, because ratio as form inheres only in highly individualized objects which can only be signified in an unmotivated fashion, anything over against the self was open to doubt by that same self. That is, clarity as an aspect of an object—as it is clearly for both neo-Platonic and Scholastic thinkers—can, according to Descartes, conceivably be the blinding light of an evil spirit. Significantly, when in his arguments in Contra Academicos Augustine entertains the exceptional cases—hallucinations, misperceptions caused by disease, etc.—he implies an assumed stable center of knowledge. However, Descartes takes the exceptional case as the normative center of all knowledge—not only perceptions, which can always be justifiably doubted—but any evidence that does not present itself in a clear and distinct fashion. The implications for the possibility of clarity are great. Here Dupré is helpful:
Descartes' theory of ideas marks the watershed where the tide of cognition ceased to flow from the real to the known and turned from the ideal representation toward the extra-mental reality. Threatened by the loss of certainty that had originated in late medieval thought, Descartes tried to regain a sure foothold by sacrificing the ancient concept of truth as participation in being and instead concentrated on the nature of representation and its internal criteria. Philosophy has mostly remained on this epistemological track ever since. (86)

Augustine's argument seems to be a specific retort to the cry of the occasion, the skepticism of Carneades the Academic. Descartes on the other hand sees his method as the beginning of philosophy per se. In addition, Augustine accepts as evidence the mere presentation of his being; there is an adequacy to his own self-presence. Descartes takes clarity and distinctness as the criteria for certain knowledge; with this, notes Dupré, "The foundation of both the mind and the world is conceived in accordance with the condition and needs of knowledge" (88). And the only things that can fulfill that criterion with perfect clarity are the mind's own existence and its own creations such as mathematics.

Upon such indubitable foundations, the structure of knowledge could be deduced and built. The architectonic drive of Descartes' thought has received much attention. His major metaphor is that of a house of knowledge whose foundations have to be re-investigated. Claudia Brodsky Lacour, however, claims that while many critics of Descartes see his radicalism as the relatively simple process of razing the structure to get at foundations, it
is even more radical, and has a more direct influence on modernist aesthetics.

Descartes' architectural metaphors, Lacour maintains, are not figurations to express thoughts. In fact, in Descartes, "architecture functions as anything but an expressive motif in the origin of method of modern philosophy" (4). Rather, "Like the Géométrie, the Discours de la méthode, produces discursively the possibility of drawing a line--call it "I"--based on no previously available figure or form" (5). Descartes' position is a philosophical standpoint, literally; from one point, a point without extension, he draws out a line of thought. This architectonic line cannot represent anything, and must break with all modes of representation, "whether the coin of imitation be categorized as copy, type, or archetype . . . " (8). Or, in the words of Ernst Cassirer writing in The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, for Descartes "all being, in order to be clearly and distinctly conceived and to be understood in pure concepts, must first be reduced to the laws of spatial intuition" (282).

There are two interacting instances of clarity of interest here. The epistemological certainty that "clear and distinct" ideas yield depends on the non-extended stand-point of the "ego." In Lacour's reading, Descartes' project requires a non-representational start: "The discursive beginning of modern philosophy, the founding of
the subject of thinking occurs not as a linguistic picture or image, but as a line, an iconoclastic line, a 'line of thought'" (8). These lines of thought themselves yield simultaneously the clarity of the linearity of the discourse. This second aspect of clarity is not the clarity of certainty, but a specifically aesthetic quality; ironically, despite Lacour's claim that Descartes' line was an attempt to get outside of representation, the line becomes a foundation not just for thought, but for a representational aesthetic:

The linearity—as opposed to the pictorality—of other modernisms may now be apparent to us, the modernism of painting, sculpture, dance and architecture itself. (8)

Thus Descartes is midwife not only to the birth of modern philosophy, but modernist aesthetics.

The movement through Descartes then is a collapsing of clarity toward the mind, a restriction to the mental. To quote Dupré once more, "Jean-Luc Marion has shown how the father of modern thought began by transforming philosophy from a science of first things to an epistemological investigation of the first principle of knowledge" (87). Philosophy takes a turn from ontological issues towards epistemological ones. Clarity is still valued, but its purview is restricted entirely to an intra-mental existence.

Clarity and the Birth of Aesthetics

There are then two directions in Descartes' thought: the centripetal reduction of clarity to the mind, and the
mind's centrifugal extension of propositions deducted therefrom. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762 A.D.) inherited the rationalism of Descartes and sought to investigate a realm on which Descartes was silent: poetry. Poetry is certainly not deduced in the same way that the Cartesian apparatus is. On the contrary, poetry concerns precisely that which Descartes called into question: the immediacy of sense experience, which was by nature manifold and unfocused. Yet in the introduction to his 1735 work Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus), Baumgarten states his intention to put the two disciplines in communication:

I wish to make it plain that philosophy and the knowledge of how to construct a poem, which are often held to be entirely antithetical, are linked together in the most amiable union. (36)

Baumgarten's original focus, poetry, is widened in the work itself, but his thought has even broader implications. He is the first to use the term "aesthetics" to describe that certain field of study. However, it refers not directly to beauty as such, but to its original Greek etymology, "perception." His study is not simply an investigation of beauty, but a part of the rationalist program to evaluate all elements of experience. For Baumgarten, that element of poetry which makes it a distinctive thing unto itself is precisely its appeal to the "lower part of the cognitive faculty": sense perception (38). Therefore to dismiss perceptions is to
dismiss a whole realm of experience—verse—which "wise men" say "ought never to be neglected" (35). What Baumgarten attempts in his aesthetics, in Cassirer's words, is the "legitimation of the inferior powers of the soul" (349).

Baumgarten tries to show how the sensuousness of art, as perceived by the senses, can have its own clarity, a clarity distinct from the confusion of sense perceptions, yet a clarity different from logical clarity. To be exact: Baumgarten asserts that of ideas or sensate representations, both can be either clear or obscure; clear representations can be either distinct or confused. But where clear and distinct representations are the province of philosophy, "philosophy pursues conceptual distinctness above everything else" (42), clear and confused (or rather fused\textsuperscript{14}) representations are the province of poetics and the philosophy of poetics. The poem is "perfect sensate discourse" (39). But being "fused" is different from being "obscure." A poem that is "obscure" is inferior: "This should take care of those who wrongly suppose that the more obscure and intricate their effusions, the more 'poetic' their diction" (41).

It is with "clarity" that Baumgarten's thought encompasses the rationalism of Descartes (along with that of G. W. Leibniz), taking the common "clear and distinct"

\textsuperscript{14} See Aschenbrenner and Holther's "Introduction" to the Reflections on Poetry for an explanation of this "fusion," 21.
appellation and situating poetic discourse within its scope. Baumgarten distinguishes two types of clarity: extensive clarity is proper to poetry; in more extensively clear works, “more is represented” (43). Intensive clarity on the other hand belongs, as it does for Descartes and Leibniz, to cognition (43). Baumgarten to a degree rehabilitates sense perception by attributing to it a meaningful content. His distinction between extensive and intensive clarity mirrors Descartes’ distinction between res extensa and res cogitans. The former rightly belongs to sense perception, the latter rightly belongs to cognition.

Baumgarten is usually dismissed as a promoter of the inflexibility of classical aesthetics. However, his first interest is to do justice to the phenomenon of the poetic by making it part of a rationalist schema; he puts the poetic into communication with the other human faculties of perception and judgment. The importance of this is evident in Immanuel Kant’s shift in reaction to the possibility of aesthetics. In the Critique of Pure Reason (1787), he addresses aesthetics only to dismiss it:

This usage [of aesthetics] originated in the abortive attempt made by Baumgarten, that admirable analytical thinker, to bring the critical treatment of the beautiful under rational principles, and to raise its rules to the rank of science. But such efforts are fruitless. (quoted in Simpson 4)

As David Simpson notes in his Introduction to German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism, Kant’s opinion of
Baumgarten’s project changed to such a degree that he found it necessary in his third Critique to attempt a similar resolution to a problem he had previously dismissed. Baumgarten’s legacy then is the thematizing and formalizing of a relationship that had always been intuited: the relationship between the clarity of philosophy and the clarity of the poem. More importantly for the present study, Baumgarten’s endeavor implies that not rationality, but clarity is the center of the personal enterprise. For this reason alone, he seems worth attention. And yet Kant’s original opinion regarding the incompatibility of aesthetics and rational investigation is perhaps more historically prevalent: Karl Aschenbrenner and William Holthier perhaps overstate the case somewhat in their Introduction to the Reflections, but it is generally true that

before the end of [Baumgarten’s] century the doctrine of the supremacy of feeling, of feeling as the essence of art, was already in command. There followed an endless succession of aesthetic theories based on emotion, play, fancy, pleasure, the unconscious, the irrational, and so on. (8)

This development was perhaps somewhat inchoate in Baumgarten anyway, and therefore inevitable.

It is worthy of note, however, that toward the end of his Reflections, Baumgarten introduces the term “vivid” to further describe poetry: “We call that vivid in which we are allowed to perceive many parts either simultaneously or in succession” (76). This sort of
vividness (*vividum*) is inherent in his understanding of extensive clarity and perhaps contains the seed of later Romantic vitalism. It is only with the modernist lyric of, for example, Ezra Pound, H. D., and especially Wallace Stevens that a "clarity" close to Baumgarten's understanding as a central element appears as a governing aesthetic motif.

**From Mirror to Lamp with Kant**

If in a sense "enlightenment" has always been with us, what does the "Enlightenment" add? It seems it could add little: Socrates describes the ascendancy of the soul to God as enlightenment, as does Bonaventure fifteen hundred years later; in their unsystematic aesthetics, medievals viewed clarity as that aspect of a thing shining (as beauty) to the mind. Descartes' distrust of the world of the *res extensa* took the search for clarity to the moment of thought and therefore restricted its meaning to epistemological certitude disconnected from any structure aside from the mind's own existence and the corollaries derived from it.

What distinguishes the "Enlightenment" from this previous history becomes more fraught when considering that it is, like all historical periods, susceptible to revision. It would therefore be tempting to engage in the common rhetorical move of pluralization, and merely posit there is not one Enlightenment, but many "enlightenments."

The widespread translation and exportation of the term
during the eighteenth century seems to support this pluralized interpretation. Enlightenment is a translation of the German *Aufklärung*, but the word found its way into Italian, *Illuminismo*, and French, *Lumieres*. Yet despite these localisms, the light metaphor remained throughout the European (and American) understanding of the expression.

The perdurance of the light metaphor in the expression implies a unity—however plastic—in the phenomenon. Yet though the light metaphor endures in the Enlightenment formulation, it undergoes a change in orientation. The most important element that distinguishes clarity of this period occurs in epistemology where one witnesses the movement from a receptive to an active epistemology. M. H. Abrams traces this shift as it occurs in representations of representation. In his study, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Abrams argues that the mirror, in various guises, was until the eighteenth century the main metaphor to describe artistic activity. The mirror described as well the relationship between the mind and the world: both “mirrored” or “imitated” nature. This was a stable interpretation of the role of art from Plato’s emanation theory to the “classicist” formulations through the seventeenth century. Even Baumgarten still held to an imitative account of poetry: “Hence, the poem is an imitation of nature and of
the actions depending on it" (76). And while art as imitation of nature did not necessarily lead to a strict realism associated with the nineteenth-century novel, it still imitated as classical aesthetics imitated things; that is, ideally, as they "should be."

In the eighteenth century there was a shift to a more expressivist understanding. What accounted for the shift in metaphor from mirror to lamp was to a large degree the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. What distinguishes both cognition and artistic activity before and after him is the direction of epistemological flow, so to speak. Instead of mind receiving data from a given, the mind informs through administering a *a priori* categories. Kant's "Copernican turn" is pivotal; yet it was prepared for in previous thought (just as was the first Copernican turn). For example, not only did Aquinas introduce subject-relatedness in the *visio* of beauty, but his epistemology itself broke down on several levels. In his terms, the active intellect does not receive objects, but sense impressions out of which active intellect forms a phantasm, which the passive intellect then knows. At this point, the mind is two steps away from the object, and Aquinas' epistemology contains the seeds of latent empiricism and idealism. But however tenuous the balance between subject and object, it was a balance.

Kant's epistemology redefined what constituted knowledge by relating it to the act of knowing itself.
Kant's own *What is Enlightenment?*—a work ostensibly on religion and history—attests to this shift toward mind as an autonomous lamp. For the ancients and medievals, the answer to the question "What is enlightenment?" would have inevitably involved relating the person to the intelligibly ordered world over against the self. "Enlightenment" would be a process—much like exiting Plato's cave—of becoming more in concert with the cosmos. It would reveal itself in theology as an accordance with divine will, and in epistemology as a correspondence between mind and thing. For Kant, however, "enlightenment" has less to do with clarification in terms of external concord than with the "escape of men from their self-incurred tutelage" (91). Instead of imbibing the received ideas of "books," "clergy" and "physicians," men must argue amongst themselves and use their own understanding. This requires a radical autonomy: "For this enlightenment, however, nothing is required but freedom" (86). Cassirer describes the spirit of the age: "Reason is now looked upon rather as an acquisition than as a heritage" (13). "Enlightenment" in its broadest sense is the movement from self-tutelage to self-governance.

For Kant, this requirement of self-governance lies at the heart of the disinterestedness found in his *Critique of Judgement*. In order for our judgments of taste—i.e. of the aesthetic—to be valid, they must be
disinterested: "[W]e must not be in the least prejudiced in favor of the existence of the things . . ." (§2). On the other hand, judgments of the good or the pleasant are highly interested (§3,4). They have a to me or for me character to them, while "the judgment of taste is merely contemplative" (§5). Yet despite the radical disinterestedness and its subjectivity, the judgment of taste is "imputed to everyone" and therefore universal (§8). The emphasis both here and in What is Enlightenment? is on the preservation of autonomy in a realm where the self is freed from external deflection.

Kant's importance in the clarity/ambiguity dialectic takes two forms. Firstly, by making taste a subjective imperative he does much to privatize the relationship to art, and therefore gives what Abrams calls the "expressivist" mode of cognition and imitation philosophical justification. The source of clarity is the self—the mind as lamp. Secondly, despite the fact that his epistemology is to a degree a reaction to the empiricism of Hume (seen for example in Kant's rejection of the identification of the pleasant with the beautiful), his aesthetics nevertheless incorporates the sensations into the overall project of enlightenment. Thus according to Cassirer, after the empiricist challenge, "taste is no longer classified with the logical processes of inference and conclusion but placed on a par with the immediacy of pure acts of perception—with seeing and hearing, tasting
and smelling” (304). This accounts for the paradox in Kant that judgments of taste must both be thoroughly subjective and imputed to everyone. While Descartes and Leibniz value system and deduction, as enlightenment thought progressed, it came to address the inductive analysis of experience; the internal foundations of Descartes inevitably confronted external impressions.

Perhaps Kant’s contribution can be framed in terms of disciplinarity. Up to Kant’s time, philosophy’s position had always been assured, either as queen of sciences or as handmaid of theology. But because it was seen (at least through Scholasticism) in terms of the soul’s ascent, philosophy carried with it the hint of Socratic catharsis, and with this came the tendency to denigrate the empirical. Clarity was the goal of philosophical activity: sense knowledge was the realm of the “confused and indistinct” (Cassirer 340)—that is, the realm of the ambiguous. Clarity had become then strictly associated with “objectivity” in Descartes, but the nominalism of Ockham, the empiricism of Hume as well as the new science of probability made the eventual disassociation of clarity from objectivity easier if not inevitable.  

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15 Barbara Shapiro writes in her Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: “Experience, conjecture, and opinion, which once had little or no role in philosophy or physics . . . now became relevant and even crucial categories for natural scientists and philosophers” (4).
broadly as an attempt at the resolution of the tense and ongoing dialectic between aesthetics and philosophy, two fields of human knowledge and activity. But the Romantic installation and valorization of ambiguity indicates just how short they fell.

This change in perspective will be the topic of the next two chapters. By now, however, a pattern of sorts ought to have emerged: clarity in all of its disparate forms—linguistic, aesthetic, or epistemological—is not only considered possible but valorized. Yet while ambiguity remains in the background, after Descartes it begins to take on shape as the repressed, as if it were the object of the West's guilty conscience. What had begun as an intuition (that ambiguity could be a source of potentiality as Augustine proffered in *De Doctrina Christiana*) was still unrealized in thought. But with the Romantics, as the attitude toward clarity and ambiguity becomes much more fraught, it becomes possible for ambiguity to achieve a new and more sympathetic hearing.

*Othello, Our Contemporary*

If clarity had reached the height of its persuasive power in its eponymously named age, "The Enlightenment," it is also precisely then that there seems to be a redetermination of the boundaries of what constitute "clear" and "ambiguous." Certainly the desire for complete clarity (as "objectivity") becomes the lust for mastery over an object, the Faustian bargain ("Resolve me
of all ambiguities"), what Nietzsche calls the *libido scienti*.

But by the end of the eighteenth century, clarity had little other meaning. By way of transition to Chapter II, and to show how the transition in reaction to clarity and ambiguity occurred, this chapter closes with a brief discussion of a text that seems to evince this move: Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Shakespeare condenses many of the concerns of the age, marking the watershed transition between late medieval and early modern—especially Enlightenment—thought. Recent historical criticism seems to confirm this demarcation, as for example, Stanley Cavell’s *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, where he notes that “the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes’ *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare” (3). Here, brief mention of *Othello* will perhaps delineate somewhat further the terms of the shift if not the shift itself.

Renaissance drama is deeply concerned with how knowledge gained through analysis affects the object. Oftentimes it investigates the limits of certain types of clarity; Hamlet’s attempt at the triangulation of knowledge during *The Mousetrap* is one often-cited example. At the same time, spousal fidelity (along with bridal virginity) is one of this period’s favorite themes; it is of course full of dramatic potential in itself and has a pre-Renaissance literary history. But in light of the epistemological concerns of the age, it bears other
interest for us. If Shakespearean drama seems fairly obsessed with fidelity as object of knowledge, it is because its constitution is such that it resists analysis to such a degree that it crumbles upon the wrong type of sighting. For example, when Leontes in A Winter’s Tale tries to analyze his wife’s fidelity, it dissolves, as if it retracts all evidentiary expression.

In Othello classicist aesthetics and empiricism meet. Othello, tempted by Iago, tries to analyze Desdemona’s fidelity in terms of the claims of empirical evidence, “ocular proof.” Yet as Iago says of the handkerchief that will condemn Desdemona: “Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of Holy Writ” (3.3.317). The desire for perfect knowledge of his wife’s honesty becomes the desire for empirical clarity. In Othello’s case, this perfect clarity (which is in principle attainable), resolves into a confusion of forms. One sign of the situation’s irresolvability is the occurrence of meaningless repetition; in fact, repetition becomes a method of Iago’s dissembling. He merely repeats, questioningly, Othello’s questions; at one point Othello shouts, “By heaven, thou echoest me . . .” (3.3.106). Later Othello tells Emilia that Iago was Desdemona’s accuser. Emilia is stunned and disbelieving. To her questioning, Othello retorts, “What needs this iterance? Woman, I say thy husband” (5.2.147).
Othello’s desire for a momentary stay against confusion is more understandable in light of his expectations. For him Desdemona is a redress against all other elements of his character: his military life, his African-ness, his suffering. Upon her foundation, he builds his life. Strangely, Othello’s aesthetic world is one of classical ideality: the skies are “yond marble heaven,” (3.3.457); this heaven is filled with “chaste stars”; he is reticent in murdering Desdemona to “scar that whiter skin of hers than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.5). The heaven, the stars, and Desdemona become linked in a clear, frozen complex of aestheticized statuary. Contrasted to this are images (more real and more ambiguous) of Desdemona as fluid: Othello says on the one hand that she is the “fountain from the which my current runs” (4.2.57), and on the other hand she is as “false as water” (5.2.133). The indeterminate quality, the formal ambiguity of water and of his wife galls Othello. He may be an outsider in Venice, but he has appropriated classicist aesthetics. When confronted with the impossibility of empirical certitude, he despairs at the unprovability of fidelity. Othello has brought a certain strand of clarity to its logical conclusion, and as the reader is told, chaos will come again. Thus if at the center of the tragedy of Oedipus Rex lies linguistic ambiguity (and more broadly the ambiguity of the gods), then at the heart of the
tragedy of Othello lies the desire for, and the impossibility of attaining, a clarity which unites the aesthetic and the epistemological through Enlightenment principles.
Chapter II. The Vagaries of the Romantics

"The Systematic Winckelmann": The Neoclassical

Othello's aesthetic regard of Desdemona attempts the resolution of all ambiguities into the clarity of a still-life. Such a vision of aesthetics would find its fullest expression in the writings of Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768). His studies of Greek and Roman sculpture and painting, especially of the Laocoon statue group (Greek or possibly Roman, rediscovered in 1506), convinced him of the relative superiority of the ancient aesthetic understanding of harmony of form. In his On the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks (1755), he identifies what he considers the formal effects that establish the supremacy of Greek art, and puts forward what has come to be regarded as the exemplary formulation of neo-classical1 aesthetics. In comparing Greek art favorably with "modern" (contemporary) art, he focuses on the Laocoon group's "expression":

The last and most eminent characteristic of the Greek works is a noble simplicity and sedate grandeur in gesture and expression. As the bottom of the sea lies peaceful beneath a foaming surface, a great soul lies sedate beneath the strife of passions in Greek figures. (72)

With this formulation, "noble simplicity and sedate grandeur," Winckelmann argues for the sublimation of fierce turmoil into a tranquil still point. Like

1 Jeffrey Perl, developing Ernst Curtius, gives a list of the many and often contradictory meanings of "classical" in his The Tradition of Return (66ff).
Othello's, Winckelmann's aesthetic requires the subsumption of ambiguity into simplicity. Thus for Othello, the ambiguous feminine (which is "false as water") becomes stilled—indeed, sepulchered. Winckelmann criticizes anything that detracts from "noble simplicity"; ornamentation, disharmony of composition, anything rogue\(^2\) is to be avoided, for "beauty consists in the harmony of the parts" (95). (This insistence on pure simplicity motivates Winckelmann to criticize the baroque style of Bernini for its grotesque "exaggeration.")

Winckelmann's stance is an emanationist view—beauty descends from Divinity to human mind to matter. In his *History of Ancient Art*, he writes,

>This idea of beauty is like an essence extracted from matter by fire; it seeks to beget unto itself a creature formed after the likeness of the first rational being designed in the mind of the Divinity. (118)

This understanding is highly mimetic; man's artistic creation mirrors the rational creation of the divine. Yet it is not rough nature itself that should be imitated, but an idealized form. The genius of ancient art for Winckelmann was that empirical observations were "raised above the reach of mortality according to the superior model of some ideal nature" (65).

\(^2\) There are of course in the history of literature examples of "delight in disorder"; but the foundation of that delight--mimeticism--is still not questioned until the German Romantics.
Winckelmann is important because he is on the threshold, intellectually as well as chronologically, between classicism and Romanticism. Rémy Saisselin, in The Enlightenment Against the Baroque writes of Winckelmann’s classicism:

This was not the self-imposed discipline of the true classicism such as obtained in the Renaissance and the Baroque, the creation of order in the face of tendencies towards disorder, disintegration, exaggeration, multiplicity and unbounded imagination, but rather a neoclassicism requiring that certain works be imitated and imposing doctrinal standards from outside. (20)

The implication is that Winckelmann’s is a degenerate ideal soon to be outmoded.

There is a tendency to draw too sharp a line between a neo-classical aesthetic and a Romantic one. One might observe that Winckelmann himself often has highly subjective, emotional passages in his writings, as well as observations that show an appreciation of cultural specificity. Yet the fact remains that Winckelmann proffers “noble simplicity and sedate grandeur” as a universally applicable criterion of the beautiful. Here the epistemological meets the aesthetic in the confrontation between clarity as epistemological certainty and clarity as classicist ideal. Precisely because the

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3 That history and culture (material conditions) influence artistic production is not a recent insight. As David Irwin points out, Polybius, Kant, and Winckelmann all mention, for example, the influence of climate (Winckelmann 42ff).
rules are intelligible, perceivable, and universally
applicable, clarity is regarded as an aesthetic value.

Moreover, it must be kept in mind that Winckelmann’s
attention (as well as the attention of this study) is not
limited to one aesthetic field. Winckelmann’s writings
refer not only to certain elements of specific arts
(sculpture, painting, etc.), but rather are meant to be
broadly applied. Further, in his comparison of ancient
and “modern” cultures, he speaks not only about specific
techniques, but also of the “soul” of a people. Thus when
Winckelmann praises the assuredness of the Greek sculptor,
it is in terms of a generalized cultural certainty:
“Surely hands so steady, so secure, must of necessity have
been guided by rules more determinate and less arbitrary
than we can boast of” (76). The rules were somehow more
clear to the ancients, and there is “but one way for the
moderns to become great, and perhaps unequaled: I mean, by
imitating the ancients” (61). Two millennia separate the
moderns and ancients, but Winckelmann begs for a trans-
historical and trans-disciplinary reference point: “Let
the artist’s pencil, like the pen of Aristotle, be
impregnated with reason; that, after having satiated the
eye, he may nourish the mind” (85).

A Vagrant, Unending Arabesque: Friedrich Schlegel
and Novalis

Kant’s Critique of Judgement solidified both
aesthetics as a discipline and the individual subject as
the sole judge of beauty. By “subjectivizing” aesthetic
judgment, he does much to undermine Winckelmann. In §17 Kant writes:

To seek for a principle of taste which shall furnish, by means of definite concepts, a universal criterion of the beautiful is fruitless trouble, because what is sought is impossible and self-contradictory. (68)

If Winckelmann investigates the universal, formal rules that govern the expression of the “sedate soul,” the Romantics emphasize those elements that point to the “foaming surface.” To say that German Romanticism, following Kant, kindled awareness and interest in the non-rational in art, thereby exposing the universal applicability of neo-classical ideals as a question of taste rather than of strict aesthetic necessity, is so well established as to be undeserving of comment. But what is less established is the Romantic affinity with ambiguity in terms of both epistemology and aesthetics. The Kantian turn from a receptive to an active epistemology emphasizes the power of the illuminating intellect of each person and thereby renders a universal criterion for the beautiful impossible. Thus the appreciation for ambiguity as a positive linguistic and aesthetic phenomenon grew out of the idealist and empiricist critique of rationalism such as that represented by Descartes. Conversely, the depreciation of clarity occurs with the degradation of clarity from its status as an aesthetic “resplendence of form” to a will to
order, a rote imitation of the rules perceived by another period: the ancient Greek.

Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) are generally held to be the first writers to give a wide-ranging appreciation of an aesthetic disassociated from, indeed opposed to, the clarity of neoclassicism. It is true that incipient even in Winckelmann are Romantic tensions; as Saisselin notes, "Winckelmann's love of ancient Greece was already a Romantic sentiment, a nostalgia heralding the poetry of Hölderlin or Keats" (20). Still, Schlegel's "Fragments," "On Incomprehensibility" and "Letter on the Novel," along with Novalis' "Monologue" and "Miscellaneous Writings" (all written between 1797-1800), represent a break with neoclassicism, and chart out a connection among self, language, aesthetics and the world that reimagine the relationship between clarity and ambiguity. There are three related but distinguishable aspects of Schlegel's and Novalis' break that are worthy of note: language, inexhaustibility, and freedom of form.

i. Language beyond Communication

In the beginning of his "On Incomprehensibility," Schlegel blithely wonders, "Of all things that have to do with communicating ideas, what could be more fascinating than the question of whether such communication is actually
possible?” (32).4 Playful as the question is, it throws into doubt the teleology of all discourse. That is, can language be used to communicate ideas? And if it can’t, then is there any “use” beyond it? Schlegel’s short though far-reaching essay carves out for language its own metaphysics. It draws attention to the words themselves aside from either their “end” (ostensibly communication) or authorial intention. One of his goals, he writes, is “to demonstrate that words often understand themselves better than do those who use them . . .” (33). The question of incomprehensibility is tied to the question of the words themselves, which appear to have a life of their own.

Because comprehensibility does not exhaust language, Schlegel can only come to the conclusion, however rhetorically paradoxical, that incomprehensibility, instead of being an obstacle to human relationships and to the political order, is actually the “salvation” of them, and if it is an obstruction to the entire project of enlightenment, then that project ought to be re-thought:

But is incomprehensibility really something so unmitigatedly contemptible and evil? Methinks the salvation of families and nations rests upon it. . . . Yes, even man’s most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify, on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and

4 All Schlegel and Novalis references taken from German Romantic and Literary Criticism, edited by Kathleen Wheeler.
would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis. Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest. And isn’t this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos? (38)

The essay assiduously avoids all definitions or taxonomy. Instead of the expected explication of epistemological obstacles or logical fallacies that may hinder comprehension, Schlegel gives a series of involutions that perform his dictum—truth is not comprehensible, but paradoxical:

All the greatest truths of every sort are completely trivial and hence nothing is more important than to express them forever in a new way, and wherever possible, forever more paradoxically, so that we won’t forget they still exist and that they can never be expressed in their entirety. (35)

Marike Finlay writes that, “To an analytical hierarchy of distinct and referentially meaningful categories, Schlegel opposes, in the very practice of defining irony, a constant flux, process, chaos, and dynamic a-systemicity” (194). Irony lays bare the gap between language and being.5 Thus incomprehensibility is not only unavoidable because of the limits of “rational analysis” inherent in communication, but that gap—the incomprehensible—may indeed be the assumed condition of those cultural institutions (families, states) that have comprehension as their ostensible goal. Ernst Behler in his German

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5 The *dramatic* irony of Greek tragedy on the other hand relies on ambiguity on the part of the characters and clarity on the part of the audience.
Romantic Literary Theory argues for the radicality of this gesture; *contra* Hans-Georg Gadamer, he writes:

The early Romantic theory of understanding should not be regarded as a historical phase of a step into a generally developing history of hermeneutics, as has often been maintained, but as a much more radical reflection upon the possibility of understanding which takes into account the amount of incomprehensibility, indeed, of not-understanding constituted in every act of understanding. (8)

In other words, Schlegel’s and Novalis’ is not one hermeneutic among many, but a reflection on the conditions of communication themselves. In his *Monologue*, Novalis draws attention away from the external, referring function of language—the question of hermeneutics—and bears down on the internal action of the medium itself:

[N]o one knows the essential thing about language, that it is concerned only with itself. That is why it is such a marvelous and fruitful mystery—for if someone merely speaks for the sake of speaking, he utters the most splendid, original truths. But if he wanted to say something definite, the whims of language make him say the most ridiculous false stuff. (93)

The internal drive of language is “the essential thing.” The comprehensibility of discourse is an illusion that vanishes when we realize this essential thing: that language has “whims,” is wayward or vagrant. As Schlegel asserts in his “Ideas” 129a, “You’re not really supposed to understand me, but I want very much for you to listen to me” (58).
ii. The Unending

Because there is a priority given to the deferring function of language over its referring function, the ironic, critical stance is one of constant activity. This is because we and the world are fundamentally inexhaustible. As Novalis' "Miscellaneous Writing" 6 indicates: "We will never understand ourselves entirely, but we are capable of perceptions of ourselves which far surpass understanding" (84). Schlegel therefore sees a necessity in re-casting the "greatest truths . . . forever more paradoxically." This need to restate shows another aspect of the Romantic position: notions of the unending, the infinite, the inexhaustible.6 Schlegel and Novalis tie this inexhaustibility specifically to texts and the act of criticism. In his Critical Fragment 20, Schlegel writes that "A classical text must never be entirely comprehensible. But those who are cultivated and who cultivate themselves must always want to learn more from it" (40). Criticism is not end-stopped; it has no conclusive intention.

Just as for Kant the work of art is literally to no purpose, for Schlegel criticism has no end, no telos. That does not mean there should be no criticism; as he indicates in Fragment 57, criticism is not necessarily

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6 Previous understandings of the infinite appear to have been limited to divine attributes, mathematical infinity, and the in-principle divisibility of matter (Zeno's arrow); predicating infinity of the critical act seems quite new.
dissection, nor is it merely response. Rather, criticism is a continual dialogue between building and destroying one's reactions, one's self; Critical Fragment 28 sketches this attitude: "Feeling (for a particular art, science, person, etc.) is divided spirit, is self-restriction: hence a result of self-creation and self-destruction" (41). The practice of criticism is the ironic stance that interiorizes that unending, infinite movement of the cosmos; it replicates in the mind that chaos that is external to it. Idea 69: "Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos" (56). Again, Novalis' Miscellaneous Writing 65: "The great mind would make of every acquaintance, every incident, the first item in an infinite series—the beginning of a never-ending romance" (90).

iii. Vagrancy of Form

Schlegel's and Novalis' writings display an impetus towards freedom in both subjectivity and expression of artistic form. The notion of a stable, personal self is doubted in Romanticism; rather, it is seen less as a unitary conscious agent than the subject, "thrown under" manifold forces, many beyond comprehension. Jochen Schulte-Sasse frames the issue in the Foreword to Géza von Molnár's Romantic Vision, Ethical Context:

Consequently, early romantic thought addressed the basic question: can subjectivity constitute itself in a manner free from domination when the constricted social context has inevitably engraved itself on that subject, both in material and linguistic terms? (xx)
The Romantic reconstitution of the subject took form in linguistic terms in the literary method which Novalis, Schlegel and others chose to employ: the fragment.⁷ Schlegel’s Athenäum Fragment 206 has it: “A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine”⁸ (48). The fragment form therefore implies a skepticism regarding the ability of the human mind to comprehend the “surrounding world.” As the Ideas 150 explains: “You can neither explain nor understand the universe, but only contemplate and reveal it” (59).

The fragment form allows for maximization of compactness. In his Miscellaneous Writing 70 Novalis explains:

> Our language is either mechanical—mechanical—atomistic or dynamic. But true poetic language should be organic and alive. How often one feels the poverty of words to express several ideas at a blow. (90)

Though its goal is to express “several ideas at once,” the fragment is “complete in itself.” Moreover, it is not just the fragment form that displays this freedom; the novel, the “romantic book” is the most inclusive form

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⁷ Walter Benjamin wrote his Habilitationsschrift, The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism on the fragment form. Also, the title of Novalis’ work Pollen emphasizes the ripe potentiality of this scattered form.⁸ As B. Cowan points out, a better translation for Schlegel’s word “Igel” is “hedgehog”; Peter Firchow’s “porcupine” (“Stachelsweine”) misses the self-containing aspect of a rolled-up hedgehog while adding an aggressive relation to the exterior world quite opposite to the point of the fragment.
because it is a meta-genre that comprehends elements of all. In Critical Fragment 26, Schlegel writes, "Novels are the Socratic dialogues of our time. And this free form has become the refuge of common sense in its flight from pedantry" (40). Because it is a "free form" not bound by temporal styles, it can counter "pedantry." If opinion is Socratic doxa, then that which runs "alongside" it ought to be valorized: the paradoxical. "Critical Fragment" 48: "Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is simultaneously everything good and great" (42). The Romantics revive the paradox, a form which (in English) had enjoyed popularity last at the end of the Renaissance.9

The shift from an ideal of beauty such as the one presented by "the systematic Winckelmann" (Schlegel's jibe, Athenäum Fragment 149), to an understanding requiring a freedom of form was prepared for by Kant's distinction in the Critique of Judgement between pulchritudo vaga and pulchritudo inhaerens (§16, 17). The latter, "conditioned beauty," inheres in those things

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9 As Rosalie Colie points out in her study Paradoxica Epidemica, the paradox as a literary trope enjoyed enormous popularity during the Renaissance. Paradoxes "play with rational discourse" and often resolve into irrationality. Yet they are not mere egregious displays of wit. As Colie shows, during the Renaissance they assumed and pointed to an understanding of the fundamentally mysterious aspects of the world (33ff). Colie ascribes their decline in popularity to the rise of an empiricism which had little time for mystery (508ff).
whose form is restricted by purpose—namely, the person.\textsuperscript{10} "Free" beauty, or vague beauty, on the other hand is not fixed by a purpose as human beauty is. Schlegel and Novalis take the notion of freedom, the indeterminacy of form (vaga, the vague, the vagrant) as a determinate element of a new aesthetic sense. Poetry under the Romantics takes on almost personal attributes, especially Kantian autonomy, and becomes a free subject: Critical Fragment 65: "Poetry is republican speech: a speech which is its own law and end unto itself, and in which all the parts are free citizens and have the right to vote" (42).

Much of Schlegel's and Novalis' thought can be summarized in Schlegel's notion of the \textit{arabesque}. In his "Letter on the Novel" he asks his interlocutor about \textit{Tristram Shandy}:

Now ask yourself if your enjoyment was not related to what we often experience while viewing the witty paintings called arabesques. In case you cannot deny some sympathy with Sterne's sensibility, I am sending you a book, but I have to warn you about it so that you will be careful with regard to strangers for it has the fortune or misfortune to be somewhat notorious. It is Diderot's \textit{The Fatalist}. I think you will like it and will find in it an abundance of wit, quite free from sentimental admixtures. It is designed with understanding and executed with a firm hand. Without exaggerating I can call it a work of art. To be sure, it is not a work of high rank, but only an arabesque. But for that reason it has in my eyes no small merit; for I consider the arabesque a very definite and essential form or mode of expression in poetry. (75)

\textsuperscript{10} "The only being which has the purpose of its existence in itself is man, who can determine his purpose by reason" (69).
This last line implies that for Schlegel the term summarizes both his critical efforts and his method of evaluating individual texts. Sandra Naddaff in her study *Arabesque* writes that this eastern term entered the western visual arts vocabulary first around 1555, during the Italian Renaissance (111). Though it is a fundamentally organic style "derived from a denaturalized leaf or tendril pattern," its repetitiousness, because it is potentially unending, reflects "a concern for the infinite and eternal" (113). Schlegel broadens the term when he uses it in a narrative context; for him the novel as romantic book would display its own linguistic nature and freedom of form. *Arabesque* repetition defers a telos and puts emphasis on the medium while paradoxically establishing a relation to the eternal in the potential for infinite duplication. Because our nature, as Novalis writes in his Dialogues, has an "inclination to custom and easy habit," it must be brought into critical engagement precisely through such devices.

**The Beautiful, the Sublime**

The Romantic aesthetic that stressed the infinity of the finite, depth of feeling, and self-reflection in criticism and language over the clarity of neo-classicism found parallel expression in the well-known distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. Where Kant gives a full account of the difference in his third *Critique*, Edmund Burke's treatment in *A Philosophical Enquiry into*
The Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) would be just as influential for English Romanticism. In general, the sublime describes that aesthetic quality that evokes fear and awe through its presentation of the great, the vague, or the terrible.

Burke’s treatise shows its empirical roots, the weak methodology that Kant later tried to shore up with his appeal to a subjective law, universally imputed. Much of Burke’s treatise however does anticipate and parallel Kant’s distinctions. In differentiating the beautiful from the sublime, Burke somewhat contradictorily tries to retain an appeal to the senses while coming close to imparting universal aesthetic principles:

Sublime objects are vast in their dimension, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; . . . ; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy. . . . (60)

The sublime is associated with darkness, the vast, the infinite, and the terrible. Kant will indicate the same forces at work in §28 of his “Analytic of the Sublime.”

Some examples of the sublime are:

Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult. . . . (100)

Both Burke and Kant tie the sublime to danger; but moreover, Burke indicates that the passion awakened by the sublime is evoked not by clear ideas but by obscure ones;
“In reality a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever” (60). It is a sentiment that finds parallel in Schlegel’s “On Incomprehensibility”: once we comprehend something, its sublime aspect disappears. For Burke, the truly sublime has an association with the infinite:

But let it be considered that hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness which does not make some sort of approach toward infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea. (63)

Both the German and English arts would be influenced by this new-found appreciation of the sublime, and commentators would re-read previous art (much as Winckelmann did) in light of their preferred critical practice.

**English Romanticism**

The English Romantics were conversant with many of the same issues that concerned Novalis and Schlegel. There is in both movements a complication of and distancing from the notion of *mimesis*. Any previous poetic discourse naturally had a heightened awareness of its own linguistic status and even of polysemy. Dante’s “Letter to Can Grande della Scala,” for example, articulated the levels of scriptural interpretation. But all such approaches remain classicist in essence; Behler writes of these variations on the theme of mimeticism:
In spite of these and many other deviations, we still feel entitled to characterize the classical and classicist views of literature as a theory of imitation, because of the belief in a pregiven reality for poetry, the assumption that literature relates to something outside, to an already existing reference point in the real world. (302)

The English interest in the philosophical issues inherent in the transcendental idealism that influenced Novalis and Schlegel was limited. Following Burke more than Kant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth still raise some of the same questions. With the movement away from mimesis there is then a bearing down on the materiality of language itself, emphasizing in turn both the plasticity of language and its potential relation to the infinite. But in the English Romantics there is another concern: the psychology of the poet, the studying of the creative mind and not only the analysis of the aesthetic object. The subject becomes related to the infinite and the sublime in a new way, with obscurity becoming a criterion of depth.

Coleridge

Much like the mystic Novalis’ work, Coleridge’s prose and poetry contain a theological drive, one more certain than Wordsworth’s. Coleridge frames the issues of infinity, imagination, and form in relation to the humanistic, and especially religious, values that were familiar to him. In this sense his critique was less radical than Novalis’ or Schlegel’s, yet the thrust is the same: the obscure is related to the infinite, to the
mysterious, the sacred. For example, his long poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* concerns the shift in perspective the mariner-speaker undergoes. The ship is cursed when the mariner kills the Albatross:

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The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.
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About, about, in a reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white.
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(lines 122-130)

The speaker is hostile to nature, and looks upon it as wholly other under the harsh light of the sun. The water snakes themselves are indistinct—slimy figures upon slimy ground; the gap of sympathy between subject and object is complete. But later, "By the light of the Moon," the Mariner sees the obscurity and indistinctness of the creatures differently, as a luminescence:

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Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watched the water snakes:
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes
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Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire. (272-281)
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The mariner's mind re-creates things in the divine image. This transformation scene mirrors Genesis, as God creates world and man from his mind, and later sees them as "good." Similarly, the mariner re-visions them, and "blesses them unawares." The recreating mind allows the
things to be as they are, in all their hiddenness; and
once he accepts the creatures, the albatross falls off.
It is the acceptance of the experience of the
indeterminate, the obscure, that allows the ancient
mariner to be freed from the burdens of his own violent
history.

The poetry and criticism of the English Romantics
flow from the same source, thereby to a degree fulfilling
Schlegel’s hope for a unification of philosophy and
poetry. In the Rime, the creating mind has automatic
reference to a transcendent God. Coleridge’s Biographia
Literaria confirms this connection, where, in Chapter
XIII, he describes the linkages that the imagination is
capable of:

The imagination, then, I consider either as
primary, or secondary. The primary imagination
I hold to be the living power and prime agent
of all human perception, and as a repetition in
the finite mind of the eternal act of creation
in the infinite I am. The secondary I consider
as an echo of the former. . . . (304)

The primary imagination is an echo of the primordial act
of God’s self-naming; Coleridge’s notion of the mind’s
benediction of created nature is in dialogue with an older
sacred writing, which makes its appeal to obscurity in
overtly theological terms.

**Wordsworth**

Coleridge’s fixing of the obscure into a direct
lineage of sacred texts is somewhat at variance with
Wordsworth’s more secularized perspective. Lucy Newlyn,
in "'Questionable Shape': The Aesthetics of Indeterminacy," writes:

Wordsworth . . . does not use the aesthetic category of the sublime merely as a function of divinity, but appears rather to offer notions of the unreachable as substitutes for God. (222)

While Coleridge ties the indistinct and the obscure to the divine, Wordsworth institutes them in place of the divine. Obscurity as an access to sublimity is the recurring theme of the dialectic between self and past. In a short lyric "My Heart Leaps Up," the speaker's days are bound together in "natural piety"; in Book Twelfth of The Prelude of 1850 the speaker describes "spots of time" (line 208) in which "our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired" (215). During a horse-back ride of his youth, the speaker becomes temporarily lost; to depict the sight of the wind-blown bluff, "I should need / colours and words that are unknown to man, / To paint the visionary dreariness . . . " (256-57). The memory however gives back a restorative association to overcome the oxymoronic "visionary dreariness." Yet the restorative "spots of time" too are beyond "words that are known to man," indescribable epiphanies from the soul:

The days gone by
Return upon me almost from the dawn
Of life: the hiding-places of man's power
Open; I would approach them, but they close.
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all; And I would give,
While yet we may as far as words can give
Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining,
Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past
For future restoration. (277-282)
In Wordsworth then the sublime is interiorized. Man does not look to God for restoration, but rather looks within, to the self for this healing element, this "hiding-place of man's power." These obscure sites recede from the conscious life: "I would approach them, but they close." Efforts to elaborate on them, do justice in language, fall short and can go only "as far as words can give."

The retention of a theological perspective in Romantic criticism and poetry confronts one of the fundamental contradictions of Romanticism. Precisely at the time of the disappearance of the gods, there is a counter-movement to restore a notion of the "numinous," through displacement of the divine by the sublime. Ironically, God was the assurance of clarity, of form, of resplendence, and yet simultaneously he was shrouded in obscurity. When the epistemology of the Romantics, based as it was on empiricism and transcendental idealism, proved inconsistent with clarity (either as certainty or "resplendence of form"), then the dark, the obscure, the infinite were transported into the realms that were accessible, broachable by these epistemologies: the ego and nature.

Not only in its own time but in its rereading of Shakespeare and Cervantes the Romantics read with an eye

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11 Similarly, the Romantics have a paradoxical attitude towards science; they share its empirical approach that discerns the concrete, but disdain its reductionist method.
to those qualities that were paramount in their criticism: Shakespeare becomes stormy and passionate, and Cervantes becomes the idealistic seeker of sublime experience. Over and over again the misunderstood character, the affinity for the abyss, the ability to live without a clear-headed purpose is given prominence. But perhaps this is a matter of perspective; ironically, Keats accuses his contemporaries of having lost a "negative capability," the ability of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (43). Keats compares his contemporaries unfavorably to the Elizabethans:

Modern poets differ from Elizabethans in this. Each of the moderns like an Elector of Hanover governs his petty state & knows how many straws are swept daily from the Causeways in all his dominions & has a continual itching that all the Housewives should have their copper be scoured; the antients were Emperors of vast Provinces. . . . (61)

These "vast provinces" become an alluring, undiscovered and undiscoverable country inconsistent with any "irritable reaching after fact and reason." The sublime elements in nature find corollary significance in the obscure interior landscape of the self; these are the new "vast provinces."

The American Translation

This undiscoverable country of the English and German Romantics becomes translated easily into the New World. America's Puritan origins readied the climate for such a reception; Romantic concerns with the materiality
of language, the hieroglyphic, and rhetoric on the one hand, and with nature and self on the other, would be welcome in a land in which the Puritans hoped to establish a civil theology, a New Jerusalem. How to read the book of nature insofar as it delimits one's future salvation takes on a moral urgency.

If America has, as Cornel West indicates, evaded traditional philosophy of epistemology and metaphysics, it is in part because of the possibility of the land to be romantically read as potential, as "teeming chaos." Under this condition, practical immediacies will be emphasized:

the evasion of epistemology-centered conceptions of philosophy--from Emerson to Rorty--results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. (5)

Sacvan Bercovitch links this ethical response to the cultural crisis embedded in the origins of the country, particularly in the Puritan jeremiad tradition. The jeremiad, with its emphasis on ethics and rhetoric over ontology and epistemology, paradoxically thrives in an indeterminate land. Even early conceptions of America described it as a land without limitations; for example, in Donne's Elegy 19 the lover has "license" in this "newfound-land." Similarly, with the American translation of Romanticism, when the sign becomes free from things (Novalis' "the essential thing about language, [is] that

12 See, for example, R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam.
it is concerned only with itself"), it takes on newfound importance.

Herman Melville

All of Melville's major works show a concern with ambiguities of moral action and linguistic expression. *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* provide salient examples. There are "unnamable imminglings" surging throughout *Moby-Dick*; the inscrutable, fluid, "watery world" surrounds the ship, Melville's society writ small. Below the sea surface is even more instability, the unfinished project of the God-weaver: during Pip's sea-change, his anti-resurrection, he sees the "unwarped primal world," and "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" (347). The indeterminacy of reality finds its center in the white whale, the object not only of Ahab's primal vengefulness, but also his curiosity. He addresses Starbuck:

> Hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—There, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! (144)

More significant than Ahab's revenge or his metaphysics is the ambiguous epistemology of the "little lower layer," where everything in the novel is marked by "devious-cruising" (468). In his study *American Hieroglyphics*, John Irwin reveals this American concern with the "little lower layer" as he traces the influence of Egyptian hieroglyphs on American writers of the mid-nineteenth
century. Writing of The Scarlet Letter, Irwin describes the philosophical milieu in which the hieroglyph was situated:

The post-Kantian awareness that what man knows is not an objective external world, but simply the internal structure of his own mind projected upon an essentially indeterminate ground, the feeling of being trapped in the self, the sense of the shattering of all absolutes because of the loss of objective knowledge—these are what the concept of the hieroglyph emblem evokes for Hawthorne. (241)

And a fortiori for Melville: Queequeg’s tattoos, the hieroglyphic markings on the whales’ skin, Ahab’s character, the doubloon nailed to the mast, are at once inscrutable (open to no interpretations) and indeterminate (open to multiple interpretations). Ishmael, in “The Whiteness of the Whale” chapter, describes the terror associated with the vast indeterminateness of the color white:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows, a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (169)

In Moby-Dick such visions are not quite the “clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos” that Schlegel imagined; nor are they altogether the experience of the Kantian sublime. The whiteness of the
whale fills Ahab with hatred and Ishmael with horror.

Irwin notes:

but Ishmael’s feeling is not so much a horror that is vague and nameless as a horror of the vague and nameless, a revulsion at the ultimately indefinite and uncertain nature of the world symbolized by the color white. (286)

If Moby-Dick appropriates the ambiguous into a scheme where it denotes the noumenal and the theological, then Pierre; Or, the Ambiguities, because the protagonist is a writer, pays special attention to the ambiguity of the aesthetic and the linguistic. Edgar Dryden in his The Form of American Romance lists the novel’s concerns:

the problem of reading; the questions of relatedness, of genealogical continuity and intertextuality (family structures and narrative forms); and, linking them all, the larger issues of repetitions and representation. (76)

No relationship in the novel lacks complexity. The opening idyllic and sentimental Saddle Meadows scene is a foil against which Pierre’s increasingly entangled world unfolds. As Dryden puts it, “the usual view of human life as a linear, natural, biological process of generation and procreation is replaced by one that portrays it as a confusing play of images” (86). Genealogical ambiguity is matched by interpretive obscurities. Variations of the title-word “ambiguities” occur twenty-eight times in the novel, but most often around acts of interpretation, many centering around Pierre’s reading the ambiguous smile in his father’s portraits. It is a Mona Lisa-like smile, and because it is a representation of the absent father (he
died in Pierre’s boyhood), it becomes a focus of Pierre’s genealogical and interpretive doubts. The portrait itself addresses Pierre: “Consider; the smile is the chosen vehicle for all ambiguities, Pierre” (84). Pierre’s attempts to read the portrait only make himself more vague, and send him into reveries: “[T]hus sometimes stood Pierre before the portrait of his father, unconsciously throwing himself open to all those ineffable hints and ambiguities, and undefined half-suggestions . . .” (84). The enigmatic smile could express mutually exclusive states of mind—rapture, knowingness, or guilt—none out of character for the somewhat disreputable father. It is Pierre’s inability to read the smile that sends him into late-night musings. In the end all this “play” has fatal consequences, with Pierre reading and misreading the signs and symbols around him, only stopping with Pierre’s—and the novel’s—simultaneous death. The novel itself seems to “make one pervading ambiguity the explanation of all the ambiguous details” (224).

William James

The recent resurgence of interest in America’s only native philosophy, pragmatism, bears witness to the importance of the ambiguous in present discussions in both literature and philosophy.¹³ For William James (1842–

¹³ For example, Giles Gunn in his Thinking Across the American Grain lists Frank Lentricchia, Willard Quine, Clifford Geertz and Cornel West as among those broadly influenced by pragmatism (2).
1910), philosophy-as-"conceptualism" is "irrelevant" to life (366). Like Søren Kierkegaard, James rejects any system that would imply Hegelian completeness, and emphasizes instead experience's discreteness and ambiguity. The world is not presented to us as clear and distinct. Rather, as he notes in A Pluralistic Universe, every experience is a microcosm:

Here, then, inside of the minimal pulses of experience, is realized that very inner complexity which the transcendentalists say only the absolute can genuinely possess. (363)

The world is experienced not as "monism," but as "pluralism"; the only way to appreciate this adequately is through a "radical empiricism" that acknowledges the plenitude of experience. A description taking into account such acknowledgment will be incomplete:

The word "and" trails after every sentence. Something always escapes. "Ever not quite" has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness. (367)

Over against the project of traditional philosophy, what he terms "intellectualism," James employs thick descriptions of conscious life that take into account mutability and variety, a method of description that anticipates and indirectly influences later phenomenology. The words "and," "more," "overflow," "excess" recur throughout his writing:

Every smallest state of consciousness, concretely taken, overflows its own definition. Only concepts are self-identical; only "reason" deals with closed equations; nature is but a name for excess; every point in her opens out
and runs into the more; and the only question 
... is how far into the rest of nature we may 
have to go in order to get entirely beyond its 
overflow. (364)

James includes empirical science among those Procrustean 
systems that would refuse to take the vague as vague; even 
"science" can become a Baconian "idol." It is discredited 
as "mushroom knowledge," which, though having made 
extraordinary discoveries, is a knowledge young and short-
lived. James at once embraces empiricism and yet trusts it only as one evidence among many. This skeptical 
attitude does not lead to quietism, however; on the contrary, it is precisely this fluid inexactness of the 
world that demands a response. Therefore James' work 
represents a movement away from the epistemological to the ethical, or rather more broadly, the practical, a practice that does not exclude the body, as previous 
"intellectualism" had, but rather incorporates it. "Our body itself is the palmary instance of the ambiguous" 
(205). The lived embodied life is precisely what our experience consists of. Finally, as the name conveys, pragmatism is a philosophy of practical action.

William Gavin quotes James himself in describing his project: "the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life" (1). An adequate appreciation of the vague is an existential necessity; that is, for James, life is very much an unfinished project, which demands the participation of the subject. In The Will to Believe, he notes that the world as we see it "is only one

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portion of the total universe," and "there stretches
beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we know
nothing positive." Epistemology does not exhaust
ontology. Gavin writes: "In our terms, metaphysically for
James, reality is not only broader than the (presently)
known; it is broader than the knowable" (134).

Ultimately, James is concerned to avoid premature
systematization of thought which excludes the openness and
richness of the world. Indeed, he associates this
unknowable quality, about which we can know "nothing
positive," with surplus, with richness, and he sounds much
like a Romantic in the way he speaks of this
undiscoverable realm. This unnamed vastness has always
been with us he says: as Gavin summarizes, "Vagueness, is
not, ontologically speaking, a fall from grace" (179).

That is, life has always been an undetermined project.
There has never been a point of originary clarity, a
primal ontology which has since become occluded. Rather,
the world over against the conscious mind is a ripe, full
potency out of which we must make our life. In face of
the potentiality of life, with all its vagueness, we must
make choices, project our lives in front of us. This pre-
reflective or "affective" dimension in James which avoids
premature systematization, "comes close to catching the
basic feature of reality, namely its ambiguity" (Gavin
173).
Chapter III. Extension and Reaction: Modernist Clearings

Even if no overarching, determinate definition in the sense of genus/species can be attached to the "modern," this does not mean that one element of modernism cannot be delimited.¹ This chapter will trace modernism's part in the continuing shift in appraisal of ambiguity and clarity. To summarize the line of thought thus far: generally speaking, in the pre-Romantic Western tradition, clarity had universal approbation while genuine suspicion was attached to ambiguity. As the previous analysis argued, for the ancients as well as the medievals, clarity served as motive for thought and action. In epistemology, clarity as certain foundation was a possibility for Descartes as well as for Augustine one thousand years before. Similarly, ethical investigation involved the discovery of general moral laws that provided the clear basis for individual action as well as a general casuistry. By and large, aesthetic theory and practice saw the goal of art as the making pleasingly clear and

¹ It is perhaps a particularly modern phenomenon that all talk of "the modern" must start with disclaimers regarding the necessity, irrelevance, unavoidability, impossibility, or uselessness of the word "modern." James Olney writes that while other terms from literary history conjure up definite associations, "modernist" has no such power: "Modernist tells us nothing, offers us no essential clues to the nature of the literature that it pretends to modify" (450). Most critics imply a real, if fugitive, essence to the modern. Michael Levenson's pragmatic approach seems best: "As a rough way of locating our attention, 'modernism' will do" (vii).
intelligible the disparate and confusing welter of experience.

Ambiguity, particularly in rhetoric and logic, was the cause of fallacy; in ontology, it was unformed being; in epistemology, the stage prior to the light of knowledge, and therefore the source of doxa, opinion. It had no discernible place in art--indeed was considered an anti-value. Usually ambiguity was seen in terms of privation: it was simply the lack of clarifying order, in other words, chaos. Wherever ambiguity occurred, it was re-worked to a point of clarification. It was, finally, clarity, in all of its guises, that was the goal of much pre-Romantic cultural activity.

But William James' emphasis on experience led him to conclude that the basic feature of reality is its ambiguity; if the cosmos did not offer the comfort of a secure ontology, it did present a world of possibilities. There are, however, counter-currents. Melville was a reader of the German Romantics, and is representative of a consciousness of the pitfalls of the romantic attraction to ambiguity: the abysmal solitude of the isolato, the vagrancy of the orphan, the suicidal tendencies of the romantic spirit. The modernist movement was part extension, part rejection, of romantic concerns. But one conspicuous way in which the现代ists set themselves against the romantics is through the modernist gesture of "clearing." Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), originator of the
phenomenological movement, provides one way of transition that accounts for the modernist rapprochement with clarity, a clarity that manages a unique formulation, particularly as it appears in literature.

Husserl’s philosophical work began as a rejoinder from a mathematician to the psychologists. It was as a response to criticism that his grounding of mathematical laws was excessively psychologistic that he published his *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901). There, abandoning any psychological underpinnings for math or logic, Husserl criticizes severely those who would derive the laws of logic from the working of the human mind and therefore make the discipline of logic ultimately a branch of psychology, a position widely held at the time. “In our psychologically obsessed age, few logicians have been quite able to steer clear of psychological misinterpretations of logical principles . . .” (121). To make logic subservient to empirical psychology is to destroy its foundations, rendering what should be a necessary science an empirical one.

Against a psychologism that argues that because logical processes take place in the mind they are reducible to mental phenomena, Husserl contends that the laws of logic (along with ideal objects such as musical tones, geometric figures and meaning-units) have an ideal existence and an a priori necessity free from all “empirical vagueness” (99) of induced psychological
axioms. Thus while it is true that, as James would say, our quotidian experience is not given to us as clear and distinct, it is nevertheless the case, Husserl argues, that on some occasions we can readily perceive necessary logical laws, and indeed "Truth": "[T]he most perfect 'mark' of correctness is inward evidence, it counts as immediate intimation of the truth. In the vast majority of such cases we lack such absolute knowledge of truth . . . " (61), and yet we can and do perceive with clarity those laws. Husserl criticizes all attempts to render non-psychological phenomena psychological. Husserl's critique entails finally a rejection of all forms of relativism, especially "specific relativism" (relativism based on membership to a certain species, e.g. anthropologism).

Though Husserl's main concern is to reestablish for logic a stable ground, his Investigations has implications for epistemology, metaphysics, and linguistics. His reaction against the romantic temptation to psychologism and anthropologism has scope broader than philosophy, and is indicative, if not representative, of the clearing gesture that is characteristic of modernism. And while it appears that the Cartesian appeal to apodeictic certainty seems not to have survived Husserl (indeed, he can perhaps be seen as the last great articulator of Platonic idealism), the spirit of reaction against romantic and pragmatic empiricism perdures in the modernist gesture of
clearing. Five such moments of clarification are worth examining as indicative of this larger movement: philosophical clearings, tradition, abstraction, style, and epiphany.

i. Philosophical Clearings

Earlier it was noted that clarification was the goal of much pre-romantic cultural activity. In philosophy, clarity was not only the end-point of activity, but the beginning: not only omega, but alpha. For example, after having entertained several different theories regarding the nature of the soul, Aristotle clears them away to begin anew:

> Let the foregoing suffice as our account of the views concerning the soul which have been handed on by our predecessors; let us now dismiss them and make as it were a completely fresh start. . . . (554)

It is a gesture repeated in much philosophy; negative criticism of other positions, pre-conceptions, judgments, all give way to a methodological clearing. The linear basis of Descartes' *Second Meditation*, with its metaphor of razing a house and its foundations, is perhaps the most famous instance of clearing away. As Brodsky Lacour has remarked, Descartes' clearing leaves the invisible, non-extended geometrical point which serves as starting-point for the line which is the subject, "I."

Similarly, Husserl's phenomenology, especially as formulated later in his 1913 *Ideas*, demands a prescinding from the question of the real existence of beings. What
is open to illumination is only the appearance-quality of the objects. A true phenomenological description will "bracket" "anticipatory ideas of every kind" (105), all pre-conceived notions, even the very existence of the being in question. This epoche provides the basis for philosophy, and yet, Husserl claims, it is distinct from all previous clearing gestures in philosophy:

If I do this, as I am fully free to do, I do not then deny this "world," as though I were a sophist, I do not doubt that it is there as though I were a sceptic; but I use the "phenomenological" ἐποχή, which completely bars me from using any judgment that concerns spatio-temporal existence (Dasein). (110)

Such an epoche is a display of methodical indifference; all theories and judgments are put in brackets, "untested but also uncontested" (112).

In a very real sense then, the romantic dream of the synthesis of philosophy and poetry reaches its fruition with modernism. Schlegel's Critical Fragment 114 argues for the unity of the disciplines: "all art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one." Something parallel to philosophical clearing can be seen in modernist aesthetics. The clearing gesture that had long been an element in the western philosophical tradition is appropriated by literary modernism. It has already been noted here that

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2 Josef Seifert traces a turn in Husserl's thought from an understanding of phenomena as thing-in-itself to phenomena as mere appearance-quality. See Back to the Things Themselves.
Brodsky Lacour argues that Descartes' attempt at gaining a standpoint from which to draw the line of the self finds expression in modernist linearity. But perhaps the most significant clearing gesture modernism employs has to do with its relationship to tradition.

ii. Tradition

If the word "modern" implies an emphasis on the new and a discarding of antecedents, then surely each age has modern aspects. But it is not only that modernism more fully thematizes the question of tradition than previously; it is also that the moderns express this desire for the new in an apparently contradictory manner. For while they clear away the past in order to find autonomy, they do so, as several critics have pointed out, by returning to remote origins.

The modern attitude towards tradition has a synoptic text, found in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Herbert Schneidau, in his Waking Giants, comments that this essay is "the nearest equivalent to the Communist Manifesto" for modernism (203). Eliot attempts to situate the new into dialogue with what had gone before. The modern attitude should, he argues, not be one of one-directional passivity; if tradition "consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should positively be discouraged" (4).
Tradition ought not be rote imitation, but active incorporation.

It is easy to take Eliot’s position for the opposite of what it intends, to see him as requiring scholarship over novelty. Yet Eliot’s position does not advocate the subsuming of the new in the old. That is rather, as Umberto Eco points out, a medieval disposition toward innovation. Eco, referring to Thomistic innovations in medieval philosophy, writes that it was typical that new discoveries occurred under cover of silence and indifference. What mattered was to stay within the tradition, not to innovate. Innovation might occur, but without show. This was one of the most widespread and implicit of the methodological criteria of Scholasticism. (118)

Such an attitude privileges tradition over innovations, with tradition consuming the new. For Eliot, however, the movement is reversed, as the new appropriates the past. By calling up the “presentness” of the past, the artist cuts the “now” off from the causal chain of the past, and opens it up to investigation and exploitation. Here is a distinct mode of being traditional, one that requires a radical separation from the past even as it demands that the new communicate with the old.

Hannah Arendt notes that there are two different and perhaps simultaneous responses possible to the loss of a tradition. One may despair over the sudden deracination, or one may also find comfort in being put in a privileged epistemological position:
With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past. It could be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had the ears to hear.³

It is this potential for "freshness" that the moderns sense. When one is no longer situated in a "home," when the line of tradition is broken, there is sorrow over the world lost to one. But if it is tragic, it is also potentially freeing. For that very isolation grants a freedom to precisely accept the tradition, which, because it is no longer "responsible" for the present, can "tell us things no one has yet had the ears to hear."

Thus cut off from previous tradition, the moderns respond in a paradoxical manner: by re-turning. Schneidau describes the hold that the "atavistic" urge has on the modern mind. Reacting against Victorian progressivism and Darwinian evolution theory, the moderns looked not to their immediate successors, but their ancients, not to the father, but to the grandfather. As Schneidau points out, moderns drew on contemporary anthropological findings, especially Jane Harrison's Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion and J. G. Frazer's The Golden Bough. This atavism enabled a radical change of perspective:

This embrace of the archaic started many trains of thoughts, eventuating in a new fascination with such phenomena first as roots, and then as

³ Quoted in D. S. Carne-Ross, Instaurations 11.
objects of interest themselves. Now we have come full circle. Words like *primitive* have become in many contexts (the most important ones) more honorific than pejorative; this is an index of a great paradigm shift, and no more far-reaching intellectual revolution has occurred in the Western world. (23)

This revolution foregrounds an equivocation on the word “original”; while for the Victorian it might have meant “never before done, novel,” for the modernist it was more likely to mean “at the origin or beginning.” The return to the original becomes an attractive option in face of present predicaments. Jeffrey Perl, in *The Tradition of Return*, writes that the modernist desire to return partakes in a general nostalgia; this *nostos*, he writes, this “impulse to ‘return’ is rooted in the intuition that problems have origins” (34). We reconsider a relatively unproblematic former age in order to set the present right. Homer’s *Odyssey* provides Perl with the historiographical pattern of that drive home to a less complex, peaceful origin. Perl traces the impact this urge to return had on modernist writers (“In my end is my beginning”), and the political implications of the apparently inevitable disillusionment with the return.5

The *seinsvergessenheit* Martin Heidegger speaks of in “The Origin of the Work of Art” hints at this occlusion of the original by the subjectivist strategies of modern

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4 Ian Watt makes the same distinction in *The Rise of the Novel* 17.

5 Perl calls the violence that returns engender the “Book 24 phenomenon,” after Odysseus’ slaughter of the suitors.
history, and indicates another way in which this return is made. The original, indicates Heidegger, can manifest its truth if it is allowed to. His notion of truth as aletheia, un-forgetfulness or "unconcealedness," depends not on the correspondence between mind and thing, but the opening of the thing. Aletheia is therefore "the uncovering of being" (59):

"Truth occurs precisely as itself in that the concealing denial, as refusal, provides its constant source to all clearing, and yet, as dissembling, it metes out to all, clearing the indefensible severity of error. Concealing denial is intended to denote that opposition in the nature of truth which subsists between clearing, or lighting, and concealing. (55)"

There is here expressed a nostalgia for a primordial clearing, a clearing which can occur through art, which as techne "never signifies the action of making" but is instead a "bringing forth of beings in that it brings forth present beings as such beings out of concealedness and specifically into the unconcealedness of their appearance" (59).

The moderns then were seemingly faced with two possible options: either passively accept "tradition," and as an Allen Tate poem has it, "set up the grave / In the house? The Ravenous grave"; or accept a progressive view of history, and posit the present as the superior accretion of what has gone before. Most moderns rejected these options, however, and chose a third: to cut

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6 "Ode to the Confederate Dead," in The Fugitive Poets, William Pratt, ed. 69.
themselves off from history, and by so doing, make the past available for present-ation. One important expression of this was the return of the original, which made its appearance as the desire to appropriate the past in order to command it, a paradox most clearly seen in the two most important modernist theorists: Eliot and Pound. Their newness takes the strange shapes of encyclopedism and translation (Eliot studied Sanskrit as a Harvard undergraduate, and Pound worked in twelve languages). In both, the attempt to gather up the past and exert direction over it presupposes precisely the estrangement of the past which is such a hallmark of modernist literature.

iii. Abstraction

Perhaps the most obvious instance of the clearing gesture that I say is an element of modernism is the movement toward abstraction in art. Michael Levenson’s treatment of abstractionism in his *A Genealogy of Modernism* will help focus the discussion. Using T. E. Hulme as a nexus of modernism’s labyrinthine concerns, Levenson argues that abstract art, in both its literary and plastic expressions, is a reaction to and criticism of previous traditions.7 It distances itself self-consciously from previous art (compare J.M.W. Turner, or

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7 Meyer Schapiro’s “Introduction of Modern Art in America: The Armory Show” in his *Modern Art* is a succinct introduction to abstract art. For an exhaustive study on literary abstractionism, see Charles Altieri’s *Painterly Abstraction*.
the Impressionists he anticipates, with Kandinsky, for example). There is a dismissal of *chiaroscuro*, of shadings and gradations of light, in favor of bold heraldic colors, clear sharp lines, and geometric shapes. The movement denotes not just a parochial shift in art history, but a broad cultural action at work. In this movement, Levenson sees one figure as central not only for Hulme’s thought but for this entire cultural shift: Wilhelm Worringer.

In 1908 Worringer published his doctoral dissertation, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, a critique of the theory of empathy in aesthetics, what Worringer dismisses as “objectified self-enjoyment” (95). The urge to abstraction (*Abstraktionsdrang*) with its lack of concern for audience feeling, was diametrically opposed to this view.8 Worringer elaborates:

> the urge to abstraction finds its gratification in the beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline or, in general terms, in all abstract law and necessity. (Levenson 95)

This urge to abstraction displaces the sentiment of romantic empathy, which is, Worringer writes, “a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the outside world” (95). As important, however, is abstractionism’s indictment of the humanism which western, representative art presupposes. Any reference whatever to the human subject implies for Hulme

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8 Compare to Novalis’ “Miscellaneous Writing” 70: “poetic language should be organic and alive” (90).
a dangerous narcissism. Levenson traces Hulme's growing consciousness that romanticism is only symptom and logical conclusion of all western humanist aesthetics:

The romantic/classical opposition is simply not identical with the humanist/anti-humanist opposition—not in ordinary use, not in Hulme's use. Once Hulme saw humanism as the root of the problem, he ceased to regard the romantic/classical division as fundamental.

Only a position outside these conventional cultural oppositions such as "romantic/classical" could save western culture. Such was the position of Byzantine, Egyptian and Oriental art; all are less mimetic, less humanist and less bound to a provincially anthropocentric ethos. For Hulme as well as Worringer, this is the significance of abstractionism: that it holds out the hope of a revitalized culture based not on vitalism, but on pure form. One way to view this movement is the transition from image to icon, where the icon's transparency to another reality makes no pretension to reality itself. Abstractionism is a clearing from, among other things, the anthropocentrism that Husserl argued against. Only the viewer's or audience's complete alienation from the art object on a representational level could guarantee autonomy for both.

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9 This alienation from the art object finds literary expression in Viktor Shklovsky's notion of "enstrangement."
iv. That Modern Style

"Don’t talk to me about politics, I’m only interested in style."10 If James Joyce is singular among moderns for his (ostensible) aversion to politics, he is not unique in his concern for style. Indeed, Herbert Schneidau identifies it as one of modernism’s more original contributions.11 And though it seems the word has often been associated with the new (as in the thirteenth-century poetic movement “dolce stil nuovo,” for example) the moderns import a particular degree of distinction to its usage. Joyce’s comment then may indicate not that politics and style are mutually exclusive, but that in modernity even political questions have stylistic presuppositions.

Such seems to have been Ezra Pound’s thought. One might be accused of saying that since Pound says so much, it is easy to find support for a variety of opinions.12 But one perduring element in his work (having lasted from his tutorship under Ford Madox Ford in 1909 until at least the late 1930’s) is this high regard for clarity of style. Thus the significance of a poem such as “In a Station of the Metro” may be less the way it represents mimetically the fragmentariness of the age, than the way it shows the

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10 Quoted in Umberto Eco’s The Aesthetics of Chaosmos, 86.
11 Lecture at Louisiana State University, April 5, 1996.
12 Pound’s critical and political opinions change rapidly and radically, to say the least. See Perl, Schneidau and Hugh Kenner’s The Pound Era for mappings of the vicissitudes of his thought.
luminosity that clear, simple presentation affords. Schneidau writes, "Pound was dedicated to an essentially fragmentary poetics . . . not—as in the standard classroom explanation—because he believed that a culturally fragmented age demanded such a thing," but because the crystalline moment was a good in itself. That is why, Schneidau continues, "Pound moved for stark and suggestive isolation, positing an aesthetic of arrested attention" (228-229). This signaler and crystalline quality has been pointed out by D.S. Carne-Ross, who opposes Pound's univocal simplicity to polysemous writing:

The thing, however concretely rendered, always "stands for" something else supposedly more important. But Pound is not polysemous; his first level doesn't point beyond itself. (213)

If, as Eliot writes in "The Dry Salvages" in The Four Quartets, "we had the experience but missed the meaning," Pound's poetry seems to doubt that we even had the experience. His poetry does not proffer an array of meanings, but tries rather to regain an original experience that has been lost.

Though Pound's early work (under the influence of Provençal poetry) tended towards elaboration and ornamentation, his later poetry came to embrace a leaner aesthetic. Influenced by Ford Madox Ford, "by 1912-1913 Pound had adopted a vehemently anti-rhetorical critical perspective . . . " (Levenson 106). He demands for poetry a "hard" language: an illustration. In the very beginning of his ABC of Reading (1934), Pound writes, "No man is
equipped for modern thinking until he has understood the anecdote of [Louis Rodolphe] Agassiz and the fish" (17). Pound relates the story: the "great man" tells the student to describe a sunfish; the student tries and falters. His scientific summary of the fish's qualities, then a four-page essay, are rejected in turn. "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" (18). What exactly that was, Pound does not say. But to judge from much of what follows in the rest of ABC, what the student learns has to do with de-composing, decreation, stripping away, and getting to the skeletal structure of things, especially words. "Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear" (32).

Pound's dictum, "Dichten = condensare" (36) seems to be an outgrowth of his reverence for the unadorned "prose tradition" of Ford. Referring to Stendhal's style, Pound writes:

his so-called dignity of style, á la Louis XIV, and all that trail of what they call poetic ornament, is vastly inferior to prose if you are trying to give a clear and exact idea of the "mouvements du cœur"; if you are trying to show what a man feels, you can only do it by clarity. (97)

Perhaps nowhere is this desire for the skeletal, or the inner form of a thing, better shown than in Pound's essay "Machine Art" (1927-1930). In a section called "The Form"
Pound writes: "we find a thing beautiful in proportion to its aptitude to a function" (69). This appears to be no mere functionalism, however. Maria Luisa Ardizzone notes in her Introduction to Pound's *Machine Art*, the poet replaces a mimetic (specifically Platonic) notion of beauty with an aesthetic associated with the laws under which a thing functions:

> The critique of the concept of form is the key point on which Pound attacks one of metaphysics' strong points: beauty as the contemplation of an ideal realm, beauty as ideal form. Pound transforms this concept of beauty into the notion of form as law. (19)

Function helps focus attention, unencumbers art from unnecessary reference to ideal realms. Even the example Pound uses points to this desire for skeletal clarity, a clarity rendered almost to the point of desiccation. Speaking of the aesthetics of the automobile, he dismisses all distracting concern for "traditional aesthetics, feeling for furniture, upholstery, carosserie . . ." (69). Instead, "the best firms exhibit the chassis. And the chassis is indubitably the more interesting phenomenon" (70).

Yet if Pound requires clarity in the language and other arts, it is a clarity dissociated from the taxonomic pedantry of the neo-classicists or scholastics. And even if "Literature is language charged with meaning" (28), it still must be shaped by the exigencies of clearness. That is why Pound asserts the practicality of language, writing contra Novalis that "Language is the main means of human
communication" (32). Clarity is generated by efficient operation.

If what exactly Poundian clarity consists of is not apparent, its motivation seems more discernible. Though we've seen that anti-humanism plays some part in modernist aesthetics, it did not overwhelm all sympathy. Well before he made a commitment to fascist politics, Pound was concerned with the relationship between the arts and politics: Hulme died in the trenches, as did (on the German side) one of Husserl's students, Adolph Reinach.13 The general slaughter of World War I was a young memory, when, in "A Problem of (Specifically) Style" (1934), Pound suggested a correlation between thoughtless language and strife:

Even the death of the last survivors of the clogging and war-causing generation that preceded us, will not bring a new and illumined era unless at least the élite of ours or (that being unlikely) the next, make some effort to understand the function of language, and to understand why a tolerance for slipshod expression in whatever department of writing gradually leads to chaos, munitions-profiteers, the maintenance of wholly unnecessary misery, omnipresent obfuscation of mind, and a progressive rottenness of spirit. (122)

For Pound as well as Joyce, the statement "I'm only interested in style" becomes wholly political, not dissociating art from politics, but tying them together more intimately. In fact, in modern literature, when all else is "bracketed," what is left is often only style:

13 See Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* for how the war is remembered in literature.
thus its importance. Henry Sussman writes that it is no accident that twentieth-century philosophy places "enormous weight" on style:

Style becomes not mere aesthetic accompaniment or convenience, akin to the interior design of an office. It embodies and expresses the theoretical possibility of the discourse whose traits it provides. (81)

And if modern style is anything, it is plain and clear. Pound writes: "Without just style, expression, no clear idea, no law, no society having a decent order, no amenity, no clean relations with things, ideas, or people" (121).

v. Culture as Detritus: *Claritas* as Epiphany

The atavistic urge that Schneidau describes evidences itself in James Joyce. Stephen Dedalus' much-noted redefinition of Thomistic *claritas* seems to partake of the urge to return—but here to original texts. Describing aesthetic perception in Thomas, Stephen tells Cranly:

The radiance of which he speaks is the scholastic *quidditas*, the whatness of a thing. This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination. The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure. . . . (213)

14 Such a position made Pound vulnerable to the aesthetic promise of Italian Fascism. See Paul Morrison's *Poetics of Fascism*. Chapter Five.
Umberto Eco, referring to Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, describes this resurgence of a medieval aesthetic expression into modernist writing in terms of the shift between two world-views, from medieval unified cosmos to modernist fragmented chaos:

> Although the epiphanies in *Stephen Hero*, identified with a discovery of reality, still retain a connection with the scholastic concept of *quidditas*, the artist now builds his epiphanic vision from the objective context of events—by connecting isolated facts in new relationships through a completely arbitrary poetic catalysis. (*Chaosmos* 26)

Eco sees Joyce proffering an essentially romantic answer to this cultural break-up, a "conflict of a traditional order and a new vision of the world" (30).15 Stephen uses his inherited Catholic terminology only to sustain a romantic idea of the poetic word as revelation and the poet as the only one who can give a reason to things, a meaning to life, a form to experience, a finality to the world. (23)

Thus the movement from *claritas* to epiphany outlines the displacement and replacement of world-views:

> The medieval artist was the servant of things and their laws, charged to create the work according to given rules. The Joycean artist, last inheritor of the romantic tradition, elicits meaning from a world that would otherwise be amorphous and, in so doing, masters the world of which he becomes the center. (29)

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15 Much has been written in this regard on temporality. Georges Poulet in his *Studies in Human Time* describes the shift from an understanding of time as continuum to its partitioning; these "chaplets of time" are the presupposition for the modernist "arresting" of moments.
Morris Beja in his *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* notes that though epiphanies make their presence felt in pre-modern literature, they occur in modernist literature to a unique degree. He calls epiphany

a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it. (18)

Epiphany is therefore not epistemological like *anagnorisis* (discovery), but spiritual, yet deracinated from any theology. In a culture of debased tradition, epiphany is a secular, romantic replacement for religious revelation. Its focus is on the minutiae of quotidian life; for all of its spiritualization, there is in modernist epiphany a bourgeois fascination with the texture of tangible feelings and objects, similar to that found in a realist novel. Ashton Nichols agrees, and in *The Poetics of Epiphany* argues that “Joyce systematizes a means of bestowing significance on objects and mental states that would have previously been considered trivial” (12).

Nichols goes on to assert that this valorization of the ordinary has its roots in Wordsworth. Yet perhaps Nichols’ and Eco’s genealogies are too “traditional” in that they make antecedents causes of later phenomena, and thereby tie Joyce’s notion of epiphany too closely to the romantic notion of genius. Eco supposes that Joyce’s use of Thomistic categories constitutes only a framework inherent in his residual Catholicism, one that allows him
to speak of the psychology of poetic creation while simultaneously distancing himself from that framework's rigorism. Yet this emphasis on Joyce's (and Stephen Hero-Dedalus') background blinds Eco to Joyce's participation in the larger movement here outlined. However suggestive Eco's insight into the continuities of Joyce's modernism with romanticism, it effaces the difference between the romantic and modern aesthetics of clarity. Surely one of the "nets" Stephen Dedalus will "fly by" is the stultifying romanticism of empathy. When Joyce speaks of epiphany, he means it in stylistic and ontological ways as much as in psychological, and in fact ironizes Dedalus' romanticism.16

It is agreed however that the modernist epiphany is very far from the possibility implicit in the clarity of abstract laws, where existing things are illumined by participation in the ontology of a total cosmos. Rather, modernist epiphany is the clarity of the immediate, contingent object. Joseph Conrad in the 1897 "Preface" to The Nigger of the "Narcissus" is prescient of the tensions inherent in modernism.17 The artist, Conrad writes, "descends within himself," appealing to "our capacity for delight and wonder," to "our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all

16 This ironization of epiphany as artistic insight I think is present even in Portrait: for example, see the mock-heroic tone of the pandying-scene of the first chapter, and Stephen's adulation of Shelley, for example.
17 My reading here is to some extent indebted to Levenson.
creation": all tasks important to the romantics (145). On the other hand, the artist must "attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect." Conrad vacillates between the desire for empathetic "solidarity"--the keyword of the "Preface"--and harsh though just illumination of "facts."

Modernism, therefore, finds itself perched between the two poles of enacting romantic "solidarity" (the dangers of which Conrad's novel explicates) and discovers the "one illuminating and convincing quality--the very truth of [facts'] existence." Because the object--what he terms the "rescued fragment" is itself contingent, isolated from all participatory ontology, the epiphenomenon of clarity which supervenes on those "fragments" is all the more ephemeral. Condensed in Conrad's assertion is a crisis view of aesthetics in conversation with a crisis view of history:18 thus the contradictions of modernist aesthetics. Its anti-humanist urge demands an abandonment of all aesthetics of empathy, yet one of its main concerns is the revivification of culture, the shared matrix of feeling and form. It is concerned with total clear form, yet its ontology demands

18 See Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940) in his Illuminations for such a crisis view: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (255).
attention be paid only to fragments. It discards any optimism associated with Victorian progressivism, but realizes that the atavistic, the return phenomenon, confronts the modern not with the hoped-for clarity, but with the runic and the oracular, a world like Oedipus', where Eliot's Madame Sosostris becomes the best possible reader.
Chapter IV. The Aesthetics of the Vague: "Conviction and Taste" in Henry James's The Ambassadors

Transition: Taxonomy, Exemplification

A transition is needed between the foregoing historical survey and the subsequent examination of specific literary texts. Even within the limited scope and competence of the present study, clearly the terms "clarity" and "ambiguity" undergo certain shifts in application. Yet it is apparent that there is no originary meaning of the terms existing free of historical vicissitudes; there is no occluded arché of the terms we are responsible for retrieving, even were we able to do so. Meaning is dynamic, where even in the present ambiguity and clarity have an active relationship to each other, one vacillating between contrariety and complementarity. Such dynamism is no excuse for obscurity, however, and there is a profit in arresting the terms for a moment, even if such a taxonomy breaks down in the study of the texts.

Clarity seems to have resolved around three predominant topoi: i. clarity as a dramatic process—catharsis as clarification; ii. clarity as a specific aesthetic value, the luminosity supervening on a thing as

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The first three chapters may be considered a "history of the ideas" of clarity and ambiguity. This is said however with some awareness of the problematic ontology the phrase involves (that is, whether these "ideas" exist outside of individual personal consciousness or are transmitted through time inter-subjectively, and therefore contingently).
radiance, be it medieval (on "form," ) or modern (on the "fragment"); iii. clarity as a self-evidence from which one may derive certain knowledge.

Ambiguity has similarly been used here in the widest sense, and encompasses: i. strict ambiguity--the existence of two possible references for one word; ii. vagueness--in William James's thought, for example, the fluidity of the world over against the conscious mind; iii. polysemy--for medieval exegesis, for example, the existence of multiple meanings in a text (especially a literary text).

This study has tended to draw together these diverse meanings in order to place the two terms in dialogue with each other in the hopes of outlining a larger movement between them, and sketching reasons for shifts in their evaluation. But juxtaposing the two for contrast does not therefore mean that the groupings are arbitrary and merely nominalistic. It is no accident that Aquinas regards clarity as an aesthetic value at a time when the mind was thought to be meaningfully related to the ratio of a thing. Such was the predominant understanding at least through Winckelmann. Conversely, ambiguity is eschewed in a system (the Stoic, for example) that assumes the intelligibility of ethical choice, and takes on positive significance only when there is a lack of cultural consensus regarding fundamental aesthetic and
epistemological issues. To display this dynamic between the terms at work requires a turn to the specific literary works. And yet it seems the texts themselves cannot be merely exemplifications of either these terms or the larger movement. It would be impossible to trace the multifarious shiftings of the terms in the few texts examined. In addition, as the German literary critics indicate, one may question at some level the ability of a literary text to "exemplify" anything but itself. This in fact is one of the questions that the transmutations between clarity and ambiguity evinces. For if M. H. Abrams and others are correct in seeing a shift away from a mimetic understanding of art during the Romantic period, then such a shift certainly questions what the end of art is, and questions too the possibility of clarification in art. This chapter will attempt to lay out what types of clarity literature affords considering this shift, doing

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2 Similarly, Elizabeth Bruss in her Beautiful Theories sees a relation between the rise of critical theory after WW II, with its "multiple interpretive strategies," and "the breaking up of the appearance of consensus in the culture as a whole . . . " (17ff).

3 Regarding exemplification, Hillis Miller points out the difficulty Kant has in reconciling the empirical nature of exemplification with the abstract moral law he precisely wants to free from such contingencies (Ethics of Reading 24ff).
so, paradoxically, by focusing on one of Henry James's most ambiguous novels, *The Ambassadors*.

It is something of a cliché that James's fiction is ambiguous, and that his last novels especially frustrate interpretive efforts. In terms of the historical development of the terms sketched in the first three chapters, the reason for this should be somewhat apparent. James is an inheritor of Romantic aesthetic assumptions;4 many of his novels enact the meeting of the beautiful as the vague (which had become one of the tenets of Romantic aesthetics) with the promise of art to clarify (a promise assumed to be fulfillable at least since Aristotle's privileging of poetry over history).5 This is done in James under the auspices of the generic requirements of the novel, "the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms."6 *The Ambassadors* will be taken as symptomatic. It traces the steps and mental operations of Strether as he interprets the aesthetic and moral phenomena he encounters, all of which prompt him to ask these fundamental questions: what is the profit and cost of narration? What is the relationship between a narrated life and a lived-through life? How does one make ethical choices (clarity) in the face of possibility

4 For broader discussions, see Charles Schug's *The Romantic Genesis of the Modern Novel*, especially Chapter 4; also Daniel Fogel's *Henry James and the Structure of the Romantic Imagination*.
5 *Poetics* 9.3.
(ambiguity)? How does the aesthetic as the vague influence those ethical choices? In all, the novel will help us see whether clarity can manifest itself in literature at a newly ambiguous time.

**Ambiguity in James: Critical Reception**

After his first puzzling interview with Chad, Strether sits at a café with Chad's friend John Little Bilham and asks:

"What game under the sun is he playing?" He signified the next moment that his allusion was not to the fat man immersed in dominoes on whom his eyes had begun by resting, but to their host of the previous hour, as to whom, there on the velvet bench, with a final collapse of all consistency, he treated himself to the comfort of indiscretion. (110)

The short scene has elements typical of many in *The Ambassadors*. It contains the first dialogue in about one hundred lines, yet Strether begins with a question, as if nothing in the previous text has been settled; it is backward-glancing ("of the previous hour"); Strether uses a metaphor that is mistaken as literal by someone else ("what game": Strether does not mean "dominoes"—significantly, a game of "black and white"—but the more gray and vague social game); there is a "final collapse" of both logical categories ("consistency") and moral propriety ("indiscretion").

James's fiction is laden with such scenes, and critics at least since Edmund Wilson's essay "Ambiguity in Henry James" (1934) have investigated the role of the ambiguous in his fiction. Wilson's essay on "The Turn of
the Screw" is actually a quite straightforward Freudian reading, with the central character, the governess, a case of projected sexual frustration:

When one has once got hold of the clue to this meaning of The Turn of the Screw, one wonders how one could ever have missed it. There is a very good reason, however, in the fact that nowhere does James unequivocally give the thing away: almost everything from beginning to end can be read equally in either of two senses. (105)

Wilson settles the ambiguity through extra-textual "clues" given by James, making ambiguity an ultimately resolvable stylistic device employed to garner suspense.7

But for Shlomith Rimmon true ambiguity cannot be resolved. In her The Concept of Ambiguity--the Example of James, Rimmon gives an exhaustive taxonomy of logical ambiguity, distinguishes it from related phenomena, and interprets several of James's works. Ambiguity as Rimmon defines it is the existence of mutually exclusive yet "copresent and equitenable" (and therefore undecidable) interpretive possibilities (9). Strict ambiguity must be distinguished from vagueness (a term that admits of varying degrees), and multiplicity of meanings or indeterminacy (which need not be mutually exclusive).

Rimmon's definition in the context of the present study seems unhelpfully narrow; it is actually quite close to the Stoic definition, but lacks the ethical

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7 Appendix B of Dorothea Krook's The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James treats the reception and criticism of Wilson's article (370-389).
relationship and import the Stoics assume. Further, she
too firmly separates ambiguity from related phenomena such
as vagueness and indeterminacy. Rimmon makes the
distinctions so strong in the hope that her treatment will
"stop endless debates among critics, debates motivated by
a compulsion to choose between mutually exclusive
hypotheses, when the very phenomenon of ambiguity makes
such a choice impossible and undesirable" (xiii).
Regardless of the alleged value of the desire to "stop
endless debates," this hope could only be carried out by
definitively labeling a particular text "ambiguous" in her
restricted terms; this would only shift the debate to
determining which (apparently few) texts fit this narrow
category.

Alternately, Ralf Norrman, in his study The Insecure
World of Henry James’s Fiction: Ambiguity and Intensity,
treats the stylistic elements of ambiguity in James’s
fiction. He distinguishes five types: pronoun ambiguity,
which makes references unclear; end-linking (connection of
linguistic elements in successive sentences, through
repetition, for example) which suggests a timid narrative
casting back; emphatic affirmation, a version of
“protesting too much”; linguistic “formulas,” stock
phrases which produce an incantatory effect on reality;
and most importantly, chiastic inversions such as “Fair is
foul and foul is fair,” which indicate most radically that
James’s world “is a world characterized by insecurity,
which is manifested in style in ambiguity-and-intensity-creating devices" (185). This last is the most significant form of stylistic ambiguity:

In a chiasmus the two halves are each other's inversions; each other's mirror-images. The direction within a chiasmus is towards the middle. It is reflected there. Chiasmus is therefore typical of narcissistic people. . . . (187-88)

Norrman considers chiasmus in James's fiction central and especially pathological, for it indicates metaphysical uncertainty that makes any action "dread-ful." 8

As valuable as these studies are, when they attempt to place Jamesian ambiguity in a larger context, they emphasize epistemological and linguistic issues. For all the critical attention James's stylistics garner, relatively few works address his situation in a broader history of aesthetics, or in the context of the history of ideas. For their own valuable purposes, they take "ambiguity" narrowly, failing to engage what impact the valorization of ambiguity has on its interlocutor,

8 Other treatments of Jamesian ambiguity include Charles Thomas Samuels' The Ambiguity of Henry James—not an interpretive, but an evaluative work. Samuels goes through much of James's oeuvre; ambiguity seems for him identical with successful technical complexity. "In his confused novels, James makes us expect clear advocacy or derogation and then either fails to validate or actually blurs his own distinctions. The ambiguous books reflect such errors but don't succumb to them. The complex novels avoid them entirely" (8). The Ambassadors is James's best novel, for "In no other novel does James make such peace with things as they are" (204). Jean Frantz Blackall's Jamesian Ambiguity and The Sacred Fount does not treat ambiguity per se, but rather only as an aspect of The Sacred Fount, which she sees as transitional between James's "experimental" phase and the last three novels.
clarity. Since the purpose of this study is to outline a larger shift than can be accounted for by these specific studies, it is useful to reconsider Jamesian ambiguity, for *The Ambassadors* is the site of a clash of two notions of ambiguity: ambiguity as multiplicity of interpretive possibilities, and ambiguity as vagueness (but as we shall see, a specifically *aesthetic* vagueness). In the background of these two ambiguities is catharsis as clarification, the hope that art (the story) can help clarify life. The novel enacts the internal disharmony of the promise of the literary to clarify under the auspices of an aesthetics of the vague. To display this confrontation, four areas will be investigated: the beautiful as the vague; the story as seduction; recognitions; and repetition.

**The Beautiful as the Vague**

Henry James's *The Ambassadors* unfolds the drama of consciousness of the fifty-five-year old American Lewis Lambert Strether. He is sent by a widowed Woollett matron to retrieve her estranged son Chad, who had become entangled with a woman, a woman Strether assumes is "base, venal--out of the streets" (45). Chad is expected to run the family business, and Strether is expected to have Mrs. Newsome's hand should he succeed in his embassy. He finds Chad deeper than he expected, and Marie de Vionnet more refined and sincere than he had anticipated. However, Strether later discovers in the "Cheval Blanc" scene that
what the two share is at base an ordinary adulterous passion. In turn, his efforts to have Chad salvage the relationship fail, and Strether realizes he must return home defeated.

One level of Strether’s drama is his confrontation with an aesthetics of the vague. The distinction between an ideal of beauty and an understanding requiring a freedom of form is reflected in, for example, Kant’s distinction in the *Critique of Judgement* between *pulchritudo vaga* and *pulchritudo adhaerens* (§16, 17). The latter, “conditioned beauty” inheres in those things whose form is restricted by purpose—namely, the person: “The only being which has the purpose of its existence in itself is man, who can determine his purpose by reason” (69). “Free” beauty, or vague⁹ beauty, on the other hand, is not fixed by a purpose as is human beauty. Schlegel and Novalis take the notion of freedom, of indeterminacy of form, as a determinate element of a new aesthetic sense. The coordinates of James’s approach to the intersection of aesthetics and ethics resound with this Kantian insight.¹⁰

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⁹ “Vague” comes from the Latin *vagus*, “wandering.” Etymologies are of course empirical and highly contingent, but James’s heightened sense of diction in general, in *The Ambassadors* in particular (seen in the “international theme,” and the Preface’s drawing attention to the alleged poverty of the English language and the necessity of “clutch[ing] exotic aids” [5]), justify their study.

¹⁰ My use of Kant here is selective and perhaps out of context, but I think this distinction is a convenient and discrete entrance into the labyrinthine thought of the third *Critique*, whose theme is the way “Aesthetic factors
Although the specific term *pulchritudo vaga* seems to be a coinage of Kant, the association of the vague with the beautiful has a long semantic history. Italo Calvino’s chapter “Exactitude” in his posthumously published *Six Memos for the Millennium*, gives the Italian connotation:

*I might mention in passing that as far as I know Italian is the only language in which the word vago (vague) also means “lovely, attractive.” Starting out from the original meaning of “wandering,” the word vago still carries an idea of movement and mutability, which in Italian is associated both with uncertainty and indefiniteness and with gracefulness and pleasure.* (57)

Calvino goes on to criticize the Italian lyric poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) for his valorization of the “vague.” The point remains however that Leopardi was fully romantic in that valorization. This association of the vague with the beautiful forms the background against which the dialectic between ethics and aesthetics is worked out in *The Ambassadors*. The novel is full of ambiguity and vagueness from the beginning; even the title-word *ambassador* implies duplicity. In general the muted though brutal dialectic that the “international theme” contains partakes in the contentiousness of nineteenth-century dialectical systems such as those of Hegel, Marx and Freud.11 It is precisely this subtle

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11 Peter Brooks 134.
violence that Strether encounters in his journey, for throughout the novel he is besought by an aesthetics of vagueness that opposes the moral clarity of Calvinist Woollett.

An aesthetics of the vague, based on the dissociation of beauty not only from ethics but also from form, promises, in short, freedom, “a consciousness of personal freedom as [Strether] hadn’t known for years” (17). This promise begins to be uneasily fulfilled as soon as Strether lands in Europe:

He was prepared to be vague to Waymarsh about the hour of the ship’s touching, and that he both wanted extremely to see him and enjoyed extremely the duration of delay--these things, it is to be conceived, were early signs in him that his relation to his actual errand might prove none of the simplest. He was burdened, poor Strether--it had to be confessed at the outset--with the oddity of a double consciousness. There was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference. (18)

The same double-consciousness which oppresses Strether in Woollett allows him a certain freedom in Europe, while the vagueness, the purposelessness, of the time lets Strether do as he will. That “these things” might be complicating factors appears to be an intuition that the narrator (rather than Strether) entertains. For now it is left for Strether to enjoy the delay.

The indulgence of freedom is a constant concern in the novel. Strether in Europe no longer feels encumbered by the strictures of Woollett; his (or rather James’s)
ficelle Maria Gostrey intuits that Chad wants to be free of his lover, to “shake her off” (108); Madame de Vionnet’s daughter Jeanne declares to Strether:

Oh, but I’m almost American too. That’s what mamma has wanted me to be— I mean like that; for she has wanted me to have lots of freedom. She has known such good results from it. (154)

It is typical of the doubling of the novel, of the dialectic of the “international theme,” that though Strether clearly associates Europe with freedom, there is a counter-movement that precisely sees America as the true arena of freedom. In addition to Jeanne’s remark, Maria Gostrey says of Americanness: “Surely nothing that’s so pressing was ever so ill defined” (86-87). For Strether, however, Woollett is not free, and proffers only the provincialism of moral certitude. Strether’s journey in the first chapters of the novel is therefore entirely liberatory.

At this point, so much is made apparent to Strether, yet his freedom has the drawback of centering exclusively around aesthetic experience. He impulsively allows his new acquaintance Maria Gostrey to show him about the walls of the medieval English city Chester:

The tortuous wall--girdle, long since snapped, of the little swollen city, half held in place by careful civic hands--wanders in narrow file

Critics often point out the significance of the names in the novel: Maria Gostrey (“go stray”) is paired with Marie de Vionnet; Lambert echoes with Lambinet and Balzac’s Louis Lambert (23); Newsome is a homonym for “new sum.” The street-names (Scribe, Belle-Chase, Boulevard Malesherbes) further the embedded allegory.
between parapets smoothed by peaceful
generations, pausing here and there for a
dismantled gate or a bridged gap, with rises
and drops, steps up and steps down queer
twists, queer contacts, peeps into homely
streets and under the brows of gables, views of
cathedral tower and waterside fields, of
huddled English town and ordered English
country. Too deep almost for words was the
delight of these things to Strether; yet as
deeply mixed with it were certain images of his
inward picture. (24)

After it is parenthetically made the “girdle” which holds
the city together, the wall is personified as a pedestrian
observer. It “wanders” (vagrantly?) “paus[es],” “peeps,”
“views.” As a matter of fact, this sounds very much like
what Strether will do for the next six months; he too will
wander, pause, peep, and view. Walking along the wall,
the “fagged-out” (61) Strether is allowed respite from the
moralism of Woollett and the “success” of Milrose, his
friend and companion Waymarsh. Strether is permitted to
be vagrant. Vagrancy is not something he has ever
permitted himself, however, and after he has looked at his
watch a fifth time, Maria Gostrey notes, “You’re doing
something that you think not right” (25). What he is not
doing right is “enjoying.” Moreover, the meandering wall
becomes a figure for a particular type of wandering, one
that affords one to “peep” and “view,” one that brings
“delight”: in other words, narrative wandering. The wall
is the figure of the meeting of wandering and pleasure,
which further sounds like definition of “story.” It
includes “queer contacts” that prefigure the contact
Strether will have much later in the Cheval Blanc scene, a contact described as "queerer than fiction" (308).

Descriptions of vagueness coalesce around Chad’s lover Madame de Vionnet: Miss Barrace says of her, "She’s various. She’s fifty women." (157); in Strether’s first sight of her, she is in a dress "in substances and textures vaguely rich" (160). Late in the novel Strether enters Maria Gostrey’s apartment: "He was sure within a minute that something had happened," for he felt Madame de Vionnet’s presence in the "vague values" of the colors. She is also connected with fluidity and water-imagery: Maria Gostrey worries that Chad is trying to "sink" Marie de Vionnet (107); it is said that Marie settled in Paris and "steered her boat" (139); later Strether must decide whether to help her "keep the adventurous skiff afloat" (220). This connection between water and Madame de Vionnet rings with Othello’s condemnation of Desdemona as "false as water," and prepares the reader for the revelation of the truth on the flux of the river. Strether concludes after his final interview with Madame de Vionnet: "Women were thus endlessly absorbent, and to deal with them was to walk on water" (322).

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13 In an interesting parallelism that replaces Madame de Vionnet with Mrs. Newsome, Chad later tells Strether, "Mother’s worth fifty of Sally!" (203), significantly using the financial term "worth."
14 David Lodge’s "Strether on the River" has the most thorough treatment of water-imagery.
Strether's engagement with this fluid European aesthetic of the vague requires, typically, that he cast a cold eye on his life. Strether's concise creed (his avuncular advice to Birham), "Live all you can, it's a mistake not to" (132), is both a sincere admonition from one who has a sense of having missed out in life and a somewhat self-indulgent rejoinder from someone who has chosen to be a critic. The passage has received exhaustive critical attention; let it suffice to note the intersection between freedom and the interpretation of life that this passage evokes. Significantly, the word "mistake" appears three times (as the "Preface" points out [1]), thereby foregrounding Strether's failure of life as a failure of interpretation, his sense of mistaking what has been presented to him. Leo Bersani notes this nexus of freedom and the reading of meaning, and goes as far as to say that James's "subject is freedom,"

but we must understand that word in the sense of inventions so coercive that they resist any attempt to enrich—or reduce—them to meaning. James asserts that freedom much more confidently in his prefaces than in his fiction. (132)

Strether's journey at first amounts to an evasion of the glibness of imposed meaning; the vague offers a redress to the narrowly linear, ethical, purposive-giving judgments of Woollett. As Strether's experiences accrue, they soon violate Woollett's smug, self-assured appraisals. Thoughts commingle and judgment is deferred. Even the narrator, for example, seemingly blames Strether for
"lumping together." Strether speaks to Maria Gostrey about Waymarsh:

"He thinks us sophisticated, he thinks us worldly, he thinks us wicked, he thinks us all sorts of queer things," Strether reflected; for wondrous were the vague quantities our friend had within a couple of short days acquired the habit conveniently and conclusively lumping together. (39)

There are many things "lumped together" stylistically in the novel. The absence of commas in lists of adjectives ("She's a tremendously clever brilliant capable woman" 166; "bright clean ordered water-side life" 176), gives the impression of withholding of judgment, but also the impression of simultaneity.15 The point of this simultaneity of presentation is certainly to render Strether uncertain, who remains our "center of consciousness," thereby de-centering the reader. Yet the epistemological concerns do not in general overshadow the aesthetic ones, and aesthetic experience in the novel tends to take on the Greek root of the word, aesthesis (perception). One sense experience reminds Strether of another, with each shifting diffusely into the next. At breakfast with Bilham in Chad's rooms, Strether sat

with Mr. Bilham on one side, with a friend of Mr. Bilham's on the other, with Waymarsh stupendously opposite, and with the great hum

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15 Contrast to, for example, the dinner scene in James Joyce's "The Dead," in which the substitution of conjunctions for commas gives the impression of succession as food is being served: "The raisins and almonds and figs and apples and oranges and chocolates and sweets were now passed about the table . . . " (137). See also Lodge 193, note.
of Paris coming up in softness, vagueness—for Strether himself indeed already positive sweetness—through the sunny windows toward which the day before his curiosity had raised its wings from below. (76)

The diction, the "softness, vagueness," resolving into a "positive sweetness," makes abstract nouns out of adjectives; the "-ness" indicates an ill-defined diffuseness that permeates the diction as well as the sunny room. Words such as "wonderful," "freedom," "beautiful" in The Ambassadors retain their generality, especially when the object of the unhelpful modifier "vague."¹⁶

Any new experience for Strether offers a variety of perceptions: Strether’s first sight of Chad is as he enters the box of a theatre:

The fact was that his perception of the young man’s identity—so absolutely checked for a minute—had been quite one of the sensations that count in life; he certainly had never known one that had acted, as he might have said, with more of a crowded rush. And the rush, though both vague and multitudinous, had lasted a long time, protected, as it were, yet at the same time aggravated, but the circumstances of its coinciding with a stretch of decorous silence. (89)

The rush crowds out the silence, yet is both “protected” and “aggravated” by it. Strether, it seems, cannot be left in silence. (Later, after Mrs. Newsome stops writing him, he meditates, "he had never so lived with her as during this period of her silence" [195].) Silence

¹⁶ See Ian Watt’s comment on the use of abstract nouns in his “The First Paragraph of The Ambassadors” 471.
somehow brings to Strether the enormity of presence, with his experience always charged in "vague and multitudinous" terms. One doubts that it is possible to use "multitudinous" without echoing Macbeth's "this my hand rather will the multitudinous seas incarnadine."

Shakespeare resounds throughout the novel--Paris contains, the "Preface" tells us, "more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett" (8). But "multitudinous," while attesting to the welter of perceptions Strether has, takes on special import in light of the bloodied hand imagery discussed below.

Under this assault of the vague and multitudinous, normal categories of logic seem to desert Strether. When he confronts Chad and asks him directly if he is in a woman's "hands," Chad responds:

One doesn't know quite what you mean by being in women's "hands." It's all so vague. One is when one isn't. One isn't when one is, and then one can't quite give people away.... I've never got stuck--so very hard.... (100)

The vague defies an either/or construction, and Strether finds himself precisely not challenging Chad about what are really straightforward syntactical and logical questions. Only much later, yet before the final deflation of the Cheval Blanc scene, does Strether start to hint that the freedom promised by Chad's vagueness is a freedom from commitment to Madame de Vionnet; Strether finally demands to know if Chad wants to return to America, and presses a little more than before:
As with a sound half-dolorous, half-droll and all vague and equivocal, Chad buried his face for a little in his hands, rubbing it in a whimsical way that amounted to an evasion, [Strether] brought it out more sharply: “Do you?” (288)

One of the things Strether so admires about Chad is the feeling that he knew “how to live” (which is, ironically, the object of the discipline of ethics). But he soon realizes that there is a counterpart to the aesthetics of the vague, and that it sometimes “amounts to evasion”; an aestheticized society can easily become a society anesthetized to ethics, where Chad’s “famous knowing how to live” (312) is actually knowing how to avoid: “He habitually left things to others.”

Marshall McLuhan, in his essay “The Southern Quality,” contrasts writers of the American South with those of the North, and elaborates on what Jamesian society holds dear:

A society held together by a tense will and evasive bustle, can never produce a life-style with all that implies of passion. It can and does produce abundant tourists, museums, and houses like museums. And with these James is completely at home. (188)

“Evasive bustle” in the service of beauty leads what David Lodge calls The Ambassadors’ language of “heightened cliché”:

All his most sensitive characters speak and to some extent think in this way. It is a kind of in-group game which consists in managing to discuss, or at least to suggest, infinite complexities and discriminations in a vocabulary that is on the face of it remarkably impoverished. (197)
Here is an "equivocal," ambiguous, and as Strether finds out, a duplicitous language. The novel occasionally allows Strether hints of the distinctions between the vague as the beautiful and the vague as the, at best, merely errant, or at worst, the duplicitous. He comes closest to seeing the difference just after the Cheval Blanc scene of Book Eleventh; alone and in the dark, Strether reflects on his gullibility:

> It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; he almost blushed, in the dark for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll. (313)

The observation is a shocking one, and could only have been made by someone as simultaneously guilty and conscientious as Strether. The vague as social fiction, conveyed through the motif of the dress, is innocuous enough, and is present in other Jamesian fiction: in *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer complains that clothing is "imposed upon me by society," to which Madame Merle replies, "Would you prefer to go without them?" (253). Strether's demystifying shock is compounded by realizing that because Chad and Madame de Vionnet return with him to Paris, their "other garments" must be back at their retreat, leaving Madame de Vionnet "with not so much as a shawl to wrap around, an appearance that matched her story" (312). But the image of dressing a doll in vagueness draws together other unfortunate elements: Strether implicitly condemns himself for infantilism,
while the figure also offers a disturbing counterpoint to Strether's first impression of Jeanne de Vionnet:

> What was in the girl was indeed too soft, too unknown for direct dealing; so that one could only gaze at it as at a picture, quite staying one’s own hand. (135)

Carrying the hand imagery further, it is in this scene that Strether finds himself manipulated. But even more, Strether realizes that his aestheticized gaze has not been disinterested, and his own hands have not been "stayed," but have been "incarnadined" by dressing up lies and illicit intimacy in vagaries. Strether recommends to Bilham that he marry Jeanne de Vionnet, explaining that he will even bequeath him money to do so:

> I’ve been sacrificing so to strange gods that I feel I want to put on record, somehow, my fidelity—fundamentally unchanged after all—to our own. I feel as if my hands were embrued with the blood of monstrous alien altars—of another faith altogether. There it is—it’s done. (258)

Strether assures Little Bilham that "This is practical politics," advantageous to all around. It is hard to know exactly what Strether thinks constitutes his sacrilege, for by arranging marriages he becomes more interested, and his hands more bloodied. He culpably allows himself to be dragged into an increasingly vague, multitudinous, and tawdry story. Though the romantic aesthetic of the vague promises freedom, it incurs for Strether the danger of entanglements in lies.
"Under the rubric": Narrative Seduction

During their first interview, Madame de Vionnet asks the intransigent Strether, "Will you consent to go with me a little?" (147). The appeal of such a journey is obvious for Strether. Critics point out that Strether himself is attracted to Madame de Vionnet, and several scenes make him a substitute for Chad.17 He has just told Bilham to "live," and the temptation to live vicariously presents itself, for Chad "know[s] how to live" (282). Yet if the appeal is apparent to Strether, so too are the dangers. His moments of appreciation of Paris coincide with an acknowledgment of deflection from his errand: "But is that what I came out for?" (107), and later, "Whatever he had come out for he hadn’t come to go into that" (162). His sense of a purpose endangered is a possibility that nigh-omniscient Woollett had apparently already envisioned:

It all sprang at bottom from the beauty of Mrs. Newsome’s desire that he should be worried with nothing that was not of the essence of his task; by insisting that he should thoroughly intermit and break she had so provided for his freedom that she would, as it were, have only herself to thank. (60)

The "beauty" of the Woollett mandate resides in its stark sense of purpose derived from moral certainty, one that ironically "provided for his freedom." (Not coincidentally, this sounds much like Kant’s pulchritudo

17 For two examples among others: at the Cheval Blanc scene Strether wants to be in Madame de Vionnet’s boat (noted by Terrence Cave 454); at Gloriani’s party Strether wants to “be” Chad (133).
adhaerens, the beauty of things that have reference to a purpose.) This immediacy of moral purpose is conveyed via Mrs. Newsome’s daughter Sarah to Strether, who observes of her and her ultimatum that “she was definite. She was—at last—crystalline” (285). Woollett makes its definite, crystalline purpose known and is ruthlessly efficacious in carrying it out. The crystalline “beauty” of this sense of purpose is quite different from the beauty that “so complicates” Strether’s vision, pulchritudo vaga.

Strether’s questioning of purposes echoes with Kantian aesthetics. He feels constantly under assault by the distracting appeal of the beautiful. Here Kant’s distinction between “free beauty” and purposive beauty meet and conflict in Strether. Strether’s “That, you see, is my only logic. Not out of the whole affair to have got anything for myself” (344) is essentially a protestation of disinterestedness. Strether errs, however, in projecting his own disinterest onto others, accepting Chad’s interest in his lover as “disinterested” (157), and thinking (more correctly) that “The pure flame of the disinterested burned in [Maria Gostrey’s] cave of treasures as a lamp in a Byzantine vault” (240). An aesthetics linked with the vague operates against ethical standards moreso than an aesthetics linked with clarity

18 Maria seems to be the only one who remains disinterested, not working to her advantage: “to stay her hand from promoting these things, she had, on private, difficult, but rigid, lines, played strictly fair” (329).
(as was Aquinas'); this fact amplifies the tension between the ethical and the aesthetic in *The Ambassadors*.

Strether’s deflection from his mission by complicity in a "story" other than his own has precedence, however, for the history of the novelistic form contains a variety of bad readers and critics. Emma Bovary loves romantic novels and sentimental hagiography; Julien Sorel of Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* is by nature and vocation an imitator (he loves *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, is a professional copyist, and mimics the daring Napoleon); Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* read “light literature” as a boy and whiles away the time dreaming of heroic exploits; “Don Quixote” names both the first novel and its first victim.19 In *The Ambassadors* there too are seducing spells and charms throughout, objects under the “spell of transmission” (146), and people “under the spell of recognition.” At dinner with Maria Gostrey Strether finds himself charmed, and reflects:

He had been to the theatre, even to the opera, in Boston, with Mrs. Newsome, more than once acting as her only escort; but there had been no little confronted dinner, no pink lights, no whiff of vague sweetness, as a preliminary: one of the results of which was that at present, mildly rueful, though with a sharpish accent, he actually asked himself why there hadn’t. There was much the same difference in his impression of the noticed state of his companion, whose dress was “cut down,” as he believed the term to be, in respect to

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19 More obvious is the case of the fiction as lie. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, to comfort the fiancé, Marlowe changes Kurtz’s last words from “‘The horror’” to “your name.”
shoulders and bosom, in a manner quite other than Mrs. Newsome's and who wore round her throat a broad velvet band with an antique jewel—he was rather complacently sure it was antique—attached to it in front. Mrs. Newsome's dress was never any degree "cut down," and she never wore round her throat a broad velvet band: if she had moreover, would it have served so to carry on and complicate, as he now almost felt, his vision? (42)

The paragraph lays out the terms of the dialectic between the aesthetic and the ethical; Strether's questioning (and it should be noted that the novel starts with "Strether's first question") of the experience of the beautiful takes its bearings from the opposition. Woollett and Paris, Maria Gostrey and Mrs. Newsome, and later, respectively, Mary Stuart and Queen Elizabeth (43) all confront each other in an almost violent antithesis. The "vague sweetness" of the present is balanced by a "sharpish accent." The almost legal diction of "the term" and "in respect to" laughably conflicts with overtly sexual "shoulders and bosom."

The conflicts here work themselves out before Strether as a drama, and overall, Europe's performance charms Strether; the well-known dramatic and painterly metaphors that James employs indicate both the spectacle and the duplicity of make-believe. Things come "as pat as in a play" (183); Madame de Vionnet "was, like Cleopatra in the play, indeed various and multifold" (160); at the Cheval Blanc, her manner becomes a "performance" in which

20 Jeffrey Perl notes that the oppositions in the novel are displayed in the military figures that abound, 162ff.
even she ceases to believe (311). For all the Americans, Europe is museum, theatre and circus; and while Strether tends to contemplate from a distance and aestheticize, the Pocock entourage treats Europe as game. Circus imagery recurs jarringly throughout the novel; Waymarsh and Sarah Pocock in particular are fond of the circus (indeed, some critics think the two are carrying on an affair), while Jim Pocock prefers the racier Variétés (216). Yet the circus is not only pedestrian entertainment for American tourists, for in Chad’s hands the imagery takes a sinister turn. Strether feels himself distracted and seduced:

> He could have wished indeed, so far as this went, that Chad were less of a mere cicerone; for he was not without the impression—now that the vision of his game, his plan, his deep diplomacy, did recurrently assert itself—of his taking refuge from the realities of their intercourse in profusely dispensing, as our friend mentally phrased it, *panem et circenses*. Our friend continued to feel rather smothered in flowers, though he made in his other moments the almost angry inference that this was only because of his odious ascetic suspicion of any form of beauty. (118)

Strether’s suspicion of Chad ("What game’s he playing?") is well-founded; Chad’s "game, his plan" is to avoid "the realities of their intercourse in profusely dispensing . . . *panem et circenses*" and smothering him with flowers.21 Strether’s last meeting with Chad is particularly bizarre in the contrast between Strether’s

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21 Here the aesthetic is linked with violence. For another example of flowers used as weapons, see The Aspern Papers: "I would batter the women with lilies—I would bombard their citadel with roses" (29).
message, "You'll be a brute," and Chad's circus-like, antic reception thereof, which involves an elaborate metaphor of money balled up as a soccer ball which he mimes kicking. Chad accepts Strether's rebuttal in good humor, and reassures him while largely ignoring him. Chad is restless, dances "a fancy step" excitedly, and "gives the impression . . . of an irrelevant hornpipe or jig" (340).22

Yet Strether should know by that point that Chad's games, his hornpipe or jig, are not irrelevant, but have been part of his modus operandi throughout. In fact, irrelevant, distracting movement designed to sway opinion and obscure motivations sounds very much like a definition of Chad's chosen profession: advertising. "It really does the thing, you know," Chad explains:

They were face to face under the street-lamp as they had been the first night, and Strether, no doubt, looked blank. "Affects, you mean, the sale of the object advertised?"

"Yes, but affects it extraordinarily; really beyond what one had supposed. I mean of course when it's done as one makes out that in our roaring age it can be done. I've been finding out a little; though it doubtless doesn't amount to much more than what you originally, so awfully vividly--and all, very nearly, that first night--put before me. It's an art like another, and infinite like all the arts." (339)

22 Human bodies are described throughout the novel, but almost always in repose, and usually only in part (e. g., elbows, faces); this final physicalistic vision of Chad, who "administered his kick with fantastic force and sent an imaginary object flying," is almost unprecedented in the novel, matched only by the Cheval Blanc scene, in which Strether is "agitating his hat and stick and loudly calling out" (308).
That Chad has "no imagination" (287), that he will leave Madame de Vionnet, that he will live up to the "new-sum" name are bad enough. But added to these is Strether's complicity in it all (had he really "awfully vividly" presented this vision to Chad?). What else could be advertised than the secret product, the "ridiculous object of the commonest domestic use" (48), the product hidden from sight throughout the novel? Chad will publicize this "vulgar" item, setting up a bizarre literary competition in Woollett ("It's an art, like any other") with Strether's Review, all with the intent of "ad-verting," turning people towards the object, and inculcating desire.

The difference between a literary review and advertisement is thus seemingly brought to nil. Strether, who has learned the "lesson of social beauty," finds that he cannot reciprocate by inculcating others in the priority of ethics, no matter how he tries. At his last meeting with Chad, Strether takes on the role of teacher trying to instruct his student: "He was as grave, as distinct, as a demonstrator before a blackboard, and Chad continued to face him like an intelligent pupil" (336). Strether fails; Chad the "social animal" (167) he had so admired early in his journey has become something of a "brute" (335) before his eyes, and seemingly under his auspices. The danger of social fiction purveyed by the

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23 The phrase is Wegelin's, in the Norton The Ambassadors 442.
language of "heightened cliché" is that it masks desire and ultimately an "appetite lovely as a tapeworm's." Desire blunts moral purpose and renders one a brute.

Critics are quick to fault Strether's vision, with its elaborate and expansive celebration of the aesthetics of the vague. David McWhirter, following Denis de Rougemount and René Girard, makes a distinction in his *Desire and Love in Henry James* between "love" and "desire." McWhirter writes that desire is essentially a narcissistic fantasticizing activity of the mind. . . . [It] is necessarily unrequited, for the reciprocation of passion would bring a true knowledge of the other. . . . (5-6)

For McWhirter, Strether's freedom and imagination are symptoms of Girardian mimetic (or "triangular," or "metaphysical") desire. McWhirter argues that James, in his last three novels, progresses from an embracing of this pathological narcissism to a renunciation of it in *The Golden Bowl*, which finally affirms married (and therefore limited and other-directed) love:

For James's major phase embodies not the unified, valedictory summation of a perfected art, but an heroic struggle . . . toward a self- and life-affirming vision that had long eluded him and toward an art capable of expressing that vision. (9)

This is a strong if somewhat reductionist case, for McWhirter tends to demonize *The Ambassadors* to show a

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24 The phrase is McLuhan's, 182.
progression in James's literary biography. But moreover, it is a mistake to take this new aesthetics of the vague as identical with rampant mimetic desire; to do so tends to gloss over the romantic discovery of beauty as the vague and its fundamental relation to freedom. Even Kant, who condemns any contaminating inclination in his ethics, seems apprised of this tension between freedom and beauty when he writes:

The beautiful prepares us to love disinterestedly something, even nature itself; the sublime prepares us to esteem something highly even in opposition to our own (sensible) interest. (Critique of Judgment 108)

A structuralism such as McWhirter's assumes a rigorism in aesthetics that demands the limitation of desire through recognition of those structures. But The Ambassadors presents less an exemplification of the structural mechanics of the psychology of desire than Strether's open "field of decidability" that "calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility." Strether's position in this "field of decidability" elicits our immediate sympathy (just as he elicits the sympathy of the other characters in the novel) and cannot

25 Ross Chambers gives a more measured view when he notes in his Story and Situation that nineteenth-century texts "identify with extraordinary constancy their narrative situation by recourse to a metaphor of seduction" (9). Chambers treats only James's "The Figure in the Carpet," but his reading applies to The Ambassadors as well. 26 Jacques Derrida, Limited, Inc 116. Simone de Beauvoir discusses the ethics of decision in her Ethics of Ambiguity, but from a strictly "existentialist" standpoint, and not an aesthetic or linguistic one.
be dismissed as an example of infantile desire. It is after the recognition scene at the Cheval Blanc that he has a realization "under the rubric\textsuperscript{27} of Postes et Télégraphes" of his common humanity: that is, of both his commonness and his humanity in the position he occupies. That is, he realizes that his ethical "field" is under the rubrics of aesthetics of vague fictions. He glances around at the "performers concocting their messages":

The little prompt Paris women, arranging, pretexting goodness knew what, driving the dreadful needle-pointed public pen at the dreadful sand-strewn public table: implements that symbolized for Strether’s too interpretive innocence something more acute in manners, more sinister in morals, more fierce in the national life. (315)

The over-literariness of the alliteration, the uneven comparative (more sinister than what?), the leaving unspoken the "something" that is the symbolized, indicates a tension between the public and the private, as the "dreadful public pen" announces the most private intimacies. This is a particularly literary tension:

Chad’s secret is now public, and Strether must now write and explain the story to Woollett. Strether is no longer an editor or critic, but a writer, and something of a "showy journalist" at that: "he often wondered if he hadn’t really, under his recent stress, acquired some hollow trick, one of the specious art of make-believe"

\textsuperscript{27} James’s use of the word “rubric,” the red letters in liturgy that determine the practice of the main text, is interesting, and implies Strether is always under some "rubric," here, the rubric of a new aesthetic.
(194). Strether "was mixed up with the typical tale of Paris, and so were they, poor things—how could they all together help being?" (315). Strether writes the story, but he must entertain the possibility that the story, or, more broadly, literature "is the place where the possible convergence of rigor and pleasure is shown to be a delusion" (de Man 50). 28

His constant deferral in the hope of reconciliation of opposites—rigor and pleasure—leads him to become entangled in Chad’s "plot." That story has impinged on Strether’s. As he walks up the stairs for their final interview,

Strether paused anew, on the last flight, at this final rather breathless sense of what Chad’s life was doing with Chad’s mother’s emissary. It was dragging him, at strange hours, up the staircases of the rich; it was keeping him out of bed at the end of long hot days; it was transforming beyond recognition the simple, subtle, conveniently uniform thing that had anciently passed with him for a life of his own. (333-34)

The degree to which the transformed Chad had affected Strether’s life can be seen in Strether’s self-reference: he is not "himself," but "Chad’s mother’s emissary," doubly-possessed, doubly distanced from himself. He is no longer living the story of his own life, but someone else’s.

The novel casts doubt on the ability to know, and while this may be a function of Jamesian "relativism"

(Norrman 187), in Strether’s case it may instead hint at the inadequacy of a juridical model such as Maria Gostrey’s: “One can only judge on the facts” (45).29 Life, human motivations, epistemological positions, are all uncertain: “For at the end of all things they were mysterious” (322). Strether’s inability to recognize the most important element in his own “story” is echoed by the fundamental mysteriousness of the things around him. Sometimes this mystery is ascribable to the inability to see “designs” that lie “behind” objects and actions. Indeed, “behind” becomes a spatial term denoting the invisible realities that govern expression. Waymarsh wants to know what is “back of” Strether’s coming to Europe (32); Strether, speaking of his Review, notes that “[Mrs. Newsome’s] behind the whole thing” (50); Maria Gostrey warns Strether of Chad’s change, “There must, behind every appearance to the contrary, still be somebody—somebody who’s not a mere wretch, since we accept the miracle.” (107); Bilham warns Strether of Chad’s happy appearance: “Oh, there’s a lot behind it” (111). Perhaps the largest displacement of motives to a position “behind” is the will of the dead Mr. Newsome. He in fact is behind the desire to have Chad return to America, and there is an “opening” that

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29 Maria Gostrey immediately contradicts this empiricism by guessing a priori (“before the facts”) exactly what Mrs. Newsome must look like: Strether “blushed for her realism, but gaped at her truth” (52).
his father's will took account of as in certain conditions possible and which, under that will, attaches to Chad's availing himself of it a large contingent advantage. . . . (54)

The will of Mr. Newsome is apparently "behind" the whole movement of the novel. James's fiction is often haunted by ghosts, and here the revenant spans the ocean from Woollett to Paris in the shape of the "father's will."

At other times, however, the mysteries that lie "behind" things are put in almost religious terms; Marshall McLuhan writes that James's "coordinates are clearly theological" (187). Incomprehensibility is invoked through the diction of the superlative and the marvelous: Miss Barrace's signature word is "wonderful"; Madame de Vionnet is "brilliant" (107); both Chad's transformation and the Lambinet scene are "miracles" (309). These are all theological terms, indicating contemplation of an almost theological dimension, or at least the sublime with which the romantics tended to replace the theological.

This diction of the marvelous may help explain why Strether is indeed seduced by the story of the "virtuous attachment." Yet his seduction is made more shocking because he is such a good reader of seduction stories. Late in the novel he sees his friend Waymarsh with

his buttonhole freshly adorned with a magnificent rose. Strether read on the instant his story--how, astir from the previous hour, the sprinkled newness of the day, so pleasant at that season in Paris, he was fairly panting with the pulse of adventure and had been with
Whether Waymarsh's "story" includes an actual affair with Mrs. Pocock may be disputed, though Miss Barrace joked earlier that she herself may be involved with Waymarsh, and the diction here, "fairly panting with the pulse" is "unmistakable." More significant are both that Waymarsh's appearance is put in terms of a "story," and that Strether—the critic, the editor—displays here a talent for reading such stories. This makes his non-recognition of Chad and Madame de Vionnet's story all the more shocking; that Strether can be confronted with the "unmistakable" and be so mistaken is the "story of the story."

The vagueness of the novel renders reading itself mysterious, as "Strether himself is so lost in wonder . . . that he fails to read the signs correctly" (Bradbury 52). A hermeneutics of suspicion is perhaps justified in a novel where "plot" and "design" have both innocent and sinister meanings: Chad's face implies a "design" (97); Strether tells Maria, "'It's a plot,' he declared-- 'there's more in it than meets the eye.' He gave rein to his fancy. 'It's a plant!'" (105).30 It is not only the adulterous pair that deceive, but the story. In the

30 James is perhaps here signaling a well-known Romantic maxim, Coleridge's distinction between "fancy" and "imagination."
“Preface,” James attempts to gain some purchase, some distance from the “imbroglio”:

There is the story of one’s hero, and then, thanks to the intimate connection of things, the story of one’s story itself. I blush to confess it, but if one’s a dramatist one’s a dramatist, and the latter imbroglio is liable on occasion to strike me as really the more objective of the two. (5)

Here, James implies that the “story of the story” marks an attempt to take a distance from the narrative line, i.e. an attempt to get “behind” it. And while a Girardian reading implies that James is precisely implicated in this story, the self-reflection of the “Preface” hopes to be palinodic, a drawing back from the “interest” in the plot. Leo Bersani notes that the plots of the last three great novels are “corny . . . compared with those of other realistic novelists intent, unlike James, on imposing plots as definitive versions of reality” (142). Bersani argues that James’s preoccupation with style is an attempt to avoid such intrusions:

His discussion of his books almost only in terms of their technical ingenuities and his refusal “to go behind” technique to “meanings” which technique would merely serve, constitute a triumph of composition over depth which is more often an aspiration than an achievement in the novels themselves. (132)

Bersani’s assertion implies that James realizes that some story lines are false impositions of meaning. But Strether seems unaware of this, and what is left undone by James is done by his characters, as they try to patch and mend, using the “dreadful public pen” to write a plot,
publicize a story that, as Strether says of himself, is "incredible, but . . . true!" And while Girard's (and McWhirter's, and to a degree Chambers') model of renunciation of desire implies that many nineteenth-century novels are indeed about the unmasking of desire, thereby holding out the hope that literature can offer the possibility of literary self-reflection, Strether himself seems more cautious: "I'm fantastic and ridiculous—I don't explain myself even to myself" (286).31 If the story of the story can lead to aesthetic clarification, if it can explain itself to itself, it can perhaps do so in the recognition scenes of The Ambassadors.

Not Oedipus: "Transforming beyond recognition"32

It is something of a critical consensus that The Ambassadors is about Strether's growth in consciousness of the true relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet, his realization that it is not a "virtuous attachment" as Bilham called it, but a "typical tale" of adultery. This involves the accompanying deflation of Strether, an acknowledgment of his own inadequacy as a reader. Yet this summary is flawed on both counts, for Strether

31 Yet at least three things are unclear in Girard's thought: a) whether literature expresses only a symptom of cultural pathology or also a cure; b) whether literary expression (e.g. of unmasked triangular desire) is a different type of imitation than mimetic desire; c) the status of the works (i.e., the New Testament in Deceit) that aid in unmasking this desire (are such texts of a different order?).
32 My discussion in this section is generally indebted to Terrence Cave's Recognitions.
already knows Chad is having an affair before the novel begins; indeed that knowledge is the reason for Strether's trip.\textsuperscript{33} In addition, he already knows within ten pages of the novel, that he is a "failure." His friend Maria Gostrey tells him so ("Your failure's general" \textsuperscript{[5]}), and his conscience tells him so ("He had failed... in everything" \textsuperscript{[61]}). This should signal to the reader that the novel is not just the Oedipus plot plus the multiple perspectivism romanticism and, later, modernism bring.\textsuperscript{34} This serves to show that clarification, whatever it may be in the novel, will not be the result of an accretion of facts, the cumulative result of a successful investigation.

Yet this is precisely how the novel is most often read, a strange fact considering its inverted dramatic order. Strether starts out knowing exactly what to do—his purpose is clear. His charge does not originate in an ambiguous oracle as in \textit{Oedipus Rex}, but in a directive so unambiguous that Maria Gostrey intuits it as early as England (44). Peter Brooks in his \textit{The Melodramatic Imagination} is therefore only partially correct when he writes that the "movement of the typical Jamesian plot is from complex and often obscure interrelationship to

\textsuperscript{33} Noted by Cave 432.
\textsuperscript{34} For example, Merle Williams in her \textit{Henry James and the Philosophical Novel} draws on phenomenology and deconstruction, and still asserts that "the entire narrative is geared towards the clarification of concepts and interpretive procedures" (25), thereby making the vagueness of the novel merely the absence of knowledge.
crisis," for while there is certainly a crisis, the novel starts out from the simple, clear standpoint of Woollett. One might ask then what the subject of the novel is, and why it displays the protagonist's coming into consciousness of a fact that he already knows.

The scene at the Cheval Blanc itself has garnered an immense amount of critical attention, almost all of it structurally placing it as a clarifying scene in the development of Strether's knowledge. The scene seems to be the referent of these lines, in which Strether desires Sarah Pocock to provoke some "clarifying scene":

*He couldn't doubt that, should she only oblige him by surprising him just as he then was, a clarifying scene of some sort would result from the concussion. (247)*

Strether gets his wish in the Cheval Blanc scene. It has been ironically prepared for by several non-recognition scenes: Strether first mistakes Little Bilham for Chad (69); at the theatre an anonymous "gentleman" for Chad (89); then Chad for a "Pagan," then Chad again for a "gentleman" (102) (these last two following a chiastic scheme: gentleman:Chad : Chad:gentleman). Strether mistakes Mamie for Sarah (247); Mamie then mistakes too, exclaiming "Oh I thought you were Mr. Bilham!" (249).

All these mistaken recognitions make the final one, admittedly a "chance in a million," more shocking yet somehow more believable. The obviousness of Chad and Madame de Vionnet's relationship reveals Strether's unearned naiveté, a naiveté that allows him to opine early
in the novel, "'It's innocent,' he repeated--'I see the whole thing'" (158). This naivété is shattered in Book Eleventh when Strether takes a holiday in the countryside from his "obsession." He sees a young couple in a boat, then recognizes them:

Chad and Madame de Vionnet were then like himself taking a day in the country--though it was as queer as fiction, as farce, that their country could happen to be exactly his; and she had been the first at recognition, the first to feel, across the water, the shock--for it appeared to come to that--of what was taking place—that her recognition had been even stranger for the pair in the boat, that her immediate impulse had been to control it, and that she was quickly and intensely debating with Chad the risk of betrayal. He saw that they would show nothing if they could feel sure he hadn't made them out; so that he had before him for a few seconds his own hesitation. It was a sharp fantastic crisis that had popped up as if in a dream, and it had only to last the few seconds to make him feel it as quite horrible. (308)

Strether becomes demystified about the true nature of their relationship. In that sense the language of tragedy employed in the scene—"recognition," "shock," "betrayal," "crisis," "horrible"—is appropriate. Too many pains ought not be taken in the correct labeling of the scene, for there is dispute enough among the best commentators on the novel: while Lodge calls the scene a peripeteia, Terrence Cave studies it as a recognition scene (anagnorisis). My insistence that it be labeled catharsis—as-clarification may at this point seem perverse and unhelpful. This difficulty points out the richness of the scene, our loss of the ability to distinguish these
Greek terms, or both. Cave helpfully points out, however, that while *peripeteia* is a structural point, *anagnorisis* always has an object, is "intentional" in the phenomenological sense. We are left with a fundamental discrepancy between Strether's complete, albeit evaded, knowledge of the adultery, and what readers perceive to be the real efficacy of this "clarification scene." If clarification indeed has an object, what then gets clarified in the Cheval Blanc scene?

For Peter Brooks, what gets clarified in a melodrama such as *The Ambassadors* is not the protagonist's position in the world in relation to set cosmic laws, but rather the terms of the conflict in which the hero finds himself. Brooks therefore opposes melodrama to tragedy. Tragedy is the art form of a culture of belief, while melodrama exaggerates moral conflicts precisely because the values they presuppose are uncertain and fraught; therein lies melodrama's contemporary value.

A clarity in regard to the use of such an aesthetic form as melodrama can foster in us a greater clarity about our cultural history, an increased understanding of our historical position, of "where we are," the kinds of problems we have to deal with and the means we have for undertaking their imaginative "solution." (206)

Melodrama's vision is entirely negative, for while tragedy can give positive knowledge about reality, melodrama can only display the *importance* of the ethical and not make a determination about what actually *is* ethical.
The melodramatists refuse to allow that the world has been completely drained of transcendence; and they locate that transcendence in the struggle of the children of light with the children of darkness, in the play of ethical mind. (22)

What gets clarified, Brooks asserts, is one's ethical position. Finally, and most importantly, since there are no determinate cosmic laws, no actual content displayed, melodramatic clarification is highly structural and reflexive:

For melodrama has the distinct value of being about recognition and clarification, about how to be clear what the stakes are and what their representative signs mean, and how to face them. (206)

The ethical is certainly a concern for Strether, but it must be remembered the context under which his moral certainty evaporates: under the soft pink glow of the lamps at dinner with Maria Gostrey, on the labyrinth of the walls of Chester--during aesthetic experiences. There is a relationship between Strether’s errancy and his vagrancy, and Strether’s melodrama does not involve only ethical issues, but aesthetic ones. The previous section already showed the deflecting danger of the story, how the illusions of Chad, Chad’s "life"

was transforming beyond recognition the simple, subtle, conveniently uniform thing that had anciently passed with him for a life of his own. (333-34)

Even late in this novel, Strether is “transformed beyond recognition,” as if the “concussion” at the Cheval Blanc did not simplify, but rather, made it more ambiguous--a
strange clarification indeed. In fact, the novel up to Book Eleventh can be described as one long non-recognition scene; the Cheval Blanc scene dispels the fiction of the virtuous attachment—the "device is laid bare." Moral and epistemological clarification becomes identical with the promise of literature. That is, what Strether learns is that fiction is both the ground of clarifying beauty (and beauty, Kant notes, "prepares us to love") and the site where things become transformed "beyond recognition."

Not two pages after the Cheval Blanc scene, Strether intuits all this, as he sits "lonely and cold." What he sees, alone in the dark, is that there was something "over and above the central fact itself, [that] he had to swallow:"

It was the quantity of make-believe involved and so vividly exemplified that most disagreed with his spiritual stomach. (313)

Beyond the adultery, it is the lying fiction, the galling "invraisemblance of the occasion" (309), and Madame de Vionnet's "performance" (311), that sicken Strether. These terms display the distance, only now felt by Strether, between "make-believe" and the "spiritual stomach," between the fictional and the visceral. This distance helps to explain James's employing the language of tragedy. James is writing at a time when the epistemological basis of tragedy ("innocence to experience") has been lost; the language of the scene is therefore discordant—not quite ironic, but not quite
sincere. *The Ambassadors* cannot be about clarification as *catharsis*; rather it is about the realization of the enormous gap between make-believe and reality, between the power of fiction to clarify and the freedom linked to the beauty of the vague.

James is working out, as literature does, the requirements of literature in a specific historical context. The historical context since the German Romantics required that the aesthetic be associated with the vague. *The Ambassadors* is precisely about the clarifying power of the aesthetic at a time when that itself associated with the vague. Chad’s life was transforming Strether’s beyond recognition because it is a life of fiction—of lies and advertising. Strether’s position in the cosmos is clarified in only this limited sense; Strether realizes that he is (so to speak) a fictional character.

This goes to the very heart of the aesthetics of the vague. *The Ambassadors* is not a novel of clarification, where the plot begins in ambiguity, and the body of the novel occupies itself with the machinations of clarification, in which the characters “see,” and in turn the audience sees. It is not about clarification in the Oedipal sense; rather is it about the clear consciousness of teeming chaos that is one’s ethical position. Clarification then becomes a structural fact much like peripeteia, devoid of any actual content. If, as Brooks
indicates, melodrama helps to clarify "where we are," it is not clear where we are, even as Strether says in the novel's last line, "There we are!"  

Repetition, Reparation, and Strether's Review

In the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx writes: "Hegel says somewhere that all great historical facts and personages recur twice. He forgot to add 'Once as tragedy, and again as farce' (47)." Even if James were not aware of this formulation, it is odd that while Strether thinks the Cheval Blanc scene is as "queer as farce," he compresses into only eleven lines the language of tragedy: "recognition," "shock," "betrayal," "crisis," "horrible." This "clarifying scene" is between tragedy and farce; it does not in fact lead to tragic clarification of the protagonist's knowledge, because he already "knows" that particular state of affairs.

Knowledge is quite a problem in the novel, especially for Strether, who suffers, Cave writes, from "chronic epistemophilia" (433), and to whom Little Bilham says, "you're not a person to whom it's easy to tell things you don't want to know" (123). Knowledge of facts, of states of affairs, in short to know that, seems

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35 This may be an answer to Strether's much earlier affirmation: "if I miss that [his marriage], I miss everything--I'm nowhere" (75).
36 Samuel H. Beer's footnote indicates Daniel De Leon made an English translation available in 1897 (47); *The Ambassadors* was serialized in 1903.
infeasible, even impossible. When knowledge is claimed, it is usually in the context of know how, and contains the implication of the salacious. Maria Gostrey's eyes evaluate Strether, "measuring him up and down as if they knew how" (21); Chad "had learned how" to enter a theatre-box (91); Sarah Pocock derisively assures Madame de Vionnet, "I've been to Paris. I know Paris" (218); finally, Strether thinks of the couple on the river, "they were familiar, frequent. . . . They know how to do it" (307). Knowledge of fact gives way to acquaintance, familiarity, or social knowledge. Many critics have pointed to the epistemological--the know that--problems in the novel. Addressing "acquaintance" or knowing how takes us in a different direction, but one that also helps explain the ambiguity of the novel. One knows how to do things by being, like Chad and Madame de Vionnet, "familiar, frequent": by repetition. In fact, the novel echoes Marx's formulation, and is structured as a repeated act. But Strether's struggle to negotiate the aesthetic and moral realms requires the discernment of two different types of repetition: a ritualistic, clarifying one whose

37 Chad's knowing "how to live" savoir vivre, is therefore savoir faire.
38 This distinction between two types of knowledge, while unacknowledged in English, is reflected in other languages: wissen and kennen, saber and conocer, savoir and connaître, for examples.
39 See Normman's The Insecure World of Henry James, for example.
purpose is governed by reference to origin, and an ambiguating one that strays from the origin.

The Preface to *The Ambassadors* suggests a motivation for repetition: it asks of Strether, "Would there yet perhaps be time for reparation?" (1). The Preface sets us up for a re-reading of the story, be it Strether's life or the novel; thus the novel is about Strether's rereading of his own life in light of the promise and disenchantment of the aesthetic. The senses of nostalgia and loss that pervade the novel are due to Strether's remorse over his first "reading" of his life. The novel in a sense seeks to answer the "Preface," and it is left to the reader to discern if this second reading, the "review" that constitutes the novel's action, is any less flawed than Strether's first attempt at life.

The repetitions in the novel constitute an attempt at reparation. It is no accident that Strether at home in Woollett edits a "Review," for his vocation (reviewing) and his avocation (the journey to Europe) partake of the same urge. Even the manner of designating the action of *The Ambassadors* indicates this familiar, recursive character: it is a "tale" and a "story" ("Preface" 1, 5); it is a "typical tale" (315); it is a "corny plot" (Bersani 142). It is a simple plot that follows a "type," and therefore is repeatable, each repetition similar, bearing few surprises. Strether's journey to Europe is a repetition, for he has been there before. Once there,
whenever he enters a significant ritualistic space—the fortified boundaries of Chester (24), Notre Dame cathedral (170)—he senses and notes that he had been there before. The staid Jamesian social web is violated by these small irruptions of ritual action.40

There is an urge for repetition in the novel because there was previous loss. Among Strether’s many losses, there were

the young wife he had early lost and the young son he had stupidly sacrificed. He had again and again made out for himself that he might have kept his little boy, his little dull boy who had died at school of rapid diphtheria, if he had not in those years so insanely given himself to merely missing the mother. (61)

Strether’s life is already loss before the novel begins; his “failure is general.”41 A chronological urgency pervades the novel (“Would there yet perhaps be time for reparation?”), and is at odds with the slow, decorous simultaneity of the presentation of the prose.42

Strether’s carpe diem advice to Little Bilham in

40 This type of repetition, repetition as “ritual,” finds Strether in priestly functions, sometimes dispensing “blessing” (313), and sometimes forced to “curse” (343).
41 Time becomes pressing in the novel: “Strether had read somewhere of a Latin motto . . . on a clock. . . . Omnes vulnerat, ultima necat” [“all wound, the last kills”] (67); “people can be in general pretty well trusted . . . with the clock of their freedom ticking . . . to keep an eye on the fleeting hour” (131); “he was like one of the figures of the old clock at Berne. They came out, on one side, at their hour, jigged along their little course in the public eye, and went in on the other side” (342).
42 A famous bibliographic expression of this “simultaneity” is the reversal of Chapters 28 and 29 in the first American edition of the novel (Harper 1903), which went unnoticed until 1950.
Gloriani’s garden is an admonition to precisely not repeat Strether’s life: “Do what you like so long as you don’t make my mistake” (132).

And yet for himself, Strether continues in the hope that his mission will be another chance for significance, a chance to repair his loss. He is therefore presupposing in hopefulness the efficacy of participatory, repeated action.43 The historian of religion Mircea Eliade indicates that “traditional” cultures trusted the force of repetition.

Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is “meaningless,” i.e. lacks reality. (34)

For Eliade, ritual gives the plenitude of presence of the origin, the omphalos, the center. Ritualistic repetition gains its efficacy by reference to the origin, and therefore demands a certain shrouding of oneself. One must be other than the self to become oneself:

This tendency may well appear paradoxical, in the sense that the man of the traditional culture ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) and is satisfied with imitating and repeating the gestures of another. In other words, he sees himself as real, i.e., as “truly himself,” only, and precisely insofar as he ceases to be so. (34)

This understanding of repetition reaches towards origin and a reclamation of loss. Strether’s journey, or rather return to Europe, is reparative.

43 Repetition covers much ground; the introduction to Hillis Miller’s Fiction and Repetition gives a brief survey of some of the major positions.
Alternately, Julie Rivkin, in her *False Positions*, describes a different mode of repetition, tying "origins" to the common Jamesian theme of renunciation through the language of "deferment" and "supplement." The movement of the novel, says Rivkin, is centrifugal, with the ambassadors (Strether and the Pococks) mediating the "original" message, standing in place of the origin (Woollett) but inevitably changing the message. If there is ambiguity introduced, it is inevitable to the "logic of delegation" that the ambassadorship entails. The novel therefore sets up two different "economies" of representation, a Puritan one of scarcity and reserve, and a Parisian one of expenditure. Rivkin elaborates:

What this representational logic leads us to, then, are the experiential difficulties that constitute the novel's central themes and action: the problem of missed and vicarious experience; the plot of substitution, deflection and deferral; and the novel's dual economy. (60)

The action of the novel traces the loss of the meaning in transmission from Woollett to Paris. Rivkin ultimately contrasts not just American and Parisian mores, but their modes of representation. For example, although Mrs. Newsome,

makes use of ambassadors, she assumes that her business will be carried out as it would be in person; her fixity of purpose makes it impossible for her to imagine any shift or deviation. (68)

The centrifugal nature of the ambassadorial journey requires an occlusion of original meaning and deferment ad
infinitum. Rivkin implies that because of representational entropy, there could never be enough time for reparation.

It is true enough that there is a continual deferral of the mission and loss of direction in the novel. Yet there is at least one instance that shows correspondence between the original and the repetition. Strether asks Sarah if indeed Mrs. Newsome feels "insulted" by his behavior, and the first ambassador confronts the second:

Sarah’s answer came so straight, so "pat," as might have been said, that he felt on the instant its origin. "She has confided to my judgment and my tenderness the expression of her personal sense of everything, and the assertion of her personal dignity."

They were the very words of the lady of Woollett—he would have known them in a thousand; her parting charge to her child. Mrs. Pocock accordingly spoke to this extent by the book, and the fact immensely moved him. (278)

There is, for Strether anyway, a transparency to the "charge"; the words’ "origin" is instantly perceptible. The beauty of the Woollett charge lies in its security of purpose, its communion with the original.

Though Rivkin’s study does account for the general sense of loss in the novel by tying it to modes of representation, it does a less adequate job regarding Strether’s own sense of loss; like Girardian analysis, Rivkin’s sacrifices the personal to the structural, the

44 Typographic images abound: Strether is Chad’s "critic" (96); Chad is a "book" (111); Marie Gostrey is described as a typesetter (21).
ambassador to the embassy. It makes of the novel something of a parlor-game, in which conversation is inevitably altered through mis-repetition. Rivkin does not associate Strether’s wandering with aesthetics as this study does, but rather with the linguistic, political, and financial economy of loss inevitable to the structure of ambassadorship.

Yet there is a positive element in Strether’s vagrancy; his loss of direction, his wandering, is associated not only with an “economy that encourages extravagance” (Rivkin 72), but a specifically aesthetic field of repetition. The baroque imagination of James, with all of its involutions and digressions, seems on this viewing very much the romantic arabesque. In The Ambassadors, at Gloriani’s party, the “little artist-man” Bilham labels Strether a collectible example of the “rococo”:45

“On the contrary they adore—we all adore here—the rococo, and where is there a better setting for it than the whole thing, the pavilion and the garden, together? There are lots of people with collections,” little Bilham smiled as he glanced round. “You’ll be secured!” (123)

Strether is placed in an aesthetic category that values repetition, convolution and deferral, and therefore is tied to a romantic aesthetic. This is the second type of repetition that Strether discovers: repetition that

45 Remy Saisselin calls the rococo the “feminization of the baroque” (84).
acknowledges the possibility of alterability in repetition: vagrancy. Strether does not only discover that the embassy is deferred, but that he himself is changed:

There had been times enough for a month when it had seemed to him that he was strange, that he was altered, in every way. (209)

The repetition is distanced from its origin and alters, not only itself, but Strether; as Jacques Derrida, whom Rivkin draws on, writes in a slightly different context,

"iterability" does not signify simply . . . repeatability of the same, but rather alterability of this same idealized in the singularity of the event, for instance, in this or that speech act. (Derrida, Limited 119)

If Strether at first hopes for a "review," a grounded repetition (what Eliade would call repetition of archaic man), he soon discovers the alterability of the Parisian aesthetics of the vague. Madame de Vionnet’s labeling the recognition scene at the Cheval Blanc, the "clarifying scene," an "invraisemblance" is then a malaprop; what Strether saw on the river, the demystifying vision, is the reality, the semblance that is identical with the self. Yet Rodolphe Gasché notes of "iterability":

A priori, then, the possibility of iteration divides the identity of all units; iterability is the impurity of an absence that, from the start, prohibits the full and rigorous attainment of the plenitude of the unit, and that in principle subverts its self-identity. (213)

Rather then, the scene contains the nearest claim to self-identity that the novel will allow. Otherwise, the claims to self-evidence in the novel resemble themselves only
formally, as do vapid tautologies: "We have plenty of reasons . . . for everything we do," Sarah Pocock argues, "I’ve come because--well, because we do come" (221). Sarah's chop-logic draws on the law of self-identity and the subsumption of the individual under the class ("I" do because "we" do) to bolster her case and ground her reasons, of which she has "plenty." Yet her claim to self-identity and plenitude is actually only evasive repetition.

Strether's attempt at reparation becomes a repetition that alters despite his intention. Moreover, and more importantly, Strether's self-alienation goes much deeper, for he discovers (in one of the novel's recurring inversions), in the old world the sins of the new world. Ritualistic repetition that gains meaning by reference to origin is inadequate because the origin is *ja schon*, always already, impure.

Woollett is certainly some kind of primal scene: Strether confesses to Maria that in the past, behind the family's wealth, are the grandfather's "practices" and "exploits," and the father, whose name is "Abel," is no better than the grandfather. There are then two points: the original directive becomes occluded the further it gets from Woollett; but in addition, the original springs from polluted ("Abel's"?) ground. That ground bears fruit in the guise of the unspoken product (the "ridiculous object"), which itself is the result of unspeakable
practices. Woollett claims purity of New World origins, but the typology used indicates that impurity was present at the very beginning.

Speaking of the general system of infrastructure that is always the hope of philosophy, Gasché notes of iterability that

Repetition thus hinges on the structural possibility of an absence of the repeated. If the unit to be repeated were totally present and represent to itself, if it were not breached by a certain lack of plenitude, no repetition could ever occur. (213)

Repetition therefore presupposes distance from origin. Strether discovers not only that his repetition, like all representations, does not have perfect reference to the origin, but also that the origin itself is not clear, that Sarah’s “charge” (“definite,” “crystalline”) is associated with the “impurity” of ambiguity. Strether finds that America, despite its ostensible purity of origin (the green cover of the Review?) was sullied, imbrued with blood. Gasché here writes of the ambiguity of the “general system” in philosophy but his remarks are relevant:

46 Much can made of any given detail in The Ambassadors--colors, for example. Strether’s Review is green (50): the color of money? the New World? vegetation? If this last implies rootedness and intransigence of moral values, then perhaps the “salmon-coloured Revue” (246) of Paris is more at home in water, the fluid medium associated with the “various” Madame de Vionnet’s “ship.” B. Cowan notes that Paris’s emblem is a ship, and its motto is fluctuat nec mergitur, “it is wavers, but does not sink.”
Yet it is not the sort of ambiguity that would be witness to an absence of clarity in the process of their determination. . . . Ambiguity in these senses is always a function of presence—that is, of an ultimately self-identical signification. . . . (Gasché 240)

What Strether discovers again, yet somehow for the first time, are the connections among the beautiful as the vague, the ambiguity of origin and, finally, contamination.

Regarding this last, when Strether enters Madame de Vionnet’s apartment for the last time, into her “beautiful formal room,” he hears the “vague voice of Paris” from the street, and perceives, “The smell of revolution, the smell of public temper—or perhaps simply the smell of blood” (317). It can be no accident that he only identifies the smell, apparently the same smell from Chad’s apartment (“something very good” 72), with blood after the discovery of Madame de Vionnet’s affair; the “smell of blood” contains an overtone of sexual impurity. The only thing self-identical at the origin is an original sin, which paradoxically, is unoriginal, a “typical tale” of sexual impurity. Strether’s attempt to deviate is not only part of the inevitable structure of embassy, as Rivkin argues, but a willed desire for the vague and beautiful. What he learns is that the baroque involutions (“we adore the rococo”) of Europe repeat the sins of the New World, and
spring from the ground from which Abel's blood cries out.\textsuperscript{47}

**Imagined Ends**

Strether's final visit to Chad's apartment continues to engage this overall recursive mission. He pauses meditatively in the street below Chad's balcony: "He stopped short to-night on coming into sight of it: it was as if his last day were oddly copying his first" (333). Strether must wonder if there was ever a chance at reparation, or, as he intones after the Cheval Blanc, "verily, his labor had been lost" (313), whether repetition is futile. His last meeting of Chad is thoroughly disheartening; Strether tells him he will be a "brute" if he leaves Madame de Vionnet. Chad agrees in his hollow way, but seems set on his course back to America. Strether can do no more than echo: "If there was nothing for it but to repeat, however, repetition was no mistake" (338).

The desire to repeat unendingly seems to be a main complaint against Strether, his biggest "mistake." He is, McWhirter writes, a case of the romantic imagination trapped in its own vagaries: "[Strether's] entire approach to his embassy is one that pretends the experience will last forever" (64). Yet Strether's repetition becomes more understandable in face of the false endings that

\textsuperscript{47} Genesis 4.10. In the American novel of New World sexual impurity, *The Scarlet Letter*, the matrons speculate that the red letter could perhaps mean "able."
impose themselves throughout the novel: Maria Gostrey would serve Strether "til death" (56); "What [Strether] wanted most was some idea that would simplify, and nothing would do this so much as the fact that he was done for and finished" (61); "It probably was all at an end" (280);

"[Madame de Vionnet] shook her head. 'There's not a grain of certainty in my future--for the only certainty is that I shall be the loser in the end'" (324). And finally, at that last meeting with Chad, Strether, "his labor lost," repeats that Chad will be a "brute" if he leaves:

Chad preserved his handsome grimace as well as the rest of his attitude. "You're not altogether--in your great 'solemnity'--kind. Haven't I been drinking you in--showing you all I feel you're worth to me? What have I done, what am I doing, but cleave to her to death? The only thing is," he good-humouredly explained, "that one can't have it before one, in the cleaving--the point where the death comes in. Don't be afraid for that. (340)

Strether is afraid for "the point where the death comes in." An aesthetics of the vague promises an arabesque that evades death (and as Chad helpfully notes, the arts are "infinite"). Strether's aesthetics strives toward continuing life in the face of false endings.

Strether's success may be disputed. Yet one person in the novel does somehow seem to reconcile a sense of ending and the need to repeat. Little Bilham's potential marriage to Mamie, and Strether's early assurance that "in Little Bilham's company contrarieties in general dropped" (83), indicate that he remains the best hope for the imagination, "that faculty . . . often exploited by
nineteenth-century novelists and their characters to evade awkward dichotomies" . . . (Cave 444), a faculty Chad noticeably lacks (290). Of course the largest dichotomy of the novel is the tension between the moral and the aesthetic. Though Strether's hopes for reparation and reconciliation are dashed, those same hopes are perhaps preserved for the "little artist-man."

The vision of this possible reconciliation of the moral and the aesthetic is seen quite early in the novel. Little Bilham takes Strether and Maria Gostrey to his old studio for tea with another friend:

The comrade was another ingenuous patriot, to whom he had wired that tea was to await them "regardless," and this reckless repast, and the second ingenuous compatriot, and the faraway makeshift life, with its jokes and its gaps, its delicate daubs and its three or four chairs, its overflow of taste and conviction and its lack of nearly all else—these things wove round the occasion a spell to which our hero unreservedly surrendered. (84)

The narrator is not unaware of the preciousness of this scene: the phrase "delicate daubs" is repeated three times in thirty lines. So too it casts a "spell" on Strether, who is as we know, susceptible to enchantment. But there it remains, a binding together of the moral and the aesthetic, the reconciliation of "taste and conviction." Strether needs the rest of the novel to learn the costs of that reconciliation: the "lack of nearly all else."

48 Why "three or four"? There are four people present; certainly it would be clear how many chairs there actually were at a sit-down tea: a Jamesian "joke" or "gap."
Though the aesthetics of the vague is liberatory, it cannot quell the desire for a “clarifying scene,” and the “art [that] makes the coexistence of contradictories possible” (Rimmon 234) may in fact be the art of the lie, the art of fiction.
Chapter V. Wallace Stevens' "illustrious nothing"

Romantic Fog, and "a project for the sun"

The Russian modernist painter Wassily Kandinsky had only recently started formal art study in Munich when he wrote a review of the "Secession" exhibition (1899) for a local paper. The exhibition, he wrote, "give[s] a rough picture of . . . two trends in contemporary painting."

The first was characterized by the tiresomeness and monotony of that foggy veil which covered these artist's paintings: fog in the morning, afternoon, evening, and night, with sun and in overcast weather; fog appearing in landscape, genre, portrait, a beautiful fog, giving that fairy-tale and peculiarly poetic impression, but with too often recurring persistence as if by order of law, until exhausted. Arising now and then on its own but most of the time drifting over from Scotland, this foggy mood was cultivated in the painting of countries all over the world. (731)

Amidst "this international assembly of fogs," the young student sees hints of a new style, if not a new era, with "patches of the new light catching on fire in some places" (733):

And it is just now, perhaps, that a reaction is beginning: pure and intense light, purity and brightness of colors are beginning to burn here and there with intense patches among many others, immersed as usual in a dull haze of paintings. (732)

While Kandinsky grants a technical reason for the difference between the two trends (a preference for newly-rediscovered bold tempera over more muted oils), it would be a mistake to consider the shift a stylistic localism;

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Kandinsky certainly thought what he saw had a wider significance. He continues:

We are experiencing a more interesting period, when art and especially painting is beginning to come out of the embryo of a new epoch, where everything bright is not just a premonition among a few specialists, but a great renaissance, for which the approaching twentieth century is opening its doors. (737)

One would say that Kandinsky was prescient, but for the fact that his work to a certain degree brought about that "new epoch." The excesses of the Romantics, their affinity for the divine under the guise of the sublime and the organic, for beauty disguised as vagueness, for personalism dressed as pathos, might all be grouped under what Kandinsky calls "fogginess."

The first decades of the twentieth century provide other examples of this modernist impatience with an aesthetics of the vague. In architecture, distracting ornamentation was effaced amid a preference for "clean lines and uncluttered surfaces." Pound's criticism, as outlined above, emphasized the political and societal dangers of obtuse language: no justice without clear style. William Carlos Williams, while less overtly concerned with the political, shared Pound's devotion to the skeletal. Of Marianne Moore, he writes that with her a word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated by acid to remove the

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1 Thomas Leddy describes an overlooked group of aesthetic values in "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: 'Neat,' 'Messy,' 'Clean' 'Dirty,'" (260).
Yet it is one of the fundamental paradoxes of the poetry of Wallace Stevens that though he claims ambiguity as both the starting-point and end of poetry, his poems are rife with the promise and project of clarity: "Phoebus is dead," but "There is a project for the sun" (208). This dialectic occurs with his first poems ("Chiaroscuro" [OP 3]) and continues until his very last ones ("Of Mere Being" [398]). Stevens was uniquely situated, and his poetry remained particularly attuned to this tension. What is at stake with this dialectic touches on ethics, epistemology and aesthetics, and Stevens in both his prose and poetry evidences deep appreciation for what was served in "choosing sides" in the debate. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he indicates that

a language evolves through a series of conflicts between the denotative and the connotative forces in words; between an asceticism tending to kill language by stripping words of all association and a hedonism tending to kill language by dissipating their sense in a multiplicity of associations. (NA 13)

In a sense his life project is a meditation on this duality and its complex interaction.4

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2 Quoted by Stephen Tapscott, American Beauty 136.
3 All citations in Stevens are from The Palm at the End of the Mind, except where indicated Opus Posthumous (hereafter OP) and Necessary Angel (hereafter NA).
4 Helen Vendler deplores the tendency in Stevens criticism to frame issues in terms of oppositions, while employing one "despair" versus "desire" (Words 42ff). Harold Bloom
It will come as no surprise that the poet with such a consciousness never chooses sides in the debate. Rather, Stevens moves beyond the mere efficient function of machine-like verse, and proffers, especially in his late lyrics, a clarity of a possible poetry. On first glance, Stevens certainly seems an unlikely champion of clarity. In a letter to R. P. Blackmur dated November 16, 1931, he writes that:

One of the essentials of poetry is ambiguity. I don't feel that I have touched the thing until I touch it in ambiguous form. Sometimes when I felt that I had touched it it was a delight to see how far I could bring it back to reality. (Stevens, Holly 773)

The statement itself is of course fundamentally ambiguous. Perhaps it is an ethical statement, an expression of humility in face of the object, and a rejection of any appropriating attitude that a desire for mastery over the object would involve. Or, it could mean that it is indeed a “fluent mundo” (233), a world that remains a disappointment to those who seek a certainty in the stable object, a world of ontological flux. Then again, it could mean that the perceiving eye (which he so often puns with “I”) must be a restless eye (“It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” [190]) seeking a new vision of the object to glean ever-new experiences for an always-changing self.

Criticism on Stevens has from early on seen that one of the projects of his poetic praxis was to “ambiguate” elaborates on the dialectic of opposites (power and fate, among others) in the Coda to his *The Poems of Our Climate*. 

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both the poetic vision and ontological stability. The explication of Stevens' works in terms of ambiguity adds to an understanding of literary modernism's grappling with the issues of religious disbelief and ethical skepticism. It remains, however, that one of the qualities that is most admired in Stevens is the haiku-like sparseness of his verse; as Randall Jarrell note, Stevens' are "cool, clear, airy poems" (54).

**Wallace Stevens Has No Shape**

If it is easy to indicate that clarity is found to be admirable in Stevens' poetry, it is harder to say directly what constitutes this clarity. The conflict in *The Ambassadors* was between the positive elements of an aesthetics of the vague which promised freedom, and the economy of loss that vagueness participated in and inadequately redressed (most notably through repetition). In this latter sense, ambiguity in James and the Romantics in general is parasitic of clarity, accounting for the overall sense of melancholy of both the Romantics and the moderns. The question arises: does any proffering of a poetics of clarity immediately involve nostalgia and the tradition of return? Is the modernist aficionado of clarity therefore reactionary? The danger seems inherent.

Paul Morrison in his *Poetics of Fascism* notes that

5 Criticism on Stevens is so extensive that it has merited at least one tertiary study: Melita Schaum's *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools*. Hillis Miller's explication of ambiguity in "The Rock" is perhaps the most sophisticated.
Pound's poetic radicalism . . . in a paradox sadly familiar to students of modernism, proves compatible with the most reactionary of politics. (19)

Pound's attempt was, as Carne-Ross persuasively argues, to garner an experience of the originary. When Pound invokes Ceres in the Cantos, he is really trying to evince the goddess uniquely, one actualized time. Seemingly, the lyric is then an aesthetic object and not a political one. Indeed, its condensation and epigrammatic quality sets it against meta-narratives, grand schemes of the "world-historical" consciousness. In much critical estimation, the lyric is a type of "windowless monad," a "world within a world" that would claim relative innocence for itself and its purposes. Further substantiating this view is the conventional opposition of the lyric to the genre of the novel. It is in the novel where, according to Georg Lukács' widely-held thesis, real history and politics are worked out.6

Yet this is not the end of the question. For it is perhaps because of the emphatic authorial "I" (as the monologism of Mikhail Bakhtin would locate the issue) that critics have tended to zero in on lyricist rather than lyric, poet rather than poem. The lyrical "I" is then a sign of the mind's (or ego's) formidable power. And in this regard critics are not so ready to excuse or

6 My use of "lyric" and "novel" does not necessarily imply an essential form, but nor does it mean that I consider such groupings unmotivated, arbitrary, or unhelpful.
exculpate the poets from historical responsibility as they are their poems. Interrogating personal failures has now become so standard as to be part of what modernity signifies. The case of Ezra Pound is symptomatic, with the critical estimation of his canon inevitably attached to his association with fascism. T. S. Eliot has suffered a milder though similar fate, with the overall critical estimation of his poetic project now called into question. In both his practical non-commitment to rightist politics on one hand (usually taken as evidence of duplicitous caution rather than faith in democracy) as well as in his self-conscious intellectual consent to a conservative political program, Eliot's critical fortunes show increasing instability.7

Whether because of his Americanness (he was consciously not an expatriate), his ordinariness, or his upper-middle class mores, Wallace Stevens himself seems immune to such treatment.8 No "major man" he, and if he was an aesthete, he was abstemious, and seems to garner respect from readers merely for staying in a career he disliked for the sake of his poetry. It is likely,

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7 See Morrison for a clear and concise reading of Pound and Eliot's politics; the recent flood on Eliot includes Kenneth Asher's *T. S. Eliot and Ideology* and Anthony Julius' *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and the Literary Form*. Eliot's attitude toward the classes is revealed in his own early essay "Marie Lloyd," in which it is the middle rather than the lower classes that are the target of his derision.
8 Marjorie Perloff, however, sees some of Stevens' poems moving from "fluent mundo" to (monologic) crystal.
however, that he evades criticism because his poetry rarely makes a claim in the way Pound's does. In this sense, the avowal of innocence in imagism seems to be precisely the problem. If lyric has a claim on the original, if it professes to invoke Ceres, then it can demand a certain authority. To take an example: the direct address comes easy to some modern poets, yet while H. D. can employ the vocative with some authority, Stevens, typically, instead writes a poem about the vocative, "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds" (56). He seems convinced of the impossibility of addressing the Ding an sich, the immediacy of experience, and is as Helen Vendler writes, a "second-order poet rather than a poet of experience" (40). 9 For Stevens language is a fiction, but that is no surprise, as all is fiction: "It is never the thing but the version of the thing" (268), and even repetitions change. Indeed, his poem "The Good Man Has No Shape" may be his own "epitaphium," or perhaps a warning to himself to make only guarded claims: with "feathers in his flesh" and an "empty book to read" the unnamed bird/poet/prophet is mocked merely because "[h]e said a good life would be possible" (283). Given this guarded stance, a conscious poetic project to "touch a thing in its ambiguous form," and the poet's lived reticence, there

9 This is the understanding of modernity that usually accompanies studies of Stevens. As Louis Dupré indicates, this understanding of modernity "subordinates direct experience to a second order of epistemological foundations" (Postmodernity 294).
is reason to dwell on Stevens' clarity as it partakes in the larger drama of modernism. In Stevens there is a redisposition of clarity as mere machine-like stripping of encrustation, to a clarity as luminescence, a luminescence "beyond belief." What can it mean for a disbeliever to use the words "gold" and "aureole"; for a skeptic to talk about the "brilliance" of a scene; for an anti-naturalist to talk about "the vigor of glory"? To this end, a presentation of four topoi of Stevensian clarity: a clearing away from history; the figure of the giant as an ersatz clarity; the recognizable poem; and finally, negative ekphrasis.10

A Clear Poem and No History

In response to a questionnaire from The Partisan Review in 1939, Stevens wrote, "The material of the imagination is reality and reality can be nothing other than the usable past." Replying to a more specific question about Henry James and Walt Whitman, he noted, "neither of them mean anything to me" (OP 309). The two answers summarize well "the American scene" for Stevens, whose poetry bears the marks of the tension between the desire to summon and to clear away the past. His poem "Ghosts as Cocoons" likewise displays this tension, for the poem is not a presentation of past-ness, as the "ghost" of its title would indicate, but rather is an...

10 My emphasis here will fall on the later lyrics, but it seems to me they concentrate themes Stevens labored with his entire career.
invocation to newness: "Come now, pearled and pasted, bloomy-leafed" (128). But then there is always reason enough for Stevens the poet to distrust history. Future generations inevitably mistake what went before, as they do in "A Postcard from the Volcano":

Children picking up our bones Will never know that these were once Quick as foxes on the hill. . . . (127)

It is a poem of cultural detritus, of the inevitable ossification of life. The community which was there leaves only its bones, its speech ("our speech") and its style ("The look of things . . . what we felt / At what we saw"). The generations share speech, but the children "Will speak our speech and never know," using it to condemn the speaker's style. It is the story of degeneration, the passing of one generation to another and the loss thereby incurred. And yet perhaps the speaker's generation was once in the same position as the "children" bone-pickers, so that we do not know if loss occurs due to moral failure, or merely due to transition between the quick and the dead.

Ossification may be a natural metaphor for the cultural process of getting clear to what is significant (let us remember Pound's fish), a clearing away of tradition. In his later poetry Stevens continues this meditation, familiar enough to all poetry, but he seems to wring a new dynamism from the past. "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination" gives the view of
the landscape from a speeding automobile. It begins with
the backward glance of memory:

Last Friday, in the big light of last Friday night,
We drove home from Cornwall to Hartford, late.

It was not a night blown at a glassworks in Vienna
Or Venice, motionless, gathering time and dust.

(396)

The first stanza's "Last Friday," "last Friday night," and
"late" all emphasize that in reading this we are cast back
into a specific time that has passed. As well, the
opening situates the poem spatially between two specific
Connecticut cities. There is a temporal glance backward,
but also a spatial one; literally, the drive from Cornwall
to Hartford is directly easterly. In order to see the
"westward evening star" one would have to look backwards.
The drive forward is remembered as a glance backward, and
further, its importance is constituted by the glance
backward.

However, the second stanza defines this moment of
observation by negation--"it was not"--to the effect that
last Friday's experience is opposed to and lifted out of
the flow of history, especially European history. That
history--the history bracketed by negation--"gather[s]
... dust" like a souvenir, a word that functions in
other poems as an ironization of the past. Thus the two
stanzas are strongly opposed: one is real, one is
imagined; one past brought near, and one pushed to the
distance; one is American, one European.
The two juxtaposed moments, however, have at heart a likeness that operates against the defining dis-simile. Both night sky and glassworks are brilliantly luminescent. On that stretch of highway, there is "The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins, / As the things emerged and moved and were dissolved," with "the veins" a possible homonym for "heavens." The unnamed "things" seem to shine precisely in their evanescence, as they appear to fade in the distance, change forms, or dissolve into nothingness from the perspective of the speeding car, whose violent movement seems to discharge the light. A night "blown at a glassworks in Vienna / Or Venice" gathers "time and dust"; this night rather disperses them through a violent scattering. It is as if the "crush of strength," and the "grinding going round," are necessary for the luminescence, the "vigor of glory" to be released from things as "An argentine abstraction." If "Night’s moonlight lake was neither water nor air," then it was most likely fire, as the essential property of the past is discharged as a fiery luminescence.

It is significant that the glance cast backward does not turn the speaker to salt. That is the danger of Lot’s wife, a fate perhaps hinted at but averted in "[t]here was an insolid billowing of the solid," a supervalence on the solid. Instead, the poet and poem, both of which are backward-looking, are transformed into not a salt crystal, but an "argentine abstraction" as they go from Corn-wall.
to Hart-ford, from the past as a wall or blockage (like the "blocking steel" of "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks") to the past as a fording, a crossing. Such a crossing has its own brilliance, as it does in "The River of Rivers in Connecticut." This poem takes place just previous to the crossing, while the speaker is still on "this side of Stygia" before the trees forget, and "lack the intelligence of trees" (386), before they cross Styx. The past--here a mythical past--is again evoked by dissimile.

Thus the urgency of modernism to appropriate a "usable past" often took the form of a distancing, but not quite forgetting, an operation of cutting oneself off from historical causality, of clearing away. In "A Clear Day and No Memories," that mere absence, in a sense, withdraws, leaving a clear but "shallow spectacle," a clarity having no reference to ambiguity. That is, while ambiguity seemingly always has a relation to its lost arché clarity, Stevens in his last lyrics moves toward a luminescence that is not a nostalgia for, or a reinstatement of, that lost ideal of clarity (the root of the modernist atavistic urge). As indicated, though this movement necessarily involves a glance backward, its essence is a moving forward "under the front of the westward evening star." This dual motion is much like that described in Walter Benjamin's commentary on Klee's "Angelus Novus," which
shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. (257)

This fixed contemplation is, in "A Clear Day," of the shallow spectacle. It is not, however, superficial, but rather central, with "shallow" taking up its etymological relation to the Greek **skeletos**. But here there is less desiccation than the bristling vigor of "Reality."

Stevens has already, in "As you leave the Room," accused himself of aridity:

> I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,  
> As a disbeliever in reality,  
> A countryman of all the bones in the world?  
> Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes  
> Part of a major reality. . . . (396)

The answer is embedded in the "Now, here" and it is a "now, here" a nowhere devoid of absence, the "scenery" of "A Clear Day," where the scenery is the drama:

> No soldiers in the scenery,  
> No thoughts of people now dead,  
> As they were fifty years ago,  
> Young and living in a live air,  
> Young and walking in the sunshine,  
> Bending in blue dresses to touch something,  
> Today the mind is not part of the weather. (397)

The mind is not part of the weather because it is a thing apart, subject neither to the weather's change nor history. That is, there is a clarity of the day because there is no memory; the soldiers are evoked, but not invoked. As Steven Shaviro notes, "the past is affirmed without being rendered present" (193), such that it does
not have to be denied. Space relations, so important in all of Stevens' poetry, ("One is not duchess / A hundred yards from a carriage" [OP 86]) are here collapsed. All pluralities—soldiers, thoughts, dresses, meanings—are resolved into a wholeness without depth, delivering no knowledge except of nothingness. The pluralities all collapse into a oneness, a "shallow spectacle, / This invisible activity, this sense." While Stevens of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" could only elaborate a "small part of the pantomime" (20), here in "A Clear Day" he allows himself a full drama of memoryless "Invisible activity." "A Clear Day" answers "Postcard," by presenting a drama of knowledge of nothingness against the children's not-knowing.

Notes Toward a Supremacist Fiction?: Stevens' Giantism

The preference for evoking rather than invoking history may say something about the comparative weakness of Stevens' lyric "I." Thus, if the self's desire for clarity becomes identified with the monological, an identification that worries readers of modernism, then seemingly Stevens is in the clear, so to speak. Yet the reticence so often associated with his poetry is belied by the figure of the giant that appears with some regularity in his poems. Yet the giant hardly appears in his corpus before it is both challenged and lampooned in "The Plot Against the Giant" (22). The first two girls will "check," and "abash," with smells and colors. The third
girl will "whisper / Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals" so as to "undo" him, indicating that the appearance of the giant will be challenged in the field of communication—labials and gutturals. Thus the monologism of the giant is checked, and he never says a word. But later in Stevens, the giant reappears, here, in Stevens’ most well-known poem, “Anecdote of the Jar.” The poem gives one view of a rather dogmatic event:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush
Like nothing else in Tennessee. (46)

Whatever reticence Stevens displays in a poem such as “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is absent here; the speaker-subject appears confident of his project. The object here—the wilderness, nature—is manfully constrained. And formally, an equivocity or multivocity of vision is supplanted by the straightforward and univocal form of the anecdote. Seen in this way, “Anecdote” reaffirms a commitment to the Romantic image, with the virile poet imposing an art on nature. Almost all critics study the poem as an Americanist re-writing of
Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." One may quibble about the degree of success of the project, with "great success" on one end (the pre-existent round form of the jar makes the wilderness dogmatically sur-round it), and "middling success" on the other (the wilderness resists, is "no longer wild," but still manages to "sprawl"). The regular iambic tetrameter is broken up by the dactyls "slovenly," "wilderness," and "Tennessee," but overall, the art takes dominion "everywhere."

Some critics, notably Frank Lentricchia and James Longenbach, see Stevens as pointing out here the dangers inherent in any imposition from above. The speaker here is Ariel become policeman. Longenbach expresses the same sentiment when he writes of another poem: "the entire point of 'The Idea of Order at Key West' is to expose the dangers of single-minded dogmatism" (163). Yet it is not so apparent that the giant is, or is always, the incarnation of this dogmatism, the temptation to the nostos, or a strong claim to access to pure clarity as original experience. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the giant appears distinct from MacCullough, who seems to be Stevens' figure of fixed fashioning:

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11 Helen Vendler goes so far as to say the poem is "not comprehensible, in manner or form, unless it is taken to be centrally about Keats' poem" (Words 45), a strange comment, considering it must be one of Stevens' most formally independent poems.

12 See Lentricchia's discussion in the Introduction to Ariel and the Police; also Longenbach, Chapter 13.
The pensive giant prone in violet space
May be the MacCullough, an expedient,

Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,
Incipit and a form to speak the word
And every latent double in the word,

Beau linguist. But the MacCullough is
MacCullough. (213)

Ever the linguist who can only assert a tautology of
selfhood, it is MacCullough, not the giant, who "imposes
orders as he thinks of them" (229). "But to impose is not
/ to discover" (230). Indeed Stevens condemns art as will
to power: "The essential fault of surrealism is that it
invents without discovering." (OP 203).

There is here and elsewhere in Stevens a hint that
giantism satirizes the Romantic mind's control over
nature, disputes poesis as origin of order (or, more
sinisterly, as expression of a libido dominandi, an
unblessed "rage for order" [98]). For example, in
"Anecdote," note that the "I" "place[s]" a jar on a hill
in Tennessee, as if he reaches onto the hill itself. In
"The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" the actor
"recomposed the pines," "shifted the rocks." In stanza XI
of "Thirteen," "he" rides not through Connecticut, but
"over" the state. The mentioning of the specific states,
Tennessee and Connecticut, implies a forceful political
action. In all these, there is a looming, gigantic
figure, seemingly that of an artist, that towers over a
territory and delimits, or changes it. And yet if there
is a lust for "dominion," its effectiveness is not
ensured, for Stevens’ giants are not incapable of being checked, abashed, and undone. The timorous quality of this giantism softens the monologism of the speaker’s project in “Anecdote.”

One thrust of Stevens’ criticism since Joseph Riddel’s Clairvoyant Eye emphasizes his humanism, his interest in man as fiction-maker, and Stevens is aware in “Anecdote” that art, the entire project of taming the wilderness, is anthropomorphic. He opposes the man-made jar to wilderness (with its moral slovenliness), to bird and bush. This opposition is thematized such that giantism becomes the monstrous and ironic hyperbole of humanistic anthropomorphism. The placing of the jar proffers (or rather satirizes) the artist-as-giant that gives order through a jar that takes dominion.

A view toward the form of the poem appears at first to be more evidence of the actor-speaker’s monologism. The speaker-actor is not only forceful in his manipulation of the jar and wilderness, but also in casting the poem in a specific form, the anecdote. Anecdotes are a highly manipulable form. In fact, in his essay “The Man Who Mistook His Hat: Steven Greenblatt and the Anecdote,” critic John Lee criticizes “new historicism” precisely for its dependence on this suggestive form. To Lee, the anecdote, especially the personal anecdote, is a little too resonant: “Their small narrative size allows them to be easily manipulated by a master narrative” (299). It is
not just that the anecdote is easily transportable, but also that despite the implicit claim that anecdotes are small "slices of life," they usually are given strongly symbolic functions. One is usually supposed to generalize from a small anecdote, and deduce toward a covering principle. The use of the definite article "the" in the title— which implies a general applicability— instead of the indefinite and empirical "a" further indicates that the poet means to have his anecdote represent a "normative" jar-event.

Yet there is another side to "anecdotes" that operates against a will-to-power, and makes them somewhat palinodic, rendering problematic an overtly political reading. Anecdotes were originally private, alternate histories that are not given around publicly (an-not+ ekdotos-given out). Thus in the last stanza, the domineering affirmation of "It took dominion everywhere" retreats with the negatives of the last two lines, and the giantism of the poem seems to withdraw. The not-giving of bird or bush ties the etymology of the form--anecdote--with the function of the jar. But what of this give-and-take? If a parallel is being made between the anecdote and jar, what is it?

It is the transportability of the two--the jar and the anecdote--that seems especially unstable, and must give pause to a reading which makes the poem an allegory of the working of art(ists). Were one to follow Derrida,
one could say the jar is a sign, the event is the anecdote, the context is the surrounding wilderness. The "event" seems to be the attempt to give a unity to the slovenly "context" that surrounds signature—the jar. But a sign's significance cannot be extricated from its context, and its value lies in its iterability in other contexts. This deracinating function is precisely what Lee finds troublesome. Greenblatt uses this highly transportable, context-dependent form and can manipulate it, perhaps towards sinister purpose.

The simple allegorization of the poem as art-event is further weakened by the mode of the jar's reflecting. One would think that we are being given a mirror held up to nature. The jar as artwork seems to have the poem expressing faith in a classical view of mimesis; but the anecdote form undercuts this, and the jar becomes an insignificant object that, being "gray and bare" does not reflect, and therefore does "not give of bird or bush." The surface, because it "does not give," appears non-reflective, more tain—the non-reflecting back—than mirror. So on the one hand, the jar's position as anamorphic center of the slovenly wilderness indicates

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13 Brooks and Warren think the jar is a gray crockery pot (non-reflective, common-named), while Roy Harvey Pearce notes that there was in 1918 a line of clear glass canning jars called "Dominion" (transparent, proper-named) of which Stevens could have been aware (see Macleod 23ff). Rodolph Gasché uses the word "tain" to indicate the unseen condition of reflection.

14 The jar is an instance of cylindrical anamorphosis, a "trick" painting popular in the Renaissance, in which a
that it should bring the distorted wilderness into representation. On the other hand, its form as anecdote and its description as "gray and bare" belies any promise that it will give any such form. Is this giant's effort merely a non-sign in a wild context enacting a non-event?

Stevens it seems offers arguments against his own poetic project, and any idea of order will remain provisional so as not to become a will to order. From his first poems, Stevens exposes and betrays the singular maker of the Romantic image. In "Six Significant Landscapes" man appears to be the measure of all things:

I measure myself
Against a tall tree.
I find that I am much taller,
For I reach right up to the sun,
With my eye;
And I reach to the shore of the sea
With my ear. (16)

This hymn to man ("My mind to me a kingdom is") is interrupted by mere irritation as the poem continues:

"Nevertheless, I dislike / The way the ants crawl / In and out of my shadow" (16). In "A Primitive Like an Orb" the poet as source of clarity finds elaboration in a meditation on nature and culture, the raw and the cooked. The "primitive" of the title hints at the original, the primordial, but our first vision is of high culture. The first stanza's tone tends toward sarcasm:

But it is, dear sirs,
A difficult apperception, this gorging good

distorted plane is brought to representation in a round mirror.
Fetched by such slick-eyed nymphs, this essential gold,
This fortune's finding, disposed and re-disposed
By such slight genii in such pale air. (317)

The Romantic poet as "slight genii" takes up the effete "pious egress" of "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" (85). They mine "essential gold" from the "cast-iron" of our lives and works. It is perhaps Stevens' version of Marianne Moore's "I, too, dislike it." Yet these figures have the "separate sense" to see the fleeting "huge, high harmony" of poems, that only "was there" and is gone. But the tone changes in the third stanza, and lends an almost epic sound to the adventure:

What milk there is in such captivity,
What wheaten bread and oaten cake and kind,
Green guests and table in the woods and songs . . . . (317)

It is suddenly "a space gown wide" of which "the clairvoyant men . . . need no proof." This "central poem" plays part in a huge high mythology, as it "mates" with the world (stanza VI). Just as the "central poem" gains elaboration through relation to an entire cosmos of earth and sky, a figure looms:

The muscles of a magnet aptly felt,
A giant, on the horizon, glistening,
And in bright excellence adorned, crested
With every prodigal, familiar fire. . . . (319)

He is an "abstraction given head, / A giant on the horizon, given arms, / A massive body and long legs, stretched out." The bodied giant is similar enough to share genealogy (a "parental magnitude") with the "lover,
believer, and the poet," but foreign enough to inspire. This movement toward abstraction (it is a "giant of nothingness") is the necessary outcome of the "miraculous mutiplex of poems," a congruence of forces that resolve toward wholeness. The status of this wholeness is, however, unsettled. Yet while Vendler sees Stevens’ tendency to abstraction as idealized intellectual desire (Words 29), Stevens does not merely posit a fictive Platonic form as some sort of pedagogical tool for his and his reader’s use. The giant, looming both on the horizon and at the center, has too much mass, and is too foreign—seeming to be an arid incarnation of our desires.

Yet in the last stanza with "That’s it", this massy being is either decisively concluded or derisively dismissed. The speaker lets the believer, painter and poet continue their crafts, which the poem would have us believe is Kraft, power. The giant seems to be for Stevens (and for the believer, poet, and painter) "required, as a necessity requires" (383). It is a coalition of both the source of order, “patron of origins,” very much like ourselves, yet at the same time it is the anti-humanist, monstrous, (that “imposes power by the power of his form”). The orb of the title, both clairvoyant eye and “sphere of influence,” reflects the strain in Stevens that distrusts the personalistic despite its humanist fictionality, the “happy pantheism” Gottlieb Worringre so criticized. The giant is a coalescence who
appears at stages, a figure of reconciliation without actual union, between humanist fiction and anti-humanist abstraction.

Poems that Represent Recognizable Poetry

The historical question of how and why clarity reasserted itself in modernism generally (and in Stevens specifically) is distinct from, but not unrelated to, the broader question of whether or not literature follows the course Robert Frost described in his well-known formulation:

It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. (18)

The previous chapter on James’ The Ambassadors showed that a belief that literature furnishes such a clarification was rendered problematical, to say the least. In this section Stevens’ poetry shall be discussed in terms of representation. It could be said that there are two representative elements at work in his poetry. Some of Stevens’ poems are actually, and primarily about things. His early “Depression before Spring” is about sexual disappointment:

The cock crows
But no queen rises.

The hair of my blonde
Is dazzling,
As the spittle of cows
Threading the wind. (36)
Before spring, before green fertility, there is a call to vitality from the cock, but the “ki-ki-ri-ki” of the rooster brings no cooing “rou-cou.” The straightforward simile between “The hair of my blonde” and the “spittle of cows” indicates and invites both sexual hunger and mild disgust. However, there is no hope of achievement, as the thread is broken, and the final deflation, “no queen comes / In slipper green” echoes the gentle self-mockery of Wyatt’s “They Flee from Me.” “Depression Before Spring,” because it is primarily referential, exhibits only one representational element; its main energy, its fundamental gesture, is toward prose reality.

There is another representational element in Stevens’ poetry I want to discuss; a parallel with architecture will help. Karsten Harries’ commentary on the nature of architectural representation is useful here in the context of literary modernism. In his recent study, The Ethical Function of Architecture, he investigates the possibility of an architecture that expresses a cultural ethos in a “postmodern” present of cultural dissensus. He argues that “architecture” is distinct from “buildings” not merely because of superadded ornamentation; they differ more fundamentally in representative structure. A building, to be architecture, must not only be a building, but ought to represent a building.
This means on the one hand that a building should fulfill certain historical expectations; a church should not only "be" a church, but should "look like" a church. Yet Harries argues that reference to, or quotation of, other historical styles is not adequate to fulfill this representational function, as playfully vapid postmodern architecture shows. Rather, a building must relate in history to a normative ahistorical ideal. How architecture is to accomplish this task in an age lacking any such unanimity regarding ideals forms the bulk of Harries' treatment.

I want to argue that a similar self-representation is at work in much of Stevens' poetry. His poems not only are poems, but represent poems; they not only fulfill requirements to be poems, but they are also like poems. Understanding this helps in envisioning Stevens' poetic project; as well, it helps to frame much criticism on Stevens, for as his earliest readers realized, Stevens poems are often about poems. This does not mean merely that Stevens' poetry references other poems. In fact, though Harold Bloom rightly sees Stevens as firmly ensconced in the American poetic tradition, Stevens seems to take philosophers and artists as often as poets for his interlocutors. Nor is this to say that Stevens' poetry merely fulfills certain expectations of appearance. What is denoted here is rather a facet of Stevens' overall representative strategy. Stevens, in his prose (if that
is to be trusted), indicates that he himself was attempting to signal the overall recognizability of his project:

My intention in poetry is to write poetry: to reach and express that which, without any particular definition, everyone recognizes to be poetry, and to do this because I feel the need of doing it. (OP 240)

Though his poetry begins in a felt need, it takes the representative expectations of an imagined audience ("everyone") into consideration. Stevens' last long poem, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," displays this dual function of presenting something and representing itself. The first stanza starts:

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,
The vulgate of experience. Of this,
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet--

(331)

The oxymoronic "plain version" (etymologically a "flat turning") indicates the twists and revisions the next thirty cantos undergo, as the poem (so many "few words"), traces the speaker's encounter with an ordinary, plain city, here named (with some irony) "New Haven." But if the plain city were transformed:

Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,
So that they become an impalpable town, full of impalpable bells, transparencies of sound,

In a movement . . . of the mind. . . . (331)

This is all a turning, a "version" of idealism, but this transparency, "this movement of the mind" is averted, changed into a different type of transparency, not of the mind alone:
Reality is the beginning not the end,  
Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,  
Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals.  
(337)

Reality is not the ornate full elaboration, but the  
beginning. And “We keep coming back and coming back / To  
the real,” a version of unmediated vision:

The poem of pure reality, untouched  
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,  
Straight to the transfixing object, to the  
object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,  
Transfixing by being purely what it is,  
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain  
eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the  
sight  
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek  
Nothing beyond reality. . . . (336)

Though we seek the “poem of pure reality,” we ultimately  
“do not know what is real and what is not.” As many  
critics have noted, “reality” takes on a variety of  
meanings in Stevens’ poetry; sometimes it is what is  
constituted by mind, other times what is over against  
mind. Here it is enough to note that this is not merely a  
weak skepticism at work; we do know enough about reality  
to know that it contains a “faithfulness” and a  
“tendance”—a holding. Images of holding in “An Ordinary  
Evening,” “our sepulchral hollows,” the squirrel’s “tree-  
caves” are like the “honey hived” in “Credences of  
Summer,” repositories of reality. But the repository of  
the Ecclesiast, the “text that is an answer, though
obscure" (343), cannot suffice, and attention is next drawn to an alternative: the poem.

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the res itself and not about it.
The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was. . . . (338)

Criticism on Stevens has long pointed out that Stevens is a "self-conscious" poet. Joseph Riddel, in the first major study of Stevens' poetry, could already in 1965 write that "It is hardly news that Stevens' investigation of reality discovers it in poetry" (261). Similarly, Harold Bloom sees one of the fundamental tensions in Stevens' poetry as the claiming of his own poetic standing in light of his predecessors, in finding an original expression in a "repetitiousness of men and flies," (and, presumably, of older poets) (383). "Ordinary Evening" suggests the centrality of poetry to human affairs, and to civic life in New Haven, and that, "Together, said words of the world are the life of the world" (339). But more than that, the poem is a showing of itself. "Ordinary Evening" is not allegorical--a story about something else, but more primarily an evidencing of itself. It is a poem that represents itself in an "endless elaboration," and is recognizable as poetry:

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry,
As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize
Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life,
As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from
nothingness,
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for
lands. (349)

The canto takes up a theology of poetry similar to that in
"A Primitive Like an Orb": "We do not need to prove the
existence of the poem. / It is something seen and known in
lesser poems." Stevens performs a sort of argument from
design, and in "Ordinary," with its references to creation
ex nihilo, "seen and unseen" ("visibilium et invisibilium"
of the Christian churches' Credo), and "heavens" and
"hells," the language is unguardedly theological. This is
not to supplant God with the "huge high harmony," (that,
rather, was a struggle of "The Idea of Order at Key
West"), but to evince the way poems show—not theophany,
but "logophany." Convinced of the centrality of poetry,
and yet working with its "tropes and deviations," Stevens
seemingly in this last of his long poems, in the autumn of
his life, stores up the real in poems. Or rather, reality
becomes re-stored:

The glass of the air becomes an element--
It was something imagined that has been washed
away.
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.
It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless
sight.
It is a visibility of thought,
In which a hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see
at once. (351)

"The glass of the air" takes up the "tall and of a port in
air" of "Anecdote of the Jar," and perhaps even Williams' comment on Moore. But here the containing, the "tendance"
is a restoration, literally a "standing up again." What is restored is not the "transfixing object" of VI; rather, it is the poem itself. As Harold Bloom has pointed out, the images of transparency in "An Ordinary Evening" take up the Emersonian concerns of selfhood in his essay "Nature":

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become the transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all. . . . (24)

But here in "Ordinary Evening" the transparency that is a "visibility of thought" refers to the poem itself rather than the "harassing master," the strong poet, the transcendentalist in the woods. The "plain version," the "flat turning" of the poem's opening line, is nothing other than the "endlessly elaborating poem." Thus the poem is neither "naked Alpha" nor hierophant Omega," but hierophant Alpha, the showing of itself that elaborates. Just as cubism makes no gesture towards any realism, and, as E. H. Gombrich notes, "counter[s] the transforming effects of an illusionist reading" (234), thereby troubling simple notions of recognition, so Stevens' poems, so recognizably poems, are best when (as in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"), they make no gesture to an "illusionist reading" of the prosaic.

This is not to say the poem lacks a referring function. Certainly it is about, as Helen Vendler
indicates in her *On Extended Wings*, the theme of desiccation, of old age as the "dilapidation of dilapidations" (341). Nor are the poems merely instances of the law of self-identity—the poem is itself. What occurs here is a substantial transformation of the idea of clarification as catharsis in literature. Aristotle in his *Poetics*, as will be remembered, accounted for the pleasure of art by its recognizability. This accounting ties recognition to *mimesis*, for one enjoys because one recognizes a certain situation. But in the poetry of Stevens, the primary function of recognition is not of states of affairs, but, so to speak, of poems as poems. His poetry doesn't represent only snow men, feelings, blackbirds, an American city, etc. His poems represent poems; they look like themselves.

This recognizability of the poems as poems is no small matter, as "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" shows (354). In this poem of non-recognition, the "angel of reality," the "necessary angel of earth" tries to explain to the countrymen what he is: no such easy self-evidence here as for the Gospel angels. Even when these expressings of poetry take place "word by word" (97), they need elaboration. In "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," there is a transcription word for word, verbatim:

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.
He breathed its oxygen,  
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of  
his table. (374)

In what sense can a poem "take the place of" a mountain? In "The Rock" there is a similar displacement: "In this plenty, the poem makes meaning of the rock" (364); but what is the place of a mountain? The first line, "There it was, word for word," indicates a direct transcription, an isomorphic relation between the mountain and the poem; the one copies the other, "word for word." The second stanza, "He breathed its oxygen, / Even when the book lay turned in the dust of the table" leads to a reading-inspired transport. Then, from the third stanza the poem traces a memory of how the speaker once arrived at a place where he could see and recognize "his unique and solitary home." The reading of the poem is parallel to this experience of recognizing.

The poem takes the place of a mountain in that it affords him this vista. At one time "he had needed / A place to go to in his own direction." What specific desire prompts this need is unclear; what is clear is that the place--the mountain, the interior landscape--itself had to be changed by him before it could yield the view. He had "recomposed the pines, / Shifted the rocks, and picked his way among clouds" to find the right scenic "outlook." There, lying on "The exact rock where his inexactnesses / Would discover, at last, the view toward
which they had edged, "gazing down at the sea," he could see home.

Here, as in other of his late poems ("Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," and "Of Mere Being," for example), Stevens finds home to be at the liminal edges of things. Here, he looks over a rock, down at the sea, and can "Recognize his unique and solitary home." Yet how can the sea, as perhaps either the boundless or the unconscious, be his unique and solitary home? How can something as protean and inexact as the sea be the reader's singular home? Did "they" (he and his "inexactnesses") artificially recompose the land "For the outlook that would be right" only to gaze and the fluid, dis-composed sea? Further, "recognize" implies he has made this trip at least once, while "at last" may indicate that it was a singular and final event. Whether the experience was unique or recursive, here the poem and the mountain it "took the place of" are places from which to contemplate one's origins, one's home. The poem becomes recognizable as a place that can afford a vista, a vista of a recognizable home, and that displacement is the poem that "makes meaning of the rock."

Similarly, in "The World as Meditation," this recognizability is questioned by the poet-spouse herself, Penelope. Penelope weaves by day ("She has composed") and dissembles by night in anticipation of her husband Ulysses' return.
She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near. (382)

Hanging over this scene, and articulated in Penelope’s weaving and unweaving, is the concern that she precisely won’t recognize Odysseus. Indeed, Homer’s Penelope tests Odysseus extensively, and even in bed voices concern that he is unrecognizable. In the Stevensian poem—as endless elaboration, as place of recognition, as place of non-recognition—there is less figurative energy directed at representing the objects than at the proffering of poetry itself.

**Negative Ekphrasis**

It is hard to read Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and not assume that it is his last work, and that this matters. Wallace Stevens is no exception to the temptation to read poets in terms of literary biography. After the “Farewell to an idea” of “The Auroras of Autumn” (308), and *Seventy Years Later* of “The Rock,” it is hard not to conclude that Stevens consciously wrote with a sense of an ending, and that despite his avoidance of the purely eschatological, when the vocabulary of clarity (clearness, gold, spectacle, glittering, transparent, luminous, etc.)¹⁵ is

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¹⁵ Marie Borroff indicates that sound-symbolic words such as “glitter” and “dazzle” “are inherently sensory and specific,” and such frequentatives “literally designate some sort of rapid motion or change” (97).

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used in the later poems, it takes on different meaning than it had earlier in his career.

Certainly "clear" and "sharp" words had been used before. A glance at Stevens' heavily anthologized "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" confirms most emphatically that the poem is about some form of clarity; it contains windows, sun, glass, ice, circles, as well as the words "lucid," "pierced," "light," and "sharply"; all these instances of clarity resist a reading that would stop at the ambiguity of its multiple perspectivism. The poem's concerns culminate in stanza number XI, the only one that enacts a drama:

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

One would expect a "glass coach" to be glass-like, i.e., to be transparent. This is apparently not the case, for this coach casts a shadow—the "shadow of his equipage"—that "he" mistakes for blackbirds. For the birds to pierce him with fear, they must be sharp; no vague thing can pierce, as a sudden recognition. What would pierce him with fear would be whatever in a transparent coach casts a shadow. Thus it is possible that the shadow of his equipage refers not to the coach, but to another "equipage" belonging to him: his own body. He mistakes the shadow of his own body, sitting in a transparent glass coach, for blackbirds, and that terrifies him; he is
literally afraid of his own shadow. The blackbirds seem to represent the fugitive aspects of his own equipage: his own body, his own mortal nature, his mortality. Only when one looks out the window of a glass coach does one see with perfect clarity a piercing fear, one's own death. Nothing resists vision like blackbirds—even their shadows arrest the eye, are opaque through the transparent glass.

Here clarity is still primarily tied to epistemology, especially self-knowledge; if we cannot know the fugitive object (literally, "flying"), we can at least know our limits. Such is the direction in "The Motive for Metaphor":

You like it under the trees in autumn,
Because everything is half dead.
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
With the half colors of quarter-things,
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon—. (240)

Stevens seemingly anticipates criticisms of his poetry, and here accuses himself, as in "As You Leave the Room," of the barrenness of his "motive for metaphor, shrinking from / The weight of primary noon": aridity and half-measures.

Yet for Stevens clarity is not a mere stripping away of all ornament, and criticism of his poetry as arid and lifeless would have given him pause. In a short essay on philosophy, Stevens criticizes Leibniz's theory of monads for precisely this lack of heart:
Yet the idea seems to be completely lacking in anything securely lofty. Leibniz was a poet without flash. . . . It is worth while stopping to think of him because he stands for a class: the philosopher afraid of ornament. (OP 269)

Rather than merely being the lack of ornamentation, rather than having its origin in a nostalgia for a lost ideal of originary, Stevens' use of clarity, I want to argue, is a kind of negative ekphrasis. His poems use the vocabulary of clarity in order to describe not an art-object, but a place where his poems can take place. "Description Without Place" takes up the seem/be contrast of both Hamlet ("Seems, Madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems") and Notes: "It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible (230).

It is possible that to seem—it is to be, As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems It is and in such seeming all things are. (270)

Of all the many examples of seeming that might be, one place opens up a possibility:

There might be, too, a change immenser than A poet's metaphors in which being would Come true, a point in the fire of music where Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe, And observing is completing and we are content . . . . (272)

This "without place,"—not quite utopia—remains in the realm of possibility. It is a change more immense than

16 Two "seems" framing two negatives, a palindrome, and the verbs "to know" and "to be": a truly Stevensian line in Shakespeare.
metaphor, a place where "being would / Come." It is a site oriented toward futurity, "fresh / In the brilliantest descriptions of the new day, / Before it comes, the just anticipation" (275).

This no-place is an artifice, a creation of man. Murray Krieger describes ekphrasis, the description of a plastic art in verbal form, this way:

What is being described in ekphrasis is both a miracle and a mirage: a miracle because a sequence of action filled with befores and afters such as language alone can trace seems frozen into an instant's vision, but a mirage because only the illusion of such an impossible picture can be suggested by the poem's words. .. This peculiar--and paradoxical--jointly produced experience of ekphrasis allows it to function as the consummate example of the verbal art, the ultimate shield beyond shields. (xvii)

This mixture of wonderment (miracle) and illusion (mirage) seems to describe Stevens' clarity of place, this "golden vacancy" (271). Yet Stevens is describing more the photographic negative of ekphrasis; rather than fullest embodiment, flat clearing is evoked, with no "befores" or "afters": "In flat appearance we should be and be, / Except for delicate clinkings not explained" (271), and, "I should name flatly" (232). I want to say that this poetry of pure affirmation of an "illustrious nothing" (270) is seen in the clearing away of a space where the poem can occur. This explains much of what is thought of as Stevens' aridity; there is a tension between the need for clarity ("It must be abstract," and "this shallow spectacle") and the stuff of poetry, such that any
 invocation operates against the stated goal. What is evoked is potential.

Thus "A Clear Day and no Memories" does not only indicate a clearing away of the past, but a positive clearness of vision of a space that can be used in action. An early vision of this "field" is given in "American Sublime." Beginning with "How does one stand?" the poem goes on to imply that the sublime is not a matter of posture (posture, after all, seems significant in paintings of the sublime), but rather,

the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat? (114)

This vacant space is here strongly associated with desire and need, and perhaps has epic resonances of Aeneas' arrival at the vacant space in which his prophecy of eaten plates would be fulfilled. Yet even here, there is a sense that the poem offers a vacant place for action to take place, whether out of desire or, in the case of "Domination of Black," fear. That poem begins with a tone of melancholy contentment:

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind. (14)
The colors of the leaves—we assume the reds, yellows and 
oranges of fallen leaves and fire-flame—flicker in the 
room and as well mimic the motion of wind-swept leaves. 
The tone then shifts abruptly: “Yes: but the color of the 
heavy hemlocks / Came striding.” Other colors in the poem 
merely repeat themselves, turn in circles, but black 
strides. Even if “hemlock” were not associated with 
poison, the verbal “striding” and the memory of “the cry 
of the peacocks” would still lend a menacing air to the 
“color of the heavy hemlocks.” The middle stanza 
describes the remembered peacocks:

The colors of their tails  
Were like the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind,  
In the twilight wind.  
They swept over the room,  
Just as they flew from the boughs of the 
hemlocks  
Down to the ground.  
I heard them cry—the peacocks. (14-15)

This stanza is enclosed or framed by the two stanzas that 
describe the striding color, just as black encloses “the 
room” the speaker is in. The confusion over the referent 
for “they” is not helped by the interjection “the 
peacocks” to clarify the referent of “them.” Confusion 
turns to fear as the peacocks’ tails sweep across the room 
as the birds drop from the hemlocks, with the rhyme “down 
to the ground” reiterating their plunge. In this middle 
stanza, in this transport, he not only “remembered” the 
peacocks’ cry, he “heard” them.
This remembrance in the middle of the poem addresses the motivations of the cry of the peacocks. Three possibilities are presented: the twilight, the leaves, and the hemlocks. The first and last possibilities are dismissed rather perfunctorily (one line each); however, eight lines are spent on “the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind, / Turning as the flames / Turned in the fire. . . .” What is it about the turning of the leaves that would cause the peacocks to cry? Or is the narrator falling into the pathetic fallacy, thinking that the peacocks’ cries are motivated at all? Exactly which the cry is “against” is of course left unsaid. There is however a contrast between the cyclical turning of the leaves and straightforward striding of black, a contrast that may indicate that the peacock’s concerns are different from the speaker’s. The peacocks may cry against the hemlock, but it is the color of the heavy hemlock that seems to occupy the speaker.

What dominates, as Riddel indicates, is time (42). This explains the peacocks who mournfully cry against the end of things (twilight, leaves, or hemlocks), but it does not fully explain the speaker’s fear. It is not just the terminus of things that seems to disturb him so, for the poem begins with an ending. The night itself—the end of day—is already fully present from the opening words: “At night. . . .” Rather, it is the color of night, the fact that black is the background of all color, of all light,
that it is the background of even the planets, and therefore a cosmic background, that frightens him. The main reason why he "felt afraid" is the realization that the fire will die, leaving black; the twilight will become full black night; the planets will gather and turn, and we assume expire, like the leaves, leaving black skies. Black is the background, and frames the room, dominates the window he looks out of, envelops the poem, covers the cosmos; it will stride in and all else will exit, leaving "the nothing that is" (54). The fear is the fear of the background.

The poet's concern here is as much for the background as it is for mortality, and "Domination" has the beginning already of this "space grown wide" of the later lyrics (317). The monstrous "striding" of the black is a showing or pointing (from monstrare) of this wide space. In the later lyrics this description, becomes a "vigor of glory" in "Reality," and an "Invisible activity" in "A Clear Day." In "The Plain Sense of Things" there is a return to a simplicity of perception of this "plain":

After the leaves have fallen, we return
To a plain sense of things. It is as if
We had come to an end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir. (382)

Its vision of trees "unleaving" echoes Hopkins' "Spring and Fall;" mortality touches all things, both natural leaves and the made houses:

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house.
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.

However, this is not simply an occasion for meditation on mortality: that is a sadness with cause. The poem evinces the imagination’s need for some kind of stripping, an exfoliation. “It is as if / We had to come to an end of the imagination” to find ourselves in a space that does not have embellishment of the mind. But once there, how to describe, think, or act? “It is difficult to choose the adjective” precisely because to do so would violate the “plain sense” that is sought. That is, the imagination’s activity—the “fantastic effort” (or rather, the “effort of fantasy”) is accretional, and presents the danger of encrustation. That the simplification involves diminishments—the lessened floors, among others—is the tragic aspect of cultural criticism and transmission.

It is the unleaving that forms the occasion for thinking about this broader cultural stripping. Moreover, the temporal span involved, “The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side,” and the repetitiousness of “men and flies” indicates that the main concern is generational re-evaluation: for fifty-year “repetition” substitute “generation.” That is, what should “we” (not the poet alone) who have returned to this “plain sense” re-imagine? Ought we preserve the imagined world of the previous “repetition,” try to rebuild the “great
structure," re-engage the "turban"? Or should we let it all go, despairing as Gloucester of King Lear (who has his own "space grow wide" in his heath) does: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th’ gods"?

The "plain sense" calls for the necessity of the imagination, which gives not reflections and tropes, but the "great pond," the transparency of water, without all of its detritus ("reflections, leaves, / Mud,"); it all had to be imagined. This clear, non-reflecting pond-vision has been prepared for in "An Ordinary Evening."

The summer buzzes beyond the horizon or in the ground:
In mud under ponds, where the sky used to be reflected.

The barrenness that appears is an exposing. It is not part of what is absent, a halt For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances. (350)

To see things without imagination's attributions, seeing the "plain sense," seeing the cleared space where a poem can take place, requires the imagination. In fact the more plain the sense, the more imagination is required, just as to see clear water requires more "fantastic effort" than to see water with its "waste of lilies." Yet the necessity does not seem to be merely a formal one, a sine qua non. It is a necessity that demands, or more, requires (literally, "asks again") what repetitions, what reflections "will suffice." This is a complete clarity, water without mud, mirror without tain, or as "Ordinary Evening" had it, "a bottomless sight."
Though this reading of Stevens as a poet describing open spaces of luminous potency favors visionary elements, it appears that sightedness stands "man-locked" in his poetry. Other approaches see a similar potentiality; both Harold Bloom and Steven Shaviro favor Nietzschean readings. Bloom also places Stevens in the transcendentalist tradition, such that "'beyond' in Stevens is where the self must go to find itself more truly and more strange" (98), an Emersonian "crossing a bare common." Shaviro sees the positive blankness of Stevens' lyrics as affirmations that fulfill what Nietzsche describes as the highest aim of art: "to be oneself the eternal joy of becoming, beyond all terror and pity— that joy which includes even joy in destroying." (208)

These readings would read more "potency" where I see potential, emphasizing the will's power, while in the last lyrics there seems to be a measure that is "without human feeling," a coming to the end of the aching desire of "The Poems of Our Climate." The "Clear water in a brilliant bowl, / Pink and white carnations" are beautiful, but "Still one would want more, one would need more, More than a world of white and snowy accents" (158). Such an ache is missing in Stevens' final poem "Of Mere Being." The blackground of "Domination of Black" is re-visioned almost as gold-ground:17

17 Or, as Vendler puns, "Domination of Gold" (Words 67).
The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze decor,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird’s fire-fangled feathers dangle down. (398)

The palm in “Of Mere Being” is the “place without
description”: in fact, “place” is etymologically related
to “palms” of hands, and palm trees are so-called because
they look like hands. (Similarly for Stevens, “Oak Leaves
are Hands” [197]). The palm is “at the end of the mind,”
it is “beyond the last thought” and therefore after
thinking. There have been in Stevens previous attempts at
transcendence, going beyond, most notably in Notes. There
was there “a point, / Beyond which fact could not progress
as fact,” and “a point / Beyond which thought could not
progress as thought” (229). Here there is something of an
achievement; thought has led the mind there, so that the
palm, the place, is a gift given (by hand?) at the end of
mind’s thoughts. From this bronze decor, the ordinary,
something extraordinary arises (like the gold in the
“cast-iron of our lives” of “Primitive”). The golden bird
sings a song that is foreign, and if it is “without human
meaning, / Without human feeling,” then it is so because
it is wholly other, at the edge of the space demarcated by the mind.

The scene that arises in the bronze decor is still familiar; it is composed of birds, palms, wind, but all are seen under an a-rational aspect: "You know then that it is not the reason that makes us happy or unhappy." The first two stanzas contain the action: the palm "rises," the bird "sings." But in the third stanza things are detained by realization and contemplation: a realization that beyond the concatenation of thought, there is an experience of a remote song, a song which shows that the reason is sequential and yet neutral with regard to happiness. Here the poem slows. The sentences shorten. The tone indicates a lifting beyond the realm of actions to the realm of contemplation. There is a simultaneity of presentation, such that things in the "decor" appear to become weightier: the palm "stands," the wind "moves slowly," the feathers "dangle down." Though critics often make the connection to Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", this is a clearing beyond an ekphrasis of a golden bird: a description without place.
Conclusion

In his preface to Paul Valéry’s *Eupalinos* (a mock Socratic dialogue), Stevens writes:

Mallarmé and Valéry announce a new climate of thought. They want clear enigmas, those that are developable, that is to say, mathematical. . . . *Eupalinos* is a work of this “clarity of details.” This is its precise description. In it Valéry made language itself a constructor.

Stevens then quotes Valéry’s Socrates directly:

What is there more mysterious than clarity? . . . What more capricious than the way in which light and shade are distributed over hours and over men? . . . Orpheuslike we build, by means of the word, temples of wisdom and science that may suffice for all reasonable creatures, this great art requires of us an admirably exact language. (OP 298)

Valéry is typically modern in his advocacy of “exact language,” but it is no coincidence that his course returns him to the origin of the “enlightenment project,” Socrates. Stevens’ approving quotation ties him to Socrates’ goals if not his methods, for as an American he eschews Socrates’ faith in dialogue (preferring solitude), the divine (preferring imagination), and reason (“You know then that it is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy” [398]). Stevens realizes that to identify the quest for a clarity with certain knowledge is no longer possible, and further, that to be hot for certainties not only goes against the American grain, but is, like the “blocking steel” of Berserk (84), pathological. The modernist reaction entails an attempt to find such a clarity distinct from the rationalism of the
Enlightenment. When it fails, it fails politically, mistaking a particular figure for a "gold flourisher" (208). Stevens avoids this fate perhaps because he thinks that whatever clarity is, "it must be abstract."

The issue necessarily involves ambiguity, for the problem for literary modernism came framed largely in theological terms; once the divine—the sine qua non of clarity—is repudiated, the occult as the ambiguous becomes the receptacle of reverence. As Colie indicates, the content of the paradoxes of each age reflects the dominant discourse: in Renaissance, philosophy; in Romanticism, God and God substitutes; in modernity it is language that is the register of cultural crisis. The Romantic deontological turbulence enacted by its poetry left modernism with only the aesthetic object of the text.

Stevens and James do their part to render problematic the epistemology of aesthetics. If they are indeed seeking some type of clarity that is not identical with epistemological obsession, then they in a sense mark the end of a knowing-dominated era. In this sense, Empson’s taxonomy in Seven Types of Ambiguity may be seen as a symptom of a diminished understanding of clarification rather than its cure. The more radical polysemy of dissemination, like Novalis’ pollen, holds out the promise of an advent, a clarity of the about-to-be-new based on figurative energy of ambiguity. Or, perhaps not. Mark DeLancy indicates that, despite protestations to the
contrary, deconstruction is still in the tradition of the interpretive stance that clarifies "opaque texts" (193). And if we accept Stevens' working definition of clarity as a waiting for possibility, then perhaps Jürgen Habermas is correct in his assessment of postmodernism as modernism's unfinished business. Indeed, it looks like we'll be stuck with modernism for a very long time.

Yet clearly, despite Husserl's broad attempt to reinvigorate interest in an invisible realm of meanings and ideal objects, modernism rejects any recourse to a Platonic ground of the real. But too there is a post-Kantian and post-Romantic dismissal of the mind's ability to transform raw data into determinate categorical knowledge. Modernism then can be seen as an attempt to re-imagine form, that which informs objects and subjects such that it can be discharged as what Walter Benjamin calls aura. This Stevensian "form gulping after formlessness" (307) is an attempt to get back to what the Greeks called proto hyle, prime matter, so that we may all be "Connoisseurs of Chaos" (PM 166). This form after formlessness constitutes the main contradiction of modernism.

The role of the critic then is to make clear the ambiguous text, to re-interpret the hermetic in terms of the present. If it is true, as Valéry's Socrates

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1 See Dupré's "Postmodernity or Late Modernity?"
2 See "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
indicates, that the vocation of clarifying demands that we be "Orpheuslike," then it requires a subterranean journey. And it is there perhaps that modernist "visibilities of thought" find their place in Hades' "darkness visible," and clarity is very much with us as an oxymoronic (and vaguely eschatological), interpretive project.
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Vita

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