ENDLESS ASSENTS: JOHN DEWEY, AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN POETRY

BY

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Abstract
Endless Assents: John Dewey, Aesthetic Experience, and the Promise of American Poetry
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Endless Assents makes the argument that John Dewey's theory of art (articulated in such texts as *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*) offers a new and fruitful way of better appreciating and understanding the uniquely generative and transformative value of aesthetic experience in American poetry (specifically in the works of Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, and A.R. Ammons).

Understood from the perspective of Dewey's explicitly naturalist philosophy of aesthetic experience, the poetry and poetic discourse examined in this dissertation is interpreted (in various different ways) as an example of the simple fact that art is neither a fixed concept nor a static object but is instead a quality of experience, made manifest through active engagement with the environment. Thus art and aesthetic experience, far from representing some abstract ideal of beauty—somehow separate from the ugly business of so-called "ordinary" life—is in fact an active and integral, though rarely realized, part of day to day experience. Understood thus, the aesthetic becomes, as it did for all of the poets in this dissertation, not only a source of pleasure, but a method for engaging with and changing our environment. Such a realization marks a radical shift in the way that American poets thought about the value and use of their own work and of poetry more broadly.

This realization, however, as Dewey argues, is impossible without first recognizing the value and embracing the experience of what he called "Animal life below the human scale," for it is in

animal life that we can most readily grasp the source of the aesthetic. Unfettered by the many habits, conventions, and false dichotomies of human reason, the animal exists, in a state of constant engagement with the facts of the environment, weaving together seamlessly the past and future into the present moment. Thus this dissertation argues that by recognizing and embracing animal life as a vital and indispensable part of the human, these poets were, in a stereotypically modernist fashion, able to transcend the limits of culture and habit, redefining the very nature of experience. Healing the rift between the human and the animal allowed these poets to then articulate a poetics of aesthetic engagement as a model for transforming life and experience from the ground up.

TO MY WIFE

“that white animal, so lean,
turned heavenly, heavenly Vincentine”

"Who speaks? But it must be that I,
That animal"

—Wallace Stevens

Contents

Abbreviations

(AE) Dewey, John. *Collected Works of John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953. V. 10: "1934 Art as Experience.* Boydston, Jo Ann. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008.

(EN) Dewey, John. *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 1, 1925 – 1953: 1925, Experience and Nature*. Boydston, Jo Ann. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008.

(CPMM) Moore, Marianne. *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*. New York: Penguin, 1956.

(EBCP) Bishop, Elizabeth. *Elizabeth Bishop the Complete Poems 1927-1979*. New York: FSG, 1995.

(WSCPP) Stevens, Wallace. *Wallace Stevens Collected Poetry and Prose.* Eds. Kermode and Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.

(JACP) Ashbery, John. *John Ashbery Collected Poems 1956-1987*. New York: Library of America, 2008.

(AASP) Ammons, A.R.. *The Selected Poems Expanded Edition*. New York: Norton, 1987

INTRODUCTION:
JOHN DEWEY AND AMERICAN MODERNISM

In his one and only explicit work on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, John Dewey described two scenarios in which art would be theoretically impossible: the first was a cold, dead world of total efficiency and monotony, the second, its opposite, was a place of complete and utter chaos without any structure or guiding rhythm. In 1934, the year that Dewey's book was published each of these must have seemed potentially immanent. On one side the factory and the increasingly subdivided organization of American society offered a dystopian vision of a world of mindless repetition and alienated labor, while on the other, the memory of the First World War and the looming threat of a second, seemed to portend a new outbreak of violence and chaos. In the face of these twin threats to civilization, Dewey argued for a renewed interest in the power of art, putting forward an explicitly naturalist theory of "art as experience" that would resituate the aesthetic as a vital part of even our most ordinary day to day activities, thus saving it from the realm of the merely "fine" and reclaiming it as a tool for transformation and change.

Not surprisingly many modern American poets at this time had also been seeking for a new way to articulate the value of poetry and art as a vital and active response to an increasingly hostile, anaesthetic environment. William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot were all looking for ways to make poetry new, to make it sing out against its times, to resist the oppression and the violence of what Stevens called "the pressure of reality." For most of these poets, such resistance took the form of a poetics that was aggressively experimental, often philosophical, often political, and at times also deeply conservative and nostalgic. Indeed, in the case of poets like Pound and Eliot language itself became a kind of battleground upon which to attack and criticize what they saw

as a dying culture, or what Pound had called a "botched civilization,:" "an old bitch gone in the teeth."[1] For most, however, despite their engagement with the problems of the larger world and their interest in the potential of language, poetry and art remained a thing distinct from, even, at times, in conflict with, the world of quotidian experience. Indeed, high modernism, as it came to be called, was premised upon the idea that art, especially of the avant-garde type, could somehow transcend the ordinary. In the case of Pound and Eliot, especially, art was frequently seen more as a bulwark against ruin than a tool for reconstruction.

But of all the early modernists mentioned above it was Stevens and Moore who understood most clearly that the real power of poetry and the aesthetic was not to be found only in the poem or work of art, but in the world of experience itself, of which the poem was just one articulation. Just as Dewey understood—despite popular prejudice and habit—that there could be no real separation between experience and art, Stevens and Moore recognized the potential of poetry as itself "a renovation of experience:" that is, as a source for enriching and transforming life from the ground up and not merely a commentary upon it. Underlying this impulse was a surprisingly strong and deep awareness of the importance of what Dewey called "animal life below the human scale." Although they may not have been responding directly to Dewey's work, Stevens and Moore were both educated and reared in an intellectual environment of American pragmatism that was itself deeply influenced by the connections between the human and natural worlds. It is not surprising, then, that they both would have implicitly recognized and appreciated the significance of the change that Dewey's philosophy was itself articulating. Understood from the perspective of Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic experience, it becomes easier to see how both Stevens and Moore (and many of the poets who followed them including Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, and A.R. Ammons) were directly addressing in their poetry and in their prose works

[1] Pound, Ezra. From "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." *Poems and Translations*. New York: Library of America, 2003.

the function and transformative potential of aesthetic experience and its relation to what Dewey called the "live creature."

The close correspondence between these poets and Dewey is in part the result of the fact that Dewey was in several ways a modernist philosopher. Like all good pragmatists, Dewey's ideas were very much of their time, and as such both influenced and were influenced *by* the world of ideas around him—including the homegrown revolution in art and literature that would later become known as modernism. Dewey's philosophy no doubt, as this dissertation will indirectly argue, influenced the literature of American modernism (clearly Stevens and Moore were both at least familiar with his work) but it is equally important for our purposes to keep in mind the degree to which his work was also influenced by that literary tradition and the ways in which his ideas were an articulation of many of the same concerns. This concept of the inevitability of mutual influence, what Dewey would call simultaneous "doing and undergoing" is essential to understanding the value of his work in relation to American literature. Such a correspondence between Dewey's ideas and the philosophical and aesthetic work being done in American literature is no surprise however, since, in addition to his better documented interests in philosophy and politics, he was also deeply interested in literature and modern and contemporary poetry. This fact is well evidenced by the many collections of American poetry in his library, including classic collections of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson as well as works by such high modernists as Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein and later poets like Theodore Roethke. In Fact, according to Jay Martin, "at his death Dewey owned more volumes of literature than he did of philosophy."[2] Such a fact, although it may seem trivial on the surface, actually reveals much about Dewey's intellectual temperament, which, from his earliest youth,

[2] Martin, Jay. *The Education of John Dewey, a Biography*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. (401)

was always sensitive to the emotional life of the human animal and the underlying aesthetic structures of ideas.

Although Dewey was already in his mid-seventies when he published *Art as Experience*—his first and only full length study of aesthetics—the foundations for his theory of aesthetic experience had already been painstakingly built over the course of several books and published articles on philosophy and art. The aesthetic and aesthetic feeling, as many commentators have noted, was always an important concern for Dewey, and with the publication of *Experience and Nature* in 1925, would in fact become central to his entire philosophy of experience.[3] Indeed, prior to *Experience and Nature*, Dewey had written several articles and reviews about art and aesthetics and given several lectures on art and literature throughout his early career. Even Dewey's first book, *Psychology*, published in 1887, included, as Jay Martin notes, a chapter on "aesthetic feeling." And *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, deals with many of the same problems and false dichotomies between science and art, that he would later explore in much greater detail. *Art as Experience*, then, was not, as it may appear in retrospect, a one-off statement upon aesthetics somehow tacked onto the end of his career, but was the culmination and integration of many decades of Dewey's thought in which he had been developing and building toward a total theory of aesthetic experience.

In this sense *Art as Experience*, written in 1934, at the very height of the modernist era, is a central philosophical work in the tradition of American philosophy, and its subsequent impact on conceptions of art and aesthetic experience have been enormous. Indeed, *Art as Experience* was such an important contribution to the field of aesthetics that nearly thirty five years after its publication Monroe Beardsley, perhaps the best known historian of aesthetic philosophy, was

[3] For more on the centrality of Dewey's aesthetic to his larger philosophy see Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*; Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature The Horizons of Feeling*; and Abraham Kaplan's Introduction to *Art As Experience*, *Vol 10 The Later Works of John Dewey*.

able to argue that *Art as Experience* is "by wide-spread agreement, the most valuable work on aesthetics written in English (and perhaps in any language) so far in our century."[4]And John McDermott, writing almost ten years after Beardsley, also affirms the importance of *Art as Experience* within Dewey's larger career, stating in *The Culture of Experience* that "Dewey's range of concerns and the incisiveness of his judgments make this one of his outstanding contributions and deserving of ever more analysis"[5] And it is precisely the intention of this dissertation to further analyze put into practice the concepts and arguments of Dewey's *Art as Experience*.

Dewey's main premise in *Art as Experience* is hardly complex but its consequences are far reaching and profound. "The task," simply put, was "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience."[6] "The "work" of art, as Dewey explains, was not a static object, it was not, in the case of a poem, merely a collection of words, but always represented in its entirety, a process, *an* experience, that was grounded in the common everyday activities of what he called "the live creature." As Dewey aptly notes:

> Full recognition…of the continuity of the organs, needs and basic impulses of the human creature with his animal forebears, implies no necessary reduction of man to the level of the brutes. On the contrary, it makes possible the drawing of a ground-plan of human experience upon which is erected the superstructure of man's marvelous and distinguishing experience.[7]

Art then was not merely a representation of the world, but was an active participation in it. "Experience in the degree in which it *is* experience," said Dewey "is heightened vitality."

> Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events…it affords

[4] Beardsley, Monroe C. *Aesthetics*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 1966. (332)
[5] McDermott, John. *The Culture of Experience Philosophical Essays in the American Grain*. Illinois: Waveland, 1976. (45)
[6] AE (3)
[7] AE (28)

> our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing.[8]

In this sense, art and all aesthetic experience was the result of a fundamental and ongoing interaction between the desires and needs of a living organism and the social and material environment of which it was a part. This decidedly naturalist emphasis on the relationship between animal experience and environment reveals a central and often overlooked aspect of the aesthetics of American poetry, which also valued and sometimes celebrated the experience of the animal. Dewey's philosophy, grounded as it is in both naturalist and pragmatist species of thought, helps us to understand and better articulate the value of aesthetic experience as an active and powerful transformation of life.

The first chapter, "Heightened Vitality:" John Dewey's Philosophy of Aesthetic Life," examines Dewey's aesthetic philosophy as grounded in an essentially naturalist model of experience. This reading provides insight into the key elements of Dewey's aesthetic theory as it is laid out in two of his most important works, *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art as Experience*, (1934), with short forays into his other earlier work to help elaborate the centrality of the aesthetic to his larger philosophy. Dewey's thought is explored and explained through an analysis of three important and recurring concepts in his work: "Environment," "Resistance & Tension," and "Transformation." Each of these terms are, in turn central to the structure of the dissertation, as is demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, which examine how these ideas are played out in the poetry of Stevens, Moore, Bishop, Ashbery, and Ammons.

The second chapter, "'Animal Life Below the Human Scale:' Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop," examines the first of these three concepts. By considering the importance of environment and animal life in the work of Bishop and Moore this chapter provides a reading of

[8] AE (25)

their work as a call to an aesthetic life grounded in access to what Dewey called "animal life below the human scale."[9] Toward the end of better understanding the connections between this aesthetic of animal life and Dewey's aesthetic philosophy, this chapter examines the interchange and correspondences between Dewey, Moore, and Bishop; how they directly and indirectly influenced each other's work, and how their ideas about the role and function of poetry in society were influenced by their close engagement with Dewey's thought. Most importantly, this chapter will also examine, through a close analysis of several poems of Moore and Bishop, the ways in which Dewey's philosophy might help us to understand better the central importance of animal life as it is played out in their work.

The Third chapter, "The Tang of Overt Conflict:" Wallace Stevens & the Poetics of Resistance," explores the remarkable similarities between Dewey's evolutionary aesthetics and Stevens' philosophy of imagination. For Stevens, as he makes explicit in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the imagination is "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without." It is "the imagination pressing back against the pressures of reality. It seems in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives."[10] This dynamic vision of imagination as a form of resistance to the pressures of reality is remarkably similar to Dewey's own ideas about the uses of "tension" and "resistance" in aesthetic experience. This focus on the value of language and the imagination as a force within the world is especially evident in the

[9] I owe the inspiration for this chapter, and much of the dissertation, in fact, to the following passage from Richard Poirier's review of Marianne Moore's *Selected Letters*, re-published in *Trying it Out in America*, New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1999."Both Dewey and Moore despite the complexities of their writings, had a rare capacity among literary intellectuals to 'talk to everyone, on all social levels, without the slightest change in their manner of speaking,' with a kind of instinctive respect. And both, Bishop adds, 'loved little things, small plants and weeds and animals.' Bishop could have had in mind Dewey's belief, evidenced no less by Moore in some of her forty poems about animals, that 'to grasp the sources of aesthetic experience it is necessary to have recourse to animal life below the human scale…'"

[10] WSCPP (655)

way in which Stevens sees this resistance as intimately connected to the idea of "self-preservation." Using Stevens' late essays as well as his poetry to illustrate a species of Deweyan aesthetic experience, this chapter underscores the ways in which Stevens' work reflects and enacts, through the cultivation of tension, a poetics of engagement grounded, like the poetry of Moore and Bishop, in ordinary, animal experience.

The fourth and final chapter, "The Intensity of Minor Acts:" John Ashbery and A.R. Ammons," provides a comparative reading of several exemplary poems by John Ashbery and A.R. Ammons toward the end of better understanding the ways in which the work each poet elaborates the reconstructive nature of aesthetic experience as composition. For Ashbery and Ammons, like Dewey, experience is not something that is merely inside of us, or conversely something from outside that happens *to* us that we can somehow accurately record in language. It is instead at once simultaneously what Dewey called an undergoing and a doing, a continued interaction between the living organism and its environment. For Ashbery and Ammons the experience of modern life as represented in their work exemplifies the tension between raw experience (the restlessness and ennui at the heart of modern life) and what Dewey would call "an experience." Through a pragmatic reconstruction of that raw experience, their poetry seeks, by active engagement to turn what is simply inchoate or mundane into aesthetic experience, providing in the process a model for intelligent and transformative aesthetic practice.

1
"HEIGHTENED VITALITY:" JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF AESTHETIC LIFE

Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics, and it insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration[1]
—John Dewey *Art as Experience*

I ART AS EXPERIENCE

Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations[2]
—John Dewey *Art as Experience*

In 1931, John Dewey—by then an established giant of American philosophy—was invited by Harvard University to give a series of lectures on "the philosophy of art." Dewey, who had already been weighing the idea of a book exclusively on aesthetics, happily accepted the offer. As Jay Martin explains in his wonderfully titled biography: *The Education of John Dewey*, the idea for a book on aesthetics had been expressed by Dewey that same year in a letter to Sidney Hook. The goal of the project, as he originally conceived of it, was to offer "an e[m]pirical philos[ophy] of art, etc. which is more than *merely* psychological. That is to show why and how experience contains aesthetic and artistic features in itself."[3] The propitiously named William James Lectures that Dewey eventually gave at Harvard would be later collected, revised, and published in 1934 as *Art as Experience,* his first and only full length study of aesthetics.

Perhaps Dewey's most important work, *Art as Experience* is more than merely the articulation of an aesthetic theory, but is, in many ways, the culmination and synthesis of his entire life's thought. Indeed, as Martin explains, Dewey was always interested in art, especially

[1] AE (352)
[2] AE (9)
[3] Originally quoted in *The Education of John Dewey: A Biography*. (403)

the art of literature and poetry, and much of his thought and work was grounded in a firmly-held belief that the aesthetic was central to life.[4] Dewey's view was simple, argues Martin:

> Experience is itself aesthetic, and art is the consummation of ordinary experience found everywhere. The best art is the best experience; the best experience is consummated aesthetically. Politics, shoemaking, watching a sunset, counting, buying and selling, or telling a joke are no different from a Cezanne landscape, a Renoir portraying the fullness of experience, a Seurat seeing life in its atomic particles.[5]

To this list of "artists" one would have to add a Keats portraying the melancholy ache of desire or an Emerson or Wordsworth expressing the fundamental interchange between man and nature. All the same, though, Martin is right to suggest that for Dewey, the nature of the artist's experience was not exceptionally different, but merely especially pronounced and complex. The difference between supposedly "ordinary" experience and what most people would call aesthetic experience was one of degree, not kind. This emphasis on the experiential side of art, although it inaugurated a groundbreaking change in aesthetic philosophy, has its origins in Dewey's earliest work, and permeates his entire philosophical project from *Psychology* (1887), to *Democracy and Education* (1916), and on down to the concept of culture and society that he put forward in such texts as *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1919) and *The Public and its Problems* (1927).

One of the earliest articulations of Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic life, however, can be found, not in any formal philosophical work, but in an 1893 review of Bernard Bosanquet's *A History of Aesthetic* that Dewey wrote while still a faculty member at the University of Michigan. In that review Dewey praises Bosanquet's book for uniting "a philosophic continuity of thought with something of the wealth of actual art."[6] This praise, however, is followed by an

[4] Among the poetry in Dewey's library were many classics (some of which make appearances in *Art as Experience*) and some less well known and more contemporary poets, including: John Milton, William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, Alfred Tennyson, Walt Whitman, Vachel Lindsay, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, and Theodore Roethke. (400)

[5] *Ibid* (403)

[6] Dewey, John. T*he Early Works of John Dewey, Volume 4, 1882 - 1898: Early Essays and* The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus. Ed. Boydston, Jo Ann. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. (189)

important and revealing critique near the end of the review in which Dewey very gently takes Bosanquet to task for making a "fixed distinction between the realm of art and that of commonplace reality."

> That there is such a distinction there can be of course no doubt, but Mr. Bosanquet makes something positive and rigid of the distinction; he makes it a datum which can be used in marking off regions of experience and deciding questions. I should have thought, on the contrary, that the distinction was a problem and a problem lying at the very heart of aesthetic.[7]

For Dewey, the distinction between art and commonplace life was real only in so far as it was the representation of very specific cultural conditions of experience—conditions which, with effort, could be changed. The split between art and life then was not an *apriori* philosophical fact, but represented simply the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic, artistic and non-artistic forms of life. "Commonplace reality, in other words, is simply the material which art has not yet conquered, which has not yet become a plastic medium of expression."[8]

This is very close to the same argument Dewey would put forward in *Art as Experience* more than forty years later:

> The hostility to association of fine art with normal processes of living is a pathetic, even tragic, commentary on life as it is ordinarily lived. Only because that life is so usually stunted, aborted, slack, or heavy laden, is the idea entertained that there is some inherent antagonism between the process of normal living and creation and enjoyment of works of estehtic art.[9]

As Dewey's use of language here makes plain, he recognized the tragic consequences of living in a world in which the aesthetic was understood as merely an escape from reality instead of an engagement and transformation of it. Indeed, the fact that life was so often "stunted" or "slack, or heavy laden," only revealed the degree to which it was *already* removed from the transforming and ameliorative processes of the aesthetic. Like so much else in *Art as Experience*,

[7] *Ibid* (197)
[8] *Ibid*
[9] AE (34)

this emphasis upon the inherent value of aesthetic experience is also present in his earlier work. In *Experience and Nature*, for instance, Dewey's entire argument revolves around healing the rift between culture and nature, but it also explores the degree to which culture and experience were themselves one and the same. As Dewey explained near the end of his life: "Were I to write (or rewrite) *Experience and Nature* today I would entitle the book *Culture and Nature* and the treatment of specific subject matters would be correspondingly modified."[10] Such a statement helps us to see the degree to which *Art as Experience* was in fact a progression and culmination of his earlier work, since the very title seems to offer a solution to the dilemma posed by the separation of culture and nature. Rather than talking about art *and* experience (as if the two were somehow categorically different), Dewey focuses instead upon the *artistic* nature of experience and the *experiential* nature of art.

Dewey however, was well aware of the entrenched cultural and philosophical obstacles to such a conception of art or experience. To resolve this dilemma, to heal the persistent rift between culture and nature, Dewey argued that we must reclaim and reprioritize the "essential conditions of life." "To grasp the source of aesthetic experience it is, therefore, necessary to have recourse to animal life below the human scale."[11] Such attention to the experiences of life outside of the intellectual prejudices of mind and body and subject and object, Dewey claimed, allowed for at least a recognition of "the unity of experience which we so fractionize when work is labor, and thought withdraws us from the world."[12] This recognition of animal life as the source and fountain of unmediated aesthetic experience and transformation was central to Dewey's argument in *Art as Experience*, and is, in many respects, the crowning achievement of his philosophy of pragmatic naturalism, which he had already been articulating and developing in

[10] Dewey, John. *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 1, 1925 - 1953: 1925, Experience and Nature*. Boydston, Jo Ann. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. (361)
[11] AE (24)
[12] AE (24)

such works as *Experience and Nature*. Indeed, at its core Dewey's aesthetic is an aesthetic of natural evolution in which "the live creature" is transformed by its environment, and it is no surprise that so much of *Art as Experience*, and Dewey's philosophy more broadly, is concerned with nature and animal life.

Born the same year as Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Dewey's ideas were also influenced and underpinned by a deep appreciation and awareness of the implications of Darwin's philosophy of natural evolution. Darwin's ideas changed not only the way we think about biology, but also culture and philosophy. Dewey's interest in animal life was informed by his early readings of Huxley and Darwin, but so was his theory of culture and experience, for he recognized the important philosophical transformation that Darwin's ideas represented.[13] As he explains in his 1909 essay "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy," Darwin's ideas made possible a new appreciation of the fact that biological and cultural life were in a constant state of transition without adhering to any predetermined end or outcome. By thus calling into question the idea of a supernatural motivating or prime intelligence behind nature, Darwin's ideas also made possible an entirely new way of considering the age-old dichotomies of body and mind, and man and animal that had held sway over western thought. Such a conception of life as always emergent freed philosophers to begin to question the supposed value of fixed truth and categorical difference and to focus instead upon the relations between things and to pay attention to the real value of experience, rather than denigrating it as a tainted version of reality.

[13] According to Jerome Popp—one of the few writers to adequately explore Darwin's deep influence upon Dewey's philosophy—Dewey would have been exposed to Darwin's ideas as early as his junior year at the University of Vermont. "During his junior year as a student at the University of Vermont, Dewey was enrolled in a physiology course in which he read Thomas Henry Huxley's…textbook. Since Huxley was known as Darwin's bulldog, because he passionately and vociferously advocated and defended Darwin's thesis, we can conclude that Dewey was well-versed in the intricacies of the theory of evolution early in his career." *Evolution's First Philosopher: John Dewey and the Continuity of Nature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

Thus the road to taking the fundamental aspects of human and animal experience seriously was opened up by Darwin. The consequences of this change, as Dewey makes clear in his essay on Darwin and philosophy, were enormous, for the new Darwinian logic both emphasizes the importance of biological life and "introduces responsibility into the intellectual life."

> To idealize and rationalize the universe at large is after all a confession of inability to master the courses of things that specifically concern us…But if insight into specific conditions of value and into specific consequences of ideas is possible, philosophy must in time become a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life, and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them: a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis.[14]

For Dewey this temperament applied as much to our ideas about aesthetic life as it did to politics and morality; such a change in temperament, Dewey argued, required access to what he called "conditions of generation." "To improve our education, to ameliorate our manners, to advance our politics, we must have recourse to specific conditions of generation." And it was precisely the cognizance of our animal origins that made such transformations possible, since without access to such fundamental conditions of generation, life would be ephemeral and without substance, eventually becoming little more than habit and routine.

It should be no surprise then that Dewey's aesthetic philosophy resembles, at least superficially, Darwin's theory of evolution, where change and transformation within species is driven by encountered resistances in the environment. Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic life thus, may be fruitfully broken up into three main concepts: Environment, Tension &Resistance, and Transformation. In the sections that follow I will describe in greater detail each of these main aspects of Dewey's aesthetic philosophy, just as I will later apply each of those concepts to a discussion of the development of American poetry in the twentieth century. It is hoped that such

[14] "The influence of Darwin on Philosophy." Dewey, John. *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 4, 1899 - 1924: Journal Articles and Book Reviews…*Ed. Boydston, Jo Ann. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. (13)

a discussion will help the reader to better understand the importance of Dewey's philosophy to our understanding of the potential of literary modernism.

I ENVIRONMENT AND EXPERIENCE

> The need that is manifest in the urgent impulsions that demand completion through what the environment—and it alone—can supply, is a dynamic acknowledgement of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings [15]
>
> —John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

The first and surely one of the most important principles of Dewey's aesthetic philosophy is the simple fact that all experience takes place, not under the skin, but always within an active, dynamic, interactive environment of thought and action. Without this environment, Dewey insists, experience—aesthetic or otherwise—would be impossible. Likewise, art, or what Dewey calls "art *as* experience," is not something separate from its environment, somehow outside of or independent of the rest of life, but is the product of meaningful and interactive engagement with the world. Unlike previous aesthetic philosophies, which viewed art and aesthetic experience as somehow rarefied or separate from the concerns of ordinary life, Dewey's philosophy—from his earliest experiments in the psychology of experience, to his groundbreaking works *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*—argues that aesthetic experience is profoundly bound up with our most basic forms of perception and interaction. Art, in essence, like thought, is an emergent aspect of natural life and not an addition to it. Thus to understand art, Dewey claimed, we must first understand how it operates in experience.

For Dewey, the consequences of this naturalist perspective, when fully considered, were enormous. The problem, however, was that despite his assertions to the contrary, art and aesthetic experience in the early half the twentieth century was still largely seen and understood as the product and province of hermetic contemplation. This compartmentalization of art was

[15] AE (65)

detrimental, Dewey argued, to its continued relevance, freshness, and meaning. If art was going to be more than merely a badge of honor or a mark of prestige and status, it would have to be reconceived, recovered, and reintegrated into the larger realm of life. Just as Dewey challenged the false dichotomy between experience and nature, he argued that we must also reunite art with experience. "When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience," says Dewey:

> …a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing and achievement. A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.[16]

Such a narrow view of the aesthetic, Dewey argued, was in part the result of the political, economic, and cultural structures that were responsible for turning art into a commodity and a source of cultural capital rather than a vital, shared part of human experience. The salon and the museum were both guilty of removing art from the public sphere and turning it into something rarefied and exclusive to a learned or cultured elite. "As long as art is the beauty parlor of civilization," said Dewey, "neither art nor civilization is secure."[17] But Dewey's greatest concerns were not with the economics of art necessarily—these after all were the result of larger economic forces with their own set of political and economic solutions—but with the philosophy of aesthetics that made this kind of idea of art even conceivable. Capitalism was certainly in large part responsible for the commodification of art as static object, but it was the reinforcing prejudices of western philosophy and culture that continued to make that commodification possible.

[16] AE (9)
[17] AE (346)

Restoring art to its rightful place among experience, however, was about more than making art public or somehow more accessible to ordinary folks. Although Dewey was critical of the museum model of art appreciation and although he wrote elegantly about the importance of the Parthenon and other public works of art, Dewey was not so much concerned with where a work of art was experienced, but of how we might better realize that experience and its potential transformative value. This dilemma is neatly encapsulated in the penultimate chapter of *Experience and Nature*, "Experience, Nature, and Art," where Dewey writes:

> There are substantially but two alternatives. Either art is a continuation, by means of intelligent selection and arrangement, of natural tendencies of natural events; or art is a peculiar addition to nature springing from something dwelling exclusively within the breast of man, whatever name be given the latter. In the former case, delightfully enhanced perception or esthetic appreciation is of the same nature as enjoyment of any object that is consummatory. It is the outcome of a skilled and intelligent art of dealing with natural things for the sake of intensifying, purifying, prolonging and deepening the satisfactions which they spontaneously afford. That, in this process, new meanings develop, and that these afford uniquely new traits and modes of enjoyment is but what happens everywhere in emergent growths.[18]

This is an excellent explanation of the problem as Dewey saw it in the 1920's, and as Monroe Beardsley describes it, is "a very exact and yet packed statement of the perspective upon art obtained from Dewey's 'empirical naturalism or naturalistic empiricism.'"[19] Indeed, such a naturalist conception of art, Dewey felt, was the only way to save aesthetic experience from total irrelevancy, "for if fine art has nothing to do with other activities and products, then of course it has nothing inherently to do with the objects, physical and social, experienced in other situations."

This philosophy of "naturalistic empiricism," as Beardsley calls it, arose out of Dewey's rejection, like other pragmatists, of the two dominant modes of philosophical thought in the west: idealism and empiricism. Although variously associated with each school of thought—Dewey

[18] EN (389)
[19] Beardsley, Monroe. *Aesthetics: From Classical Greece to the Present*. Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama UP, 1975. (332).

has been called an idealist and an empiricist (sometimes both at the same time)—Dewey was deeply uncomfortable with both philosophies. He saw the tenets of idealism as leading to a merely intellectualized form of experience taking place exclusively in the mind, while empiricism offered the exact opposite problem, leading to the construction of a reductive, mechanized, and indifferent universe, often with no room for the value of human and animal emotion, temperament, concept, or relation. Dewey explains this problem elegantly in the very opening chapter of *Experience and Nature*. There he shows how the idea that experience and nature could be one and the same, that they would even be presented as anything but exact opposites, was completely alien to most philosophical thought of the time. "To many the associating of the two words will seem like talking of a round square, so engrained is the notion of the separation of man and experience from nature."

> According to some thinkers, the case is even in worse plight: Experience to them is not only something extraneous which is occasionally super imposed upon nature, but it forms a veil or screen which shuts us off from nature, unless in some way it can be "transcended." So something non-natural by way of reason or intuition is introduced, something supra-empirical. According to an opposite school experience fares as badly, nature being thought to signify something wholly material and mechanistic; to frame a theory of experience in naturalistic terms is, accordingly, to degrade and deny the noble and ideal values that characterize experience.[20]

This is an extremely revealing and important passage, for it shows just how original and innovative Dewey's philosophy of experience really was. Indeed, the very title of Dewey's book, as Thomas Alexander explains, caused a whirlwind of debate in the philosophical community, with some philosophers such as Santayana, H.S. Thayer, and Morris Cohen, complaining that Dewey was trying to have it both ways—to be both an idealist and an empiricist.[21] These thinkers, steeped as they were in the prejudices of western philosophy, felt that it was impossible to have access to both "experience" and "nature," and that we must settle for one or the other if

[20] EN (1a)
[21] For a full discussion of this controversy, See Chapter 3: "The Metaphysics of Experience," of Thomas Alexander's book *John Dewey's Theory of art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (1987).

we are to create a coherent philosophical system.[22] Dewey, of course, did not believe that experience was in any way devalued or degraded by its association with nature—indeed, as he spends so much time detailing in *Art as Experience*, the value of art increases as its relevance to ordinary life grows. Rather than degrading art, Dewey saw himself as liberating art from the confines of a dualistic western philosophy. There was no split between nature and experience because they were not separate concepts. To talk of a difference between nature and experience, suggested Dewey, would be like talking about the difference between legs and walking or the difference between breath and singing. They simply were not dichotomous, but existed rather in a state of interconnectivity, where experience was itself an active part of nature. As Dewey makes plain:

> Experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature—stones, plants, animals, disease, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object—the human organism—they are *how* things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth.[23]

The importance of this new realization for thinking about the aesthetic cannot be overstated. Before Dewey, the aesthetic and the beautiful were seen as merely products of the mind having little to do with the world outside of the subject. Kant's theories, for instance—perhaps the most influential and traditionally important ideas in the philosophy of aesthetics—were largely idealist, and thus rejected the idea of any actual interactive relationship between an organism and its environment, except in a purely psychological sense. Indeed, for Dewey, Kant's ideas, although they helped to open the door to romantic appreciations of nature as a kind of

[22] In addition to Santayana, many more recent studies of Dewey, including Victor Kestenbaum's *The Severity and Grace of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent*; Richard Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, have perpetuated this misconception about Dewey and tended to take sides on the degree to which he was or was not an idealist, a realist, an empiricist or a transcendentalist, missing one of the central points of Dewey's philosophy. Alexander's views, as expressed in *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*, on the other hand, are consistent with an important trend in Dewey scholarship that emphasizes Dewey's original rejection of dichotomies such as realist and idealist, and experience and reality, thus better exploring the consequences of Dewey's arguments in their right context.

[23] EN (4a)

work of art, also helped to reify the already prevalent disposition toward art and the aesthetic as existing somehow outside of ordinary life and activity. As Dewey said of Kant's theory of judgment:

> This faculty [of judgment] is exercised in Contemplation, and the distinctively esthetic element is the pleasure which attends such Contemplation. Thus the psychological road was opened leading to the ivory tower of 'beauty' remote from all desire, action, and the stir of emotion…although Kant gives no evidence in his writings of any special esthetic sensitivity, it is possible that his theoretic emphasis reflects the artistic tendencies of the eighteenth century. For that century was, generally speaking, till towards its close, a century of 'reason' rather than of 'passion,' and hence one in which objective order and regularity, the invariant element, was almost exclusively the source of esthetic satisfaction.[24]

Kant's theory, based as it is on the prejudice of the "invariant element" of objective order, is deeply challenged by the revolution inaugurated by Charles Darwin's ideas of species emergence, which deeply influenced Dewey's thought. Aesthetically, the only interactions that really mattered for Kant were the ones between concepts in the mind. Thus Kant perpetuates the distinctions between culture and experience, where art "objects" become nothing more than sources of initial intellectual contemplation. Beauty and the beautiful are seen largely as products of rational judgment, and although pleasure is frequently derived from the contemplation of beauty, it is never and can never be the product of pleasurable experience. For Kant this kind of pleasurable experience without contemplation of the beautiful was merely what he called "the agreeable," a state of ordinary experience that Kant relegated to the very basement level of the aesthetic. Man might be transformed by his thoughts about the environment—as with the important moral transformation that results from experiences of the dynamic sublime—but there was no consequent transformation of the environment by man's thoughts; the two were always ultimately separate. For Dewey, on the other hand, change in one was an inevitable change in the other, since the interconnections between man and his moral and aesthetic environment were in

[24] AE (257-258)

constant interaction. For Dewey beauty or aesthetic feeling in any shape or form existed primarily as a process, an interaction where there was no separating the object of our experience from experience itself.

Of course Kant's aesthetic idealism, like Hegel's is not entirely antithetical to Dewey's philosophy. Indeed, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, along with Hegel's philosophy of history, were the very starting point for Dewey's aesthetic and cultural philosophy. After all, it was Hegel, along with Darwin, who taught Dewey that all experience is best understood as a historical progression, composed of a series of shorter interconnected experiences. Likewise, Kant helped Dewey recognize the importance of the often violent relationship between the subject and its concepts of the world, a relationship that at least superficially resembles Dewey's theory of resistance. As James Scott Johnston has said in his study of Dewey's rejection of Kantian idealism, "Dewey's Critique of Kant," Dewey had an ambivalent relationship with Kant and Hegel both.

> Though Kant is to be applauded for raising the question of supreme importance—the question of authority and despotism, through his discussion of the universal law, humanity, and the kingdom of ends, nevertheless, the artificial structure Kant builds to make the claim for freedoms is itself too steeped in supernaturalism and metaphysics to pull away from authoritarianism.[25]

What makes Dewey's philosophy so different however is that he removes once and for all, the distinctions between body and mind that had plagued previous philosophers of experience like Kant. Dewey deals with this problem, as he did with the problem of experience and nature, not by engaging with the arguments of the idealists—for whom mind was already the beginning and the end of experience—but by simply changing the nature of the discourse surrounding the

[25] *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 42.4 (2006) (518-551)

concepts of body and mind, producing, "if one is fortunate, a change in the significations previously attached to them."[26]

In his critique "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," originally published in 1896, Dewey offers a new way of thinking about the body and the mind. Although one of Dewey's earlier works, the publication of "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" laid the foundation for his pragmatic aesthetic philosophy and was an important turning point in his thought. John Shook, for instance, describes it as the culmination of his functionalist phase, going so far as to argue that Dewey's article is one of the founding documents of American philosophical pragmatism.

> The manifesto of the Chicago functionalists, the 'Reflex arc Concept' remains one of the most significant and influential works in the history of psychology. For Dewey, it served as the springboard for his functional and pragmatic analyses of human conduct, inquiry, learning, logic, morality, and knowledge.[27]

As the quote from Shook makes abundantly clear, nearly all of Dewey's central philosophical concerns: logic, morality, and education are grounded in the "Reflex Arc" article. To this list however, I would add Dewey's fundamental concern with the nature of aesthetically driven experience, for the "Reflex Arc" article lays the foundation for understanding experience as fully, and more importantly, meaningfully, integrated with its environment.

Originally written as a critique of the reflex arc concept, which argues that certain impulses, such as removing one's hand from a hot flame, are the result of a series of automatic responses to external stimuli, Dewey's article opened up an entirely new way of thinking about human psychology and environmental interaction that valued and more fully recognized the interactive nature of that experience. Like James, who realized that human thought was a process that more closely resembled a stream than merely a series of stimulus and response, Dewey's

[26] EN (2a)
[27] Shook, John R. *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality*. Vanderbilt UP, 2000. (71)

article was a radical critique of the atomism that had prevailed in psychology during the late nineteenth century in America. As James says in Chapter XII of *Psychology: Briefer Course*

> Most books adopt the so-called synthetic method. Starting with 'simple ideas of sensation,' and regarding these as so many atoms, they proceed to build up the higher states of mind out of their 'association,' 'integration,' or 'fusion,' as houses are built by the agglutination of bricks. This has the didactic advantages which the synthetic method usually has. But it commits one beforehand to the very questionable theory that our higher states of consciousness are compounds of units….[28]

Like James' critique of synthetic method, Dewey realized that the subject's relationship with its environment was far more complex and interactive than the new "reflex arc concept" could possibly allow for, composed as it was of a series of smaller sensations of stimulus and response.[29] Ironically, the reflex arc concept was originally intended to replace previous dualisms of sensation and idea; however, for Dewey, the new concept, rather than offering a solution to the problem, simply repackaged it into a new dualism of stimulus and response. As Eric Bredo says in his essay "Evolution, Psychology, and John Dewey's Critique of the Reflex Arc Concept:"

> [Dewey's article] was a powerful critique of mechanistic approaches to psychology and a suggestion for a more lively approach based on evolutionary assumptions. In shifting to an evolutionary view and rejecting a mechanical one, Dewey gave priority to activities rather than to entities.[30]

This turn from the physical to the active, from the static contemplation of ends to the dynamic evaluation of means, is explicitly pragmatist, and reveals just how much both Dewey's and James's psychologies were already pushing the boundaries of philosophical discussion.

As the Reflex Arc concept would have it, all psychological experience was composed of a series of stimulus and response. The classic example of this reflex arc was based on the

[28] William James. *Psychology: Briefer Course*. *Writings 1878-1899*. Eds. The Library of America, 1992. (152)
[29] James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) was, of course a big influence on Dewey's own *Psychology*, as well as his critique of the Reflex Arc Concept.
[30] Published in *The Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 98, No. 5, Special Issue: John Dewey: The Chicago Years, (May, 1998).

experiences of a young child and a lit candle. As the argument goes, there are four stages to this particular reflex arc divided into two sets of stimulus and response: the first step is the stimulus derived from the child's vision of the candle flame. This stimulus draws the child's eye to the candle. In response to this stimulus, the child instinctively reaches out toward the candle fulfilling the first half of the reflex arc. The last two stages (the second series of stimulus and response), as one might guess, are composed of the stimulus of the burning candle flame, and the child's inevitable response of withdrawal. The arc was then complete. The point of this was to show how, as Bredo says "Mental life could be understood as a linear causal sequence, with external sensation stimulating the inner image or idea, which in turn caused the motor response" (452). For many psychologists this concept was a vast improvement upon previously more mechanistic versions of the mind put forward by Locke and others. For Dewey, however, this linear sequence reiterated many of the same age old dichotomies between cause and effect subject and object, and organism and environment that the new psychology was supposed to have overcome.

Dewey's response to the reflex arc then consisted largely of an attempt to reveal the limited mechanical nature of the concept and to offer in its place a more complex, more interactive, and less mechanistic vision of human agency. For Dewey, the mechanistic approach of the reflex arc missed the degree to which interactions between environment and organism are always self-motivating. That is, each new gesture, each new stimulus and each response is informed by an almost unlimited number of more subtle adjustments, each with its own reason and intention.

> Let us take, for example, the familiar child-candle instance. (James, Psychology, Vol. I, p. 25.) The ordinary interpretation would say the sensation of light is a stimulus to the grasping as a response, the burn resulting is a stimulus to the withdrawing the hand as response and so on. There is, of course, no doubt that is a rough practical way of representing the process. But when we ask for its psychological adequacy, the case is quite different. Upon analysis, we find that we begin not with a sensory stimulus, but with a sensori-motor coordination, the optical-ocular, and that in a certain sense it is the

> movement of body, head and eye muscles determining the quality of what is experienced. In other words, the real beginning is with the act of seeing; it is looking, and not a sensation of light. The sensory quale gives the value of the act, just as the movement furnishes its mechanism and control, but both sensation and movement lie inside, not outside the act.[31]

In other words experience is not the passive receiving of sensation, but is always a coordinated form of action. In addition, as the passage suggests, but never explicitly states, all experience is also the product of aesthetic impulse and need. For Dewey, the reaching out to the candle flame is much more than an automatic response, but is, as he states, an "act of seeing" involving a whole biological history of sight, desire, need, and impulse.

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey expands upon this initial idea and explores how the same concepts he discusses in the reflex arc essay can also be applied to the natural environment. In his chapter on "Nature, Life, and Body-Mind," Dewey argues that the predisposition in western philosophy to value sense over feeling, ends over means, and cause over effect, has created a false dichotomy between body and mind. This temperament toward the "spiritual," as Dewey shows us was intimately related to and emergent from the societal structure of Greek life.

> The old distinction between vegetative, animal, and rational souls was, when applied to men, a formulation and justification of class divisions in Greek society. Slaves and mechanical artisans living on the nutritional, appetitive level were for practical purposes symbolized by the body—as obstructions to ideal ends as solicitations to acts contrary to reason. The good citizen in peace and war was symbolized by the soul proper, amenable to reason, employing thought, but confining its operations after all to mundane matters, infected with matter. Scientific inquirers and philosophers alone exemplified pure reason, operating with ideal forms for the sake of the latter.[32]

In place of this predisposition towards pure reason, Dewey argues that the classical distinction between body and mind—between the appetitive and the rational—were baseless obstructions to a clearer understanding of the innate interrelatedness of man, nature, and culture. Indeed, Dewey later wrote that he regretted not having titled his book "Experience and Culture" instead of

[31] Dewey, John. *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882 - 1898: Early Essays: 1895-1898. Ed.* Boydston, Jo Ann. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008.
[32] EN (251)

"Experience and Nature," precisely because of the deep interconnectedness between culture and experience. For Dewey, temperament, despite philosophy's attempts to escape from it, was a vital part of the process of thought, which was grounded, not in reason, but in biology, habit, and feeling. The mind itself, like all evolutionary advances was not some kind of pure substance but was the emergent product of a series of aesthetically driven actions and transformations. It was precisely this interrelatedness between mind, body, and culture, that Dewey called "Body-Mind."

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey explains that all biological activity is driven by a basic formula of need, demand, and satisfaction. An organism's ability to procure these satisfactions denotes an important and peculiar shift in the evolution of life from a largely static physical existence, such as that of an iron molecule, to what Dewey calls

> a concrete state of events: a condition of tension in the distribution of energies such as involves pressure from points of high potential to those of low potential which in turn effects distinctive changes such that the connection with the environment is altered, so that it acts differently upon the environment and is exposed to different influences from it.[33]

This shift from a static to an integrated relation to environment has nothing to do with some added property of mind or essence, but is rather the consequence of a condition that is at once seemingly random and inevitable.

> The difference between the animate plant and the inanimate iron molecule is not that the former has something in addition to physico-chemical energy; it lies in the *way* in which physico-chemical energies are interconnected.[34]

Likewise, the step from physico-chemical interactions like that of photosynthesis, to psycho-physical interactions, such as thought, is merely a difference in the way any particular set of energies are interconnected.

> In the compound word, the prefix 'psycho' denotes that physical activity has acquired additional properties, those of ability to procure a peculiar kind of interactive support of

[33] EN (253)
[34] EN (254)

> needs from surrounding media. Psycho-physical does not denote an abrogation of the physico-chemical; nor a peculiar mixture of something physical and something psychical (as a centaur is half man and half horse); it denotes the possession of certain qualities and efficacies not displayed by the inanimate. Thus conceived there is no problem of the relation of physical and psychic.[35]

It is the *effect* of this new interrelation that matters and not its cause. Mind is not the cause of thought as it were, but is itself an effect of environmental relations. In this sense the age old dichotomies of mind and body which helped to perpetuate the separation of nature and experience, and through extension art and ordinary life are shown to be what they are: outdated obstacles to further development. For Dewey there is no line between action and thought but they are both part of a larger environment that includes our ideas as emergent processes of material interactions. Just as the mind is an emergent object of material conditions—what Dewey called "body-mind"—so meaning and aesthetic experience are emergent parts of the interactive relations between things. As I have said earlier, for Dewey, all experience, was in some sense already aesthetic, and any philosophical discussions of experience, education, logic, or ethics, must take this into account. Indeed, one of the great contributions to philosophy, and one that we are still coming to terms with even today, is precisely the realization that much of thought, truth, and life, are not grounded in logic or science, but are all ultimately built upon structures of emotion, feeling, and expression that are inherent in our biological nature.

Therefore, to truly understand the value, use, and potential of art in experience, Dewey argued, we must first recognize and take seriously our embodied selves, gaining access to what he called "animal life below the human scale." For Dewey, despite the attempts of western philosophy to compartmentalize the beautiful, the aesthetic was always part of our lived environment and could never be separated from the experiences that we share with our animal

[35] EN (255)

ancestors. "The nature of experience is determined by the essential conditions of life," says Dewey:

> While man is other than bird or beast, he shares basic vital functions with them and has to make the same basal adjustments if he is to continue the process of living. Having the same vital needs, man derives the means by which he breathes, moves, looks and listens, the very brain with which he coordinates his senses and his movements, from his animal forebears. The organs with which he maintains himself in being are not of himself alone, but by the grace of struggles and achievements of a long line of animal ancestry.[36]

What the history of our philosophy has to tell us about aesthetics, suggests Dewey, is nothing compared to the eons of evolutionary programming that has insured that our experience of the world will be in large part much the same as the experience of the animals around us. Even our most fundamental organ of sense (the eye) is repeated with only subtle variations throughout the animal kingdom, while our nerve structures and our senses of smell, taste, and hearing also greatly resemble in varying degrees of sensitivity, the same structures that we see in hundreds of thousands of other species otherwise distinct from ourselves.

Like the animals with which we share so much, our experiences are driven by our interaction with our environment. Whether it is the animal's search for food and shelter, or the more complex desires of comfort, love, and meaning; the organism or "live creature" as Dewey liked to call it, is continually influenced by need and is in a constant search for the fulfillment and reconciliation of those needs. Even the most ordinary experiences, argues Dewey, follow this regular pattern of need and adjustment, a pattern that is, importantly, also present in both the creation and appreciation of works of art. In other words we can learn from what is most important in animal experience about what is most important about artistic experiences and *vice versa*.

> Every need, say hunger for fresh air or food, is a lack that denotes at least a temporary absence of adequate adjustment with surroundings. But it is also a demand, a reaching out into the environment to make good the lack and to restore adjustment by building at least a temporary

[36] AE (19)

> equilibrium. Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it—either through effort or by some happy chance. And, in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed.[37]

This cycle of need and fulfillment, of disruption and equilibrium inevitably leading to transformation, is at the heart of all aesthetic experience and represents a uniquely naturalist understanding of our inherently generative relationship to the world, for it is precisely the creative and diverse responses, what Dewey here calls "a reaching out" to those moments of tension and resistance that drive form, structure, and meaning, and which provide a sense, even if always temporary, of satisfaction and pleasure. Just as the animal instinctively seeks out food when it is hungry reaching out into the environment to fulfill its desire for sustenance, the scientist also reaches out to her environment to quell the nagging need for a resolution of her experiment. Just as the Beaver builds its dam as a form of shelter, the poet writes in response to a series of deep, often troubling desires, fulfilled only by reaching out into the environment and constructing his poems.

II TENSION AND RESISTANCE

> Art was born of need, lack, deprivation, incompleteness…[38]
>
> —John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*

If experience—as Dewey argues—is always the product of an interaction between the "live creature" and its environment, how exactly does that interaction work and what makes it aesthetic? Much of Dewey's *Art as Experience* is engaged with precisely this question, and one of the more important and fundamental answers he provides is that aesthetic experience as "an experience" is always defined by moments of vital and necessary tension and resistance. The only way that an organism can become aware of its self, its nature, or its goals is through

[37] AE (19)
[38] EN (355)

overcoming obstacles. "Without resistance from surroundings the self would never become aware of itself; it would have neither feeling nor interest, neither fear nor hope, neither disappointment nor elation. Mere opposition that completely thwarts, creates irritation and rage. But resistance that calls out thought generates curiosity and solicitous care, and, when it is overcome and utilized, eventuates in elation."[39] Aesthetic experience, in other words, whatever form it takes, is always the result of a meaningful engagement with life and not merely a distraction or relief from it.

Often employed interchangeably "resistance" and "tension" are the terms that Dewey uses in *Art as Experience* to describe the external challenges and the internal responses of a given organism in relation to its environment. These concepts are central to any understanding of Dewey's aesthetic philosophy. One of the problems, however, is that although he continually uses these terms throughout *Art as Experience*, Dewey never explicitly or systematically defines them. Though others have criticized this lack of exactness, Dewey's vagueness is a product of the complexity of his argument and his awareness of the shifting nature of meaning. Just as he does with the word "experience," Dewey refuses to fix the meaning of such words as "resistance" and "tension," allowing them instead to resonate with the vibrations of their many connotations. Because of this our understanding of such terms remains, as Dewey would have wanted, colloquial; a part of our natural, day to day understanding of such concepts, not merely an addition to the already bloated body of philosophical language. To understand "resistance" and "tension," then, we have to look at the way that Dewey uses such terms in context.

One place to begin is Dewey's concept of experience. Indeed, the road to understanding Dewey's aesthetic philosophy runs through his theory of experience, which is, in turn, always informed by his close attention to and interest in the value of art and the aesthetic. As such

[39] AE (65-66)

whenever Dewey talks about experience, he often emphasizes its consummatory power, and when he talks about tension and/or resistance in art, it is almost always in connection to the construction of experience more broadly. This is because in Dewey's philosophy all experience of any value is the product of an interactive engagement with the world, and—since the world was not made for us exclusively—with the many problems that we encounter there. In the opening of the third chapter of *Art as Experience*, "Having an Experience," Dewey explains that "under conditions of resistance and conflict, aspects and elements of the self and the world that are implicated in this interaction qualify experience with emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges."[40] In other words, tension and resistance, whatever shape they may take, are inherently generative, giving rise to qualities, emotions, and ideas that drive action.

Such qualities, as Dewy explains later, become the very material with which to construct meaningful experiences.

> That which distinguishes an experience as esthetic is conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversion, into a movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close.[41]

This passage is especially revealing, since it is clear here that such resistances and tensions are not merely encountered obstacles, but include the experience of ideas and emotions, "excitations" that may distract us from the fulfillment of our current desire or impulse, but which, when properly engaged and employed lead to consummation. Indeed, as Dewey explains, such distinctions between emotional and practical aspects experience are in fact largely fallacious.

> It is not possible to divide in a vital experience the practical, emotional, and intellectual from one another and to set the properties of one over against the characteristics of the others. The emotional phase binds parts together into a single whole; 'intellectual' simply

[40] AE (42)
[41] AE (62)

names the fact that the experience has meaning; 'practical' indicates that the organism is interacting with events and objects which surround it.[42]

In other words such categories of experience are in fact all part of the development of life more broadly.

Such development is grounded in the constant emergence of what Dewey called "an experience." "We have *an* experience," says Dewey:

> …when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience.[43]

All experience, then, with the exceptions of mechanical routine and formless chaos, operates through a series of consummations, of small repeated moments of fulfillment and satisfaction that flow often seamlessly from one to the other.

> In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors.[44]

As Thomas Alexander reminds us, the "basic doctrine" of Dewey's philosophy is that "*experience grows*, and in growing takes on *meaning*.[45]"

The emergence of this meaning or "conscious intent," is not separate from our animal origins, however; indeed, it is dependent upon them. For Dewey the interchange between environment and creature is the source and beginning of all form: "polarity, or opposition of energies is everywhere necessary to the definition, the delimitation, that resolves an otherwise

[42] AE (61)
[43] AE (42)
[44] AE (43)
[45] Alexander (83)

uniform mass and expanse into individual forms."[46] Without resistance driving our actions our lives would be meaningless repetitions, and without internal tensions holding back, at least partially, our responses to environment, experience would be nothing but a series of mechanical and violent actions and reactions, what Dewey calls the "outbreaks and eruptions of a disturbed infant."[47] But this is not the case with meaningful experience, where external resistances—the objects and forces with which we continually interact, and which often seem to frustrate our progress—actually help to shape our experiences through a continual and reciprocal process of interaction. Even the animal kingdom, with all of its seemingly instinctual violence and aggression does not simply follow a mechanical pattern of cause and effect, for in nature, the environment always operates as its own source of resistance, constantly engaging and challenging the efforts of organisms: the beaver to build its dam, the bird to build its nest, or the lion to mark its territory. Humans too, experience this form of external resistance, such as when the sculptor struggles to chip the stone or when the scientist or artist fights to hold his concentration upon the object of study without distraction.

I have already described in the previous section how the live creature, driven by need and impulse, seeks out fulfillment within its environment; according to Dewey, such impulsion is the driving force of nature. However, should that impulse be always fulfilled, should no obstacle, no challenge, no frustration of those needs arise, experience would be merely static and without substance, meaning, or consciousness—it would be, in effect, an intolerable nothingness of mechanized routine. When they are experienced or encountered in the environment, however, tension and resistance create the need for a measured and appropriate response and give life its

[46] AE (161)
[47] AE (48)

structure, rhythm, and flow. Dewey calls this encounter an "invitation," arguing that the human animal is especially sensitive to such moments.

> Man excels in complexity and minuteness of differentiations. This very fact constitutes the necessity for many more comprehensive and exact relationships among the constituents of his being. Important as are the distinctions and relations thus made possible, the story does not end here. There are more opportunities for resistance and tension, more drafts upon experimentation and invention, and therefore more novelty in action, greater range and depth of insight and increase of poignancy in feeling. As an organism increases in complexity, the rhythms of struggle and consummation in its relation to its environment are varied and prolonged, and they come to include within themselves an endless variety of sub-rhythms.[48]

It is this complexity of experience and this subtlety of differentiation that also makes the human animal so uniquely inclined toward aesthetic experience, for practically every moment of human life is filled with the opportunity for consummation of one kind or another. It is precisely this ability to cultivate tension as opposed to merely encountering it or avoiding it that explains the deep complexities of human culture and the fundamental value of the aesthetic as a process of cultural development.

But in *Art as Experience* Dewey is also interested in the kind of tension that takes shape *within* the organism, of how expression is often held in check, manipulated and crafted through the simultaneous process of holding back and engaging. Using Coleridge's ideas of rhythm, Dewey explains precisely how this internal tension helps to shape the world of experience. The phenomenon of meter, says Coleridge, can be traced to

> 'the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion…this salutary antagonism is assisted by the very state which it counteracts, and this balance of antagonists becomes organized into metre by a supervening act of will or judgment, consciously and for the foreseen purpose of pleasure.'[49]

[48] AE (29)
[49] AE (160)

Coleridge's explicit emphasis on pleasure is important here, for it shows how form is not something merely applied to nature, but is part of an interaction with nature whose final objective is inevitably the achievement of a kind of balance and harmony that is pleasing and satisfying to the organism. In other words, form, and the achievement of form, is the product of "an experience." It takes on shape and meaning through all of its tensions and resistances, and all of its struggles and reconstructions. That this satisfaction tends, not always, but regularly, to be beneficial in a more strictly utilitarian sense is also important, showing how art and aesthetic experience are involved in more than just good feeling or pleasure. Art is more than mere adornment to life. Art and aesthetic experience, rather, are the structuring forces that drive the constantly evolving relationship between each organism and environment. But "form is not found exclusively in objects labeled works of art. Wherever perception has not been blunted and perverted, there is an inevitable tendency to arrange events and objects with reference to the demands of complete and unified perception."[50] The cans of Esso oil arranged "so that they softly say:/ ESSO—SO—SO—SO" described in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Filling Station" are a simple but telling example of this pervasive tendency toward consummation and satisfaction in ordinary life.

In this sense form and experience are not, as Alexander explains, subjective phenomena, "*apriori* dividing 'mind' from 'reality'"[51] but are always becoming through tension and resistance. Philosophy, however, has been slow to catch up with this fact, and as Dewey details in *Experience and Nature*, the Greek conception of teleological form and preference for unchanging order, had an enormous impact on the next several thousand years of philosophical

[50] AE (142)
[51] Alexander (80)

inquiry into the nature of the aesthetic. For Dewey, this preference had much to do with the nature of Greek civilization.

> The philosophers did not create out of their own speculations, the idea of materials subdued to the acceptance and manifestation of objective forms. They found the fact in the art of their period, translating it into an intellectual formula. Philosophers were not the authors of an identification of objects with ideal order and proportion with a final and arresting outcome of processes of antecedent change. That identification was at least implicit in the operation of artisans…What the philosophers are responsible for is a peculiar one-sided interpretation of these empirical facts, an interpretation, however, which has its roots in features, although less admirable ones, of Greek culture.[52]

As this quote makes clear tension and resistance do more than merely shape the experiences of individual organisms, but are vital for the growth of all human culture. "Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization."[53] The existence of prejudice and habit, of ritual and daily practice, disposition and temperament, are the inevitable by-products of ordinary shared aesthetic experience. As Dewey says, "Through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home and the home is part of our every experience."[54] But those habits, left unchanged and unchallenged inevitably become ossified and dead. What was once a vital response to the challenges encountered in the environment eventually becomes merely academic. What was once dynamic becomes little more than cliché. "But in time":

> This very familiarity sets up resistance in some minds. Familiar things are absorbed and become a deposit in which the seeds or sparks of new conditions set up turmoil. When the old has not been incorporated, the outcome is merely eccentricity. But great original artists take a tradition into themselves. They have not shunned but digested it. Then the very conflict set up between it and what is new in themselves and their environment creates the tension that demands a new mode of expression.[55]

[52] EN (93)
[53] AE (329)
[54] AE (109)
[55] AE (163)

In other words, artists not only respond to tension and resistance when it is encountered naturally in the environment, but are always in the process of actively cultivating such states for their productive capacity.

> Since the artist cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total.[56]

This "cultivation" of tension is seen most clearly in the works of American modernists like Stevens and Moore, whose difficulty is not only the result of a complicated expression, but is also the product of an active creation of tension through language—a tension that seeks to produce conditions that might eventuate in consummation. The rich ambiguity and word play that we see in poets like these are a perfect example of the way that art not only responds to its environment, but is always in the process of actively helping to transform it. Each poem in this sense offers an experience that is rich and generative, adding something wholly original to life.

Toward this end Dewey's aesthetics provided an explicit framework for understanding the nature of aesthetic transformation in the everyday, for Dewey's philosophy helps us understand that art does more than add order or pleasure to our lives; it actually provides material for the continued practice and cultivation of social and cultural reconstruction itself.

> The live creature demands order in his living but he also demands novelty. Confusion is displeasing but so is ennui. The "touch of disorder" that lends charm to a regular scene is disorderly only from some external standard. From the standpoint of actual experience it adds emphasis, distinction, as long as it does not prevent a cumulative carrying forward from one part to another. If it were experienced as disorder it would produce an unresolved clash and be displeasing. A temporary clash, on the other hand, may be the factor of resistance that summons up energy to proceed the more actively and triumphantly.[57]

[56] AE (21)
[57] AE (171-172)

The triumphant procession that Dewey describes here is not the procession of culture but the procession of experience itself, which without this novelty would very quickly become little more than lifeless monotony. Through resistance, on the other hand, through the challenges posed by this "temporary clash" experience grows, and in growing is transformed into something new.

III TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

> Experience is the result, the sign**,** and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication[58]
>
> —John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

Thus far I have been speaking of Dewey's philosophy almost entirely in terms of his theory of aesthetic experience. I have not yet mentioned, however, how Dewey's philosophy might in fact help us to better understand the value of the art object itself or the work that it does in the world. This is largely because, for Dewey, art and experience are nearly indistinguishable, and to even speak of the art object is, already, to commit a dualistic fallacy, since art is not a fixed substance, but is always also an experience. The art object, if we can call it that—the poem, painting or piece of music—is always at once the product of aesthetic experience and its source: the thing transformed and the expression of a transformation of life. It is both form and matter and the two cannot be separated in such a way that we can speak only of the matter of a work of art any more than we would be able to speak only of the form of an experience. An experience is both what is experienced and the way that it is experienced; its very sense of being is in its form. Likewise, experience cannot be talked about as distinct from matter, since experience is always *of* matter.

Instead of talking about the art object, then, Dewey prefers to speak of the "work of art." In Dewey's aesthetic philosophy the work of art, its object and end, was always "to keep alive

[58] AE (28)

the power to experience the common world in its fullness…by reducing the raw materials of that experience to matter ordered through form."[59] Indeed, this last phrase—"matter ordered through form"— brings us as close as anything else in *Art as Experience* to a working definition of what Dewey meant when he talked about art. In the same way that the organism and its environment were inseparable, Dewey saw art as a quality of experience, not something outside of it. And it is the promise of this realization that makes Dewey's concept of art so important, for it helps us to realize the degree to which experience too might be ordered and arranged in meaningful and satisfactory ways, how our lives might, to paraphrase Walter Pater, aspire towards the condition of music—or even poetry.

Indeed one of the most important and enlightening aspects of Dewey's philosophy is that it makes us conscious of the degree to which our individual and cultural lives are always constructed aesthetically, that is, of the way that life, when thoughtfully engaged resembles art. Attention to this fact changes our relation to the world and makes greater the possibility of actively and consciously using experience as a means of improving and transforming our lives from the ground up. In this sense, far from representing the record of a unique or rarefied form of life experienced only as a relief from the normal circumstances of existence, the work of art captures in heightened form the underlying aesthetic structures that inform, in varying degrees, *each* of our waking moments. As Thomas Alexander elegantly puts it:

> For Dewey, the aesthetic haunts each moment as a near or remote possibility. Its *absence* from experience, not its presence, is what needs to be accounted for. Intelligence—civilization—is born in the shared quest for its recovery…It represents the possibility of the fulfilling, shared life, where human beings realize meaning and value in the creative process of intellectual growth.[60]

[59] AE (138)
[60] Alexander (60)

Dewey, in fact, was incredibly concerned about the potential loss of an aesthetic relationship to ordinary life, for he saw the habitual repetition and frequent compartmentalization of modern life as a limit upon and a hindrance to even the most ordinary forms of aesthetic participation. Although Dewey realized that our lives are completely infused with aesthetic possibility, we rarely realize this potential, so caught up are we in trying to elevate or separate the aesthetic from the ordinary. In our rush to raise art above the fray of "ordinary" life, we miss its real transformative value. Just as our philosophy had chosen to separate our bodies from our minds or our human minds from the minds of our closest animal ancestors; it simultaneously sought to place a wall around the study of aesthetic experience. This philosophical compartmentalization was then followed by a cultural compartmentalization, where art and aesthetic experience became increasingly distinct *from*, rather than a vital part *of*, the daily experience of work and other forms of communal activity.

Instead of relegating these experiences to the classroom, the museum, the lecture hall, or the salon, Dewey argued we must rather realize our relationship to the aesthetic as a method of continual political, moral, philosophical, and ethical transformation. Although Dewey's philosophy was always concerned with and conscious of the larger social implications of experience and art, he also recognized the importance of the aesthetic as a source of more individual forms of transformation—how even the act of seeing could be a form of radical engagement with the possibilities of life. Art and aesthetic experience literally offers us the means and the tools to change our relationship to the world and to make better our circumstances. Aesthetic experience is then, in essence, the continual transformation of the living world.

The difference, however, between changing the world and being changed by the world is another one of the many dichotomies that Dewey sought to tame and remake in his philosophy of

aesthetic life. He viewed such distinctions as intellectual hindrances to fully understanding and appreciating the dynamic, interactive nature of experience. Instead, he argues that what ultimately matters is the thoughtful and intelligent ordering of experience, of means and ends, in such a way as to make life more meaningful and satisfying. Michael Eldridge, author of *Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism*, refers to such activity as "intelligent action," and his book argues that the value of such action is the central claim of Dewey's entire philosophical project. Describing the interactive nature of Dewey's "genuine instrumentality" Eldridge writes that

> Dewey's instrumentalism…was not an exclusive concern with means. It was an advocacy of a constitutive instrumentality in which the means were integrated to the end sought. Moreover, it required—indeed, it constituted—intelligence as he understood it. To be intelligent was to be able to choose among alternative causal connections the one that best achieved the desired end. This choice, he contended, would be the one in which the means were constitutive of the end.[61]

Eldridge is exactly right to emphasize the integrated nature of experience in Dewey's philosophy as well as its inherently transformative application to ends. The problem with Eldridge's argument, here, and throughout the book, however, is that he does not pay sufficient attention to the centrality of the aesthetic to Dewey's larger instrumentalism—a mistake made by many a Dewey scholar before him. Experience is not only constitutive of ends, but those ends are themselves in a constant state of transformation and change. What we want (our desired end) changes as we integrate one experience into another. The only thing holding those changes together, keeping the organism focused and directed is the quality of art that underlies the experience itself, the degree to which it is aesthetic. In this sense, although it is in some degree a largely semantic difference, it is not "intelligence," but art that drives transformation. As Dewey

[61] Eldridge, Michael. *Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1998. (68)

explains, "intelligence" merely denotes that it is of the world, that it has consequences; the aesthetic is the feeling of rightness that makes any meaningful transformation possible.

Aesthetic experience, then, according to Dewey, is not merely the achievement of ends, but is at once what he called a process of "*doing* and an *undergoing*." Our interaction with the world, when we are fully engaged and not merely reacting to or conforming to fixed habit or total chaos, is an interactive participation that changes both the subject and its environment. For Dewey, the work of art and the aesthetic experience it provides are the clearest and most intense example of this participation.

> The expressiveness of the object of art is due to the fact that it presents a thorough and complete interpenetration of the materials of undergoing and of action, the latter including a reorganization of matter brought with us from past experience. For, in the interpenetration, the latter is material not added by way of external association nor yet by way of superimposition upon sense qualities. The expressiveness of the object is the report and celebration of the complete fusion of what we undergo and what our activity of attentive perception brings into what we receive by means of the senses.[62]

In this sense:

> "The world we have experienced becomes an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience. In their physical occurrence, things and events experienced pass and are gone. But something of their meaning and value is retained as an integral part of the self"[63]

Although all art is at its heart a celebration of the complete interrelatedness between creature and environment it is also a participation in this environment, for not only does it draw our attention to the process of transformation in our ordinary lives, but provides us momentarily with a memorable and intense example of that experience. Since the expressive artist is so frequently engaged with cultivating and encouraging moments of tension and transformation in the service of making art, the experience that a work of art provides is exemplary.

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[62] AE (108)
[63] AE (109)

Dewey was not modest, however, about the implications of his ideas, nor did he shy away from application. He eagerly applied his ideas to everything that he did. Indeed, despite, or perhaps because of, his great emphasis on aesthetic experience, Dewey's philosophy was all along an active engagement with the problems of society. For Dewey, however, these problems were never separate from aesthetic experience but were deeply informed by it. Any revolution in social life, Dewey realized, must be preceded by a revolution, or, more appropriately an evolution, in aesthetic life, art, poetry, painting, music, etc. These forms of aesthetic life, essentially informed the realm of social transformation, helping to create and affirm the foundations possible for new existences, new ways of living, or as Emerson would have said, an "original relationship to the universe."

The tensions and resistances that drive aesthetic experience are responsible for more than form in the conventional sense of the word, but help to produce new relationships to life itself. Just as Shakespeare's sonnet form allowed for new ways of drawing relationships between ideas in a given poem, our responses to the world more broadly, informed by external tensions and internal resistances allow us to create and acquire new relationships to the world around us. Just as organic struggle is the foundation for aesthetic form, aesthetic experience and form is itself the foundation for cultural and social meaning. As John McDermott puts it, the construction of these meanings "emerge from the struggle of the human organism in its attempt to understand and ameliorate its condition by virtue of *experimental* inquiry" (135)[64]. That this inquiry is part and parcel of "ordinary experience" is not lost on McDermott. Responding to a passage from Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, McDermott says:

> Some might say that Dewey's description of our "deepest problem" is prosaic, for terms such as "integration," "cooperation," "values," and "purposes" are hardly the stuff of

[64] John J. McDermott. *The Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain*. Illinois: Waveland Press, 1976. (135)

> highly charged social and political movements. Precisely, for Dewey is describing our 'ordinary' experience, which he considers to be a far more accurate description of actual situation than those tantalizing but misleading rhetorical formulations of variant salvation myths. For Dewey, the world is intelligible, although not ultimately so, and thereby his fundamental attitude is neither pessimistic nor optimistic…In contrast to assorted prophets and more strident claimants of social and political vision, Dewey promises little and delivers much.[65]

The degree to which Dewey's philosophy is in fact only meliorist is arguable, but although Dewey's political position may sound tame when compared to the high rhetoric of other social reformers, it is in fact a revolutionary way of thinking about our relationship to the world, precisely because it does what so many other revolutionary philosophies only seem to promise. Dewey's philosophy values an emphasis on the actual life and ordinary experiences of all human beings (as well as the other organisms with which we share the planet) rather than theoretical formulations about human nature or the structure of human governments as the ground for political and social change. Indeed, Dewey's philosophy describes the very means and processes of transformation itself, providing, in this sense the promise of a new world.

This idea is, of course, peculiarly modern, for many modernist artists also recognized, like Dewey, that cultural change and transformation is not teleological or directed by some divine force, be it god, the will of nature or the innate goodness of man, but is ultimately driven by aesthetic experience. Such a form of change and transformation does not rely upon preconceived ideas of progress, but instead always uses what is most useful at the moment. In this sense, modern art, so far as it sought to change the conditions of modern life accomplished this task, less through rhetoric or explicit ideology, than through a close engagement with the way that we live our lives from the ground up. As Stevens says, poetry provides us with a model for "How to Live." and "What to do." The way we see the world, the way we think about experience, and the way that we interact with the objects that inform our lives, are all merely

[65] McDermott (135)

forms of inherited and often habitual prejudice and tradition. Like the philosophically idealist vision of an unchanging world perfectly formed by God, the experience of even our most ordinary lives was informed by deep aesthetic structures that, left unchallenged and unchanged, would lead to what Dewey called a blunting of the sensibilities, a dull, orderly, and aesthetically dead world. Towards this end, art and poetry, theatre, literature, and even physical practices such as the Alexander technique, were all attempts to create a world of "heightened vitality," where each experience, whether a modest meal, a leisurely stroll through the city, or a friendly argument, would resonate with meaning, significance, and pleasure. The subject of modern art then was not progress or revolution in any explicit sense, but a radical reinfusion of meaning into life from the ground up.

In the following chapters I will look more closely at the way that American poetry in particular pays special attention to the liberating and democratic effects of such aesthetic experience as both a subject of and a method for the cultivation of a poetics that values the transformative power of art as a vital part of our ordinary animal experience. Although many of the poets under consideration had read, sometimes closely, various works by Dewey, this attention to the transformative potential of art is not directly the result of Dewey's influence; such one to one correspondences of influence are rarely helpful or insightful for understanding the intellectual temper of any particular moment in cultural history. Instead, Dewey's work, especially his theory of an evolutionary aesthetics as I have articulated it in this chapter, provides a lens by which to understand the intellectual and artistic impulses driving American modernism and provides insight into a very particular strain of American poetry from Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore, to Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery and A.R. Ammons.

2
"ANIMAL LIFE BELOW THE HUMAN SCALE:" MARIANNE MOORE AND ELIZABETH BISHOP

To grasp the source of aesthetic experience it is, therefore, necessary to have recourse to animal life below the human scale.[1]

—John Dewey, Art as Experience

I "MADE SAFE BY MAGIC HAIRS"[2]

It may be that proud spirits love only the lion or the elephant with its howdah. Miss Moore, however, loves all animals, fierce or mild, ancient or modern. [3]

—Wallace Stevens "About one of Marianne Moore's poems"

…The most interesting thing I've been doing lately is taking Marianne Moore to the circus…I've seen her only twice and I think I have enough anecdotes to meditate on for years…[4]

—Elizabeth Bishop on Marianne Moore April 26th, 1934

In her 1969 memoir of Marianne Moore, "Efforts of Affection," Elizabeth Bishop describes with characteristic detail and charm the first time she took Marianne Moore to the circus. It was 1934, the same year that Dewey's *Art as Experience* was published and Bishop was then only twenty-three years old, fresh out of Vassar College, and deeply enamored of Moore's work. Bishop described Moore's poems as "miracles of language and construction" adding "why had no one ever written about things in this clear and dazzling way before?"[5] Although she had met Moore only once before their trip to the circus, a very formal meeting in the reading room of the New York Public Library, the two women seem to have taken to each other instantly and Moore appears to have felt comfortable enough to enlist the aid of her new friend in the clandestine act of stealing a handful of hairs from one of the elephants before the show.

[1] AE (24)
[2] CPMM (128)
[3] CPP (705)
[4] Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: The Letters of Elizabeth Bishop*. Ed. Robert Giroux. New York: FSG, 1995, (36)
[5] "Efforts of Affection" published in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Collected Prose*. Ed. Robert Giroux. New York: FSG, 1984. (121-156)

"Miss Moore," as Bishop called her then, and as she would continue to call her for many years, had been given an elephant hair bracelet, "two or three strands of black hairs held together with gold clasps," by her brother Warner and she had somehow lost one of the thick coarse hairs.[6] Bishop was apparently to be used as a lookout, and while she distracted the guards by feeding loaves of rye bread to the trumpeting parents, Moore assiduously clipped a small bundle from one of the infant elephants. "As I probably knew," said Bishop, "elephant hairs grow only on the tops of the heads of very young elephants." Not only did Moore never miss the circus when it was in town, but as Bishop shows us, she knew a great deal about the animals there, and took a special, if peculiar joy in communicating with them. "That day I remember that one handsomely patterned snake, writhing about in a glass-walled cage, seemed to raise his head on purpose to look at us. 'See, he knows me!' said Miss Moore. 'He remembers me from last year.' This was a joke, I decided, but perhaps not altogether a joke."[7]

Indeed, Moore's fascination with the animal world, since the publication of her first (unofficial) collection *Poems* in 1921, was anything but a joke. For Moore, "a brother to dragons and a companion to owls," the snail's "contractility" was a virtue, the jerboa, or desert rat—a native to North Africa—was "part terrestrial,/ and part celestial," the elephant was "the Socrates of/ animals" and the squid-like paper nautilus, with her eight tentacled arms, was the epitome of maternal love. But Moore's obsession with animal life—an obsession that she would eventually inspire in and come to share with Elizabeth Bishop—was more than fodder for a poetic imagination. It was more than merely a collection of tropes and images to be drawn upon in times of poetic deficiency. Both poets realized that "animal life below the human scale," as

[6] Alison Reike, in her essay "'plunder' or 'Accessibility to experience:' Consumer Culture and Marianne Moore's Modernist Self Fashioning," explains that it was in fact her patron Winifred Ellerman who had provided her with the money to purchase the bracelet herself. Why she may have chosen to hide this information from Bishop reveals Moore's deep and sometimes complicated sense of propriety.
[7] "Efforts of Affection."

Dewey called it, afforded access to a world of raw, unmediated aesthetic experience. This unmediated experience of animal life, this focus on immediate experience as it is felt before the human impositions of mind and body and subject and object, is central to the poetics of both writers. "The live animal" said Dewey

> …Is fully present, all there, in all of its actions: in its wary glances, its sharp sniffings, its abrupt cocking of ears. All senses are equally on the *qui vive*. As you watch, you see motion merging into sense and sense into motion—constituting that animal grace so hard for man to rival. What the live creature retains from the past and what it expects from the future operate as directions in the present. The dog is never pedantic nor academic; for these things arise only when the past is severed in consciousness from the present and is set up as a model to copy or a storehouse upon which to draw. The past absorbed into the present carries on; it presses forward.[8]

It was precisely this moment of total presence and integration, where past events and future possibility merged in the present, that Moore and Bishop were looking for in their explorations of animal experience. Indeed, the lines: "The dog is never pedantic nor academic," sound remarkably like something Moore might have written herself, and seem to echo her thoughts about the virtues of animal life in "Poetry" where she describes the value of the vigilance and grace of animal experience:

> Hands that can grasp, eyes
> that can dilate, hair that can rise
> if it must, these things are important not because a
>
> high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but be-
> cause they are
> useful.[9]

The emphasis here, in an explicitly pragmatic fashion, is not only on the aesthetic potential of the physical body, but also on the importance of the utility of that aesthetic potential—its usefulness. For Dewey, unlike Kant for example, the aesthetic never was and never could be separate from this kind of utility. Such false divisions between aesthetic experience and

[8] AE (24)
[9] This quotation is from the first version of "Poetry" that Moore published in *Observations* in 1924, as collected in *Becoming Marianne Moore the Early Poems 1907-1924*. Ed. Schulze, Robin. Berkeley: UC Press, 2002. (72)

practical experience, between art and life, were the result of age-long cultural and social prejudices that valued reason, theory, and universal being above the contingencies of experience and art. Though the Greeks dismissed both art and experience, preferring philosophy and reason; for the moderns this prejudice led to a division between art and ordinary experience. Such a division, Dewey argues has much to do with the rise of scientific practice. Modern thought, he says:

> …combines exaltation of science with eulogistic appreciation of art, especially of fine or creative art. At the same time it retains the substance of the classic disparagement of the practical in contrast with the theoretical, although formulating it in somewhat different language: to the effect that knowledge deals with objective reality as it is in itself, while in what is "practical," objective reality is altered and cognitively distorted by subjective factors of want, emotion and striving.[10]

The aesthetic and the useful, however, are in fact not at odds or fundamentally different in any meaningful way, but are dependent upon each other. For Dewey such "want, emotion, and striving," were "the roots of aesthetic experience," which was always dependent upon impulsion of need and active engagement with the environment. The aesthetic was, in fact, always at once the source and product of change and adaptation to an environment, where environment included not only the natural world, but the social, the linguistic, and the cultural worlds as well, each with its own demands and complex fields of interactions.

Recognizing the vital importance of this unity in the animal between experience and reflection, action and thought, the aesthetic and the useful, both Moore and Bishop attempted to express, explore, and in some sense provide for the experience of that unity in their poetry. These decidedly Deweyan ideas about the utility and transformative potential of animal experience appear throughout the poems of Moore and Bishop and are, as I will argue, implicitly codified in the works of both poets through their close attention to the details of the world around them, their

[10] EN (355)

emphasis on unmediated animal experience, and their incessant use of animal life as a metaphor for transformative experience grounded both in what is beautiful and what is "useful." As Moore's work makes clear the role of poetry was not to be an aesthetic artifact, something that we simply take pleasure from or something that we turn to somehow for wisdom or relief, but should rather be an integral part of our everyday lives: "a place for the genuine," the actual, the physical and the emotional; "the raw material of poetry in all its rawness"[11] This chapter, although largely dedicated to a Deweyan reading of the poetry of Bishop and Moore, will also explore more closely the intellectual and social relationships among the three writers, and discuss some of the crosscurrents of interaction between the three writers. Bishop was, after all, a close friend of Dewey's daughter Jane, and although Moore never met Dewey, there is abundant evidence that she had read his work closely, even copying down large passages from his early works into her 1917 notebooks.

II "AN AFFINITY FOR FACTS:" MOORE'S PRAGMATIC NATURALISM

Aesthetic perception means not just glancing at something but attending to it, looking at it, scrutinizing it—in short, really seeing it.[12]

—Abraham Kaplan, Introduction to *Art as Experience*

Art is exact perception[13]

—Marianne Moore, "Qui S'Excuse, S'Accuse"

Although Moore and Dewey never did get the chance to meet each other in person, the deep intellectual affinities between the two were grounded in a shared cultural and intellectual heritage. Both writers, for instance, had been formally and informally schooled in the literary and philosophical traditions of Emersonian and Jamesian pragmatism, which valued ordinary

[11] *Ibid*.
[12] AE (xxiv)
[13] Originally published in *The Lantern*, (Spring 1910). *Becoming Marianne Moore*. (346)

experience, change, contingency, and evolution over fixed principles. Both writers, more importantly, were also responding to many of the same troublesome political and cultural changes ushered in with the new century. The political and social upheaval of the increasingly industrialized nation, the devastating effects of the First World War and the rise of fascism that followed, raised serious questions about the value of poetry and art. For Moore and Dewey, the answer to the question: "why make art?" was central to their work. The incredible success of science during this period also naturally led both thinkers to reevaluate the relationship between art and science. Rather than seeing the two as inherently antagonistic both Dewey and Moore recognized the innate interconnections between them—the fact that, as Moore said, "the poet and the scientist" are both "willing to waste effort. To be hard on himself is one of the main strengths of each. Each is attentive to clues, each must narrow the choice, must strive for precision."[14] For both thinkers accurate observation was always at once aesthetic and scientific, and the aesthetic experience of art was never any different in substance than the explicitly aesthetic pleasures of science.

It was, appropriately enough, Elizabeth Bishop who first recognized the philosophical and dispositional commonalities between the two thinkers. In a letter to her good friend and confidant Robert Lowell on October 30th, 1958, Bishop said that Marianne Moore and John Dewey were the only two "*real* democrats" she had ever met. For Bishop, who was living in Brazil at the time, and had recently accepted an invitation to give a talk at the *Instituto Brasil—Estados-Unidos* on American poetry and democracy, Moore and Dewey represented one of a species of American democratic values. "Now I've accepted," she told Lowell,

> I find I'm reading American poetry with new ideas—in fact, I think I'm going to talk about *Democracy*…How Concord had a kind, like a Greek city a little; Whitman's

[14] Marianne Moore. Interview with Donald Hall. *Women Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. Ed. George Plimpton. New York: Modern Library, 1998. Quoted in Zachariah Picard's "Natural History and Epiphany: Elizabeth Bishop's Darwin Letter." Twentieth Century Literature 50.3, Fall 2004.

steamy variety; Amherst's variety—Miss Moore and John Dewey the only two *real* democrats I've ever met, etc…[15]

One wonders what epithet Bishop might have chosen to describe the variety of democracy unique to Moore and Dewey. If Whitman's variety was "steamy" and Concord's (Emerson's) was Greek-like, perhaps Dewey and Moore represented the culmination of a scientific or naturalistic form of American democracy, one attuned and responsive to the important details of ordinary, everyday life, and grounded in the idea, not of a shared national or cultural experience, but of a shared animal experience. As Bishop later said of Dewey:

> Even at the age of eighty-five [John Dewey] missed no detail. He and Marianne Moore are the only people I have ever known who would talk to everyone, on all social levels, without the slightest change in their manner of speaking. I think this shows something important about Dewey and Marianne Moore—they have the kind of instinctive respect for other people which we all wish we could have but can only aspire to. No matter how foolish your question, he would always give you a complete and tactful answer. He loved little things, small plants and weeds and animals, and of course he was very generous in dealing with people.[16]

These two passages clearly reveal Bishop's admiration for both writers, showing the degree to which her own thought and sentiment must have been greatly influenced by the lives, the ideas, and the work of Moore and Dewey. More importantly, Bishop's words help to illuminate the intellectual affinities between these two looming figures of modernism—the pragmatic philosopher of education and democracy, and the reserved and iconoclastic poet of animal life. Both emphasized in their work and their lives the importance of ordinary, everyday experience ("the base-/ ball fan, the statistician—/…'business documents and/ school-books' all these phenomena are important," wrote Moore in 1924) and both believed strongly in the value of art to facilitate and create lasting changes in the ordinary lives of human beings.[17] This emphasis on the transformative power of art and aesthetic experience appears throughout

[15] *One Art* (36)
[16] Charles Molesworth. *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life*. New York: Atheneum, 1990. (xx)
[17] *Becoming Marianne Moore* (72)

Moore's poetry, as does a keen distrust of dichotomy, hierarchy, and the separation of art and the imagination from daily experience: intellectual values that Moore shared with Dewey, who was notoriously distrustful of philosophical and intellectual dichotomies.

Moore's poetry, of course, has never given itself to easy exegesis and her work and ideas have baffled, confused, and enervated critics ever since her first collection introduced her style to the general reviewing public. Amy Loveman's 1931 essay "Where we Have Come," for instance, unfavorably compares Moore to her friend and colleague T.S. Eliot, saying: "Whether or not Mr. Eliot's verse has the high qualities claimed for it by his friends, it is indubitably the product of talent, which is more than can be affirmed of that of such of his followers as Marianne Moore and E.E. Cummings."[18] Even Harriet Monroe, the founder of Poetry magazine, where Moore frequently published, described Moore's poems in comparison to Eliot's calling them "icily acid reflections."[19] This confusion and often cold reception is in part because—as Jeanne Heuving astutely points out—Moore's poetry often operates through a process of what she calls "contrariety:" "a term Moore employs early in her career to designate what is for her a desired condition in which both sides of a contention are equally true."[20] It is often hard to figure out where Moore stands philosophically or intellectually precisely because, like Dewey, she refuses to subscribe to the values of dichotomy, hierarchy, and division. Instead her poetry seeks to show the tensions among the inherent interconnectedness of things. This essentially holistic and affirmative poetics can cause difficulties for critics operating within more standard philosophical dichotomies.

Ralph Rees, for example, in his essay on Marianne Moore "The Reality of Imagination," makes the compelling argument that Moore valued "imagination" over "fact." This is an odd

[18] Amy Loveman. "Where We Have Come," *The English Journal*, Vol XX, November, 1931. (705)
[19] Harriet Monroe. "The Free-Verse Movement in America," *The English Journal*, Vol. XIII, December, 1924. (704)
[20] Jeanne Heuving. *Omissions are not Accidents: Gender in the Art of Marianne Moore*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992. (14)

argument to make, however, since nearly all of Moore's critics to date seem to take the exact opposite approach. Bonnie Costello, for instance—perhaps Moore's best known and most influential critic—describes what she calls Moore's "capacity for fact" saying that "while Moore's critics have varied radically in their judgment of the aims and aesthetic mode of her poems (a diversity of opinion that testifies to the richness, not to the vagueness, of her aesthetic), all agree about her *affinity for facts*." Costello later goes on to add: "as she matured artistically, she went beyond the imagists, taking the notion of exactness literally, in the biologist's sense of *getting the facts straight*" (emphasis added). Although clearly cutting against the grain, Rees's argument nonetheless is important, for it reveals the various ways in which the questions surrounding Moore's poetry and her aesthetics, even her concept of the imagination, change dramatically when considered from the perspective of Dewey's aesthetic philosophy.

According to Rees, Moore not only valued the imagination over the "factual" but she actively distrusted facts.

> Moore distrusts facts because they are seldom what they appear to be. Today's fact becomes tomorrow's myth. For this reason she treats the factual with little respect; she mixes the factual with myth and with imaginings, giving equal importance to the first two and added importance to the latter.[21]

Although Rees never mentions pragmatism in his essay, his argument here resembles pragmatism's core assumptions about the nature of truth—that is, that it is always changing, always temporary and highly contingent. That Moore distrusted "facts," seems at once both an obvious and a difficult argument to make. It seems obvious because Moore was, despite her various critics' focus on attention and detail, a highly imaginative poet, who believed strongly, as did Wallace Stevens, in the power of imagination as a transformative force operating in the world. Responding to Wallace Stevens' *Aurora's of Autumn*, for instance, Moore says "The real

[21] Ralph Rees. "The Reality of Imagination in the Poetry of Marianne Moore" *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 2/3, Marianne Moore Issue. (Summer-Autumn, 1984). (234)

is made more acute by an unreal; illusiveness is an intangible region in which images flit, for metaphor is a 'flit-er' that reflects itself in verisimilitudes of a mirror…."[22] Despite this emphasis on imagination, however, Moore is still universally admired for her close attention to the details of ordinary life. Grace Schulman, for instance, the editor of *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, describes what she calls Moore's "poetics of inquiry," noting that "to read a poem by Marianne Moore is to be aware of exactitude. It is to know that the writer has looked at a subject—a cliff, a sea animal, an ostrich—from all sides, and has examined the person looking at it as well."[23] Like Wallace Stevens, Moore speaks of the imagination often and with great reverence, but it seems odd to suggest that a poet who had such an innate ability for factual detail, whose focus and concentration was always on the rare and external detail, could be distrustful of "facts." Indeed, far from distrusting facts, Moore was often quick to correct the "soft-headedness" of factual error: "The musk ox/ has no musk and is not an ox--/ illiterate epithet."[24]

Rees, to his credit however, does not entirely ignore Moore's attention to the details of ordinary life. Instead he sees this attention to the factual and the real as fodder for the engines of a distinctly poetic imagination. "Moore finds that the factual and the sensed, those things which most people accept as the 'all' of reality, are important only as the stimuli of the imagination."[25] Of course Rees is partially right. Moore does value facts as "stimuli to the imagination"—indeed, this seems to be a given of modernist aesthetics, with its emphasis on capturing what Pound called an "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."[26] However Rees's later argument that "[Moore] finds imagination as much a part of reality as fact," undermines and contradicts his earlier privileging of the imagined over the factual, and brings us to the real

[22] CPMM (428)
[23] Moore, Marianne. *Poems of Marianne Moore*. Ed. Schulman, Grace. New York: Penguin, 2003. (xxvi)
[24] CPMM (193)
[25] Rees (233)
[26] Ezra Pound. *From* "A Few Don'ts," originally published in *Poetry* magazine, March, 1913.

question of Moore's poetics. In his rush to assert Moore's valuation of the imagination as somehow opposed to "fact," Rees misses the degree to which Moore's imagination is, to use a tired, but relevant phrase, *always already* a part of the world around her. For Moore the imagined and the real were not a dichotomy but were equal and inseparable parts of experience, which although they could be linguistically differentiated, were in fact one and the same. Like Stevens, Moore saw the imagination and her poems as a part of an environment, not something separate from it, and thus she understood the degree to which imaginative action could become a useful tool for personal and cultural transformation.

Moore's poems then, especially her many poems about animal life, reveal a mind in active pursuit and cultivation of those moments of wholeness, those "animal" moments when the seemingly disparate concepts of fact and imagination culminate in experience. It is precisely the attention to the world of experience, the close attention to the details of environment that make these aesthetic moments possible. As Robin Schulze explains, Moore's animals, although they may fruitfully be seen as emblems of her personal or spiritual life, are always primarily factual and detailed representations of the animals themselves, of their nature, of their evolution, and of their beauty, grace, and intelligence. They are not figments of the imagination, nor are they merely representations of some external reality (a mirror held up to nature), but are active constructions of an animal responding to its environment. Moore's poems are in this way always simultaneously appreciations and investigations of animal life "below the human scale." Moore's animals do not merely reveal to us some truth about ourselves, but rather help us to understand her own deep interaction with them as a part of her physical, intellectual, and emotional environment. The maternal instincts of the paper nautilus, the determined labor of the pangolin, the patience of the tiger are virtues relevant to our own lives. But for all of her interest in the moral qualities of these animals, the truly astonishing thing about Moore's animal poems is the

degree to which they value exact description above all else. Moore takes an interest in these creatures that is often explicitly scientific. The skunk, for instance is "adaptively whited with glistening/ goat-fur," the snail's "occipital horn" is a "curious phenomenon," and in "The Buffalo," she asks: "Might/ hematite-/ black, compactly incurved horns on bison,/ have significance?" There is in this attention to detail, in this questioning, clear evidence of a mind steeped in the science of her time. Much like the etchings of Durer, whom Moore admired, her attention to detail reveals the process of aesthetic experience at work, for Moore knew that the false dichotomies between art and science are as ephemeral and limiting as those surrounding reality and the imagination. In *Art as Experience* Dewey tackles this question directly when he states that

> Persons who are conventionally set off from artists, 'thinkers,' scientists, do not operate by conscious wit and will to anything like the extent popularly supposed. They, too, press forward toward some end dimly and imprecisely prefigured, groping their way as they are lured on by the identity of an aura in which their observations and reflections swim. Only the psychology that has separated things which in reality belong together holds that scientists and philosophers think while poets and painters follow their feelings. In both, and to the same extent in the degree in which they are of comparable rank, there is emotionalized thinking, and there are feelings whose substance consists of appreciated meanings or ideas.[27]

For Dewey, both art and science require thought and feeling, "emotionalized thinking," and the scientist is no more averse to the imagination than the poet is averse to facts. Both are grounded in aesthetic experience and both seek out the essentially aesthetic, if always temporary, satisfactions of understanding and consummation. "No thinker can ply his occupation save as he is lured and rewarded by total integral experiences that are intrinsically worthwhile. Without them he would never know what it is really to think and would be completely at a loss in distinguishing real thought from the spurious article."[28] Moore was also already conversant in the

[27] AE (80)
[28] *Ibid.*

biological thought and controversies of her time and her close descriptions and her imaginative constructions were never isolated endeavors, but were part of an aesthetic mindset that valued and understood the importance of the inseparability of the real and the imagined, thinking and feeling, science and art.[29] This inseparability was the culmination of what Moore called "humility, concentration, and gusto." "Gusto," said Moore, "thrives on freedom, and freedom in art, as in life, is the result of a discipline imposed by ourselves." For Moore this discipline was similar to the naturalist's discipline of close and exact attention to detail.

Indeed, the level of attention in Moore's poems reveals a degree of concentration and focus not dissimilar to her own descriptions of the attentive patience of the carnivore, "with that fixed, abstracted lizardlike expression of/ the eye which is characteristic/ of all accurate observers." Although Moore was a scientific thinker she understood importantly that thought was never separate from feeling and she actively sought to fashion herself into what Alison Reike astutely calls "an animal in human skin."[30] In her essay "'Plunder' or 'Accessibility to Experience': Consumer Culture and Marianne Moore's Modernist Self-Fashioning," Reike shows the ways in which Moore adapted her interest in animals as a way to formulate a persona of the modernist poet writ large. Like her far-flung acquaintance Ezra Pound, who fashioned his own dress upon the painter James Whistler, with his wild hair and his rumpled suit, Moore used her interest in animals to fashion a persona that was at once original and eclectic, and which combined the many sides of her nature: the woman, the poet, the scientist, and the animal. This persona, although well in place before the publication of Dewey's *Art as Experience*, was just

[29] Indeed, Moore was so conversant with Darwin that she frequently quoted his ideas with ease, stating in a letter to Bryher (Winifred Ellerman) July 7, 1921 that "in Variations of Animals and Plants under Domestication, Darwin speaks of a variety of pigeon that is born naked without any down whatever. I feel like that Darwinian Gosling." Moore, Marianne. *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*. New York: Knopf, 1997. (164)

[30] Alison Reike. "'Plunder' or 'Accessibility to Experience': Consumer Culture and Marianne Moore's Modernist Self-Fashioning." *Journal of Modern Literature* 27.1, 2003 (154)

one of a long series of attempts to get at "animal life below the human scale" to find recourse to "the activities of the fox, the dog, and the thrush."

III "INTEGRATION TOO TOUGH FOR INFRACTION"

In every experience we touch the world through some particular tentacle[31]
—John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

He often expressed/ A curious wish,/ To be interchangeably/ Man and fish[32]
—Marianne Moore, "Ennui"

Moore's interest in animal life was not limited to her own personal experiences, however. Like other modernist poets including William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, Moore followed closely and was sometimes directly involved in many of the debates of her time surrounding the public value and function of art. As Raphael Allison details in his dissertation on pragmatist aesthetics and community in American culture, debates about the value of art and community were reaching a fevered pitch about the time that Moore took over editorship of *The Dial* in 1925. The "Young Intellectuals" Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, and Lewis Mumford were involved in a series of debates with Dewey and other pragmatist intellectuals, poets, and writers about how best to reintegrate aesthetic experience in the life of ordinary Americans. *The Dial*, which Moore edited from 1925 to 1929, became one of the premier journals in these various discussions surrounding the cultural and political value of art and the aesthetic.

> Most significantly, Dewey's important essay 'Americanism and Localism'… appeared in the June issue, directly preceding Ezra Pound's fourth Canto; the February 1923 issue pairs Moore's own 'Novices' with Dewey's review of Bertrand Russell's *The Problem of China*;… and a 1921 issue contains reviews of books by or about both Dewey and William James. In short, Moore's publication of poetry in and eventual editorship of a journal that consistently published work on or about the pragmatists and the Young

[31] AE (199)
[32] *Becoming Marianne Moore* (339)

Intellectuals suggests the extent to which her work is involved in the same cultural milieu."[33]

All of these figures, including Moore, were at once looking for a definition of American literature as well as a purpose for it. Although many of the debates at the time, as Allison points out, revolved around issues of national identity and community as potential cures for the floating subjectivity of modernism, there was also within the writings of Moore and Dewey, especially, an engagement with subjectivity on a more fundamentally ontological level, an attempt to get back to a world where art was not separate from experience but an intimate part of it. As Allison notes:

> Moore was engaged in the pervasive pragmatist aesthetic attitude being promulgated by early twentieth-century intellectuals. The fracturing of American culture was an underlying anxiety during this period, and the idea that aesthetic experience could heal rifts and fissures while not sacrificing a now questionably attractive diversity, and that a rich phenomenology of "experience" could lead to more satisfying communitarian existence, resonated with Moore."[34]

One of the most explicit engagements with these ideas can be seen in Moore's "Efforts of Affection;" a later poem that was a favorite of Bishop's and which would ultimately become the title for her 1969 memoir of Moore. Although written in 1948, a full twenty years after her editorship of "The Dial" the poem reveals the culmination of Moore's thoughts about art and offers a clear critique of the differentiation of aesthetic and "ordinary" forms of experience.

> Genesis tells us of Jubal and Jabal.
> One handled the harp and one herded the cattle.
>
> Unhackneyed Shakespeare's
> "Hay, sweet hay, which hath no fellow,"
> Love's extraordinary-ordinary stubbornness
> Like La Fontaine's done
> by each as if by each alone,
> smiling and stemming distraction;
> How welcome:

[33] Raphael Allison. *The Beautiful Changes: Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Community in American Poetics, 1860-1960*. (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2003) (110)
[34] *Ibid* (142)

> Vermin-proof and pilfer-proof integration
> In which unself-righteousness humbles inspection.
>
> "You know I'm not a saint!" Sainted obsession,
> The bleeding-heart's—that strange rubber fern's attraction
>
> Puts perfume to shame.
> Unsheared sprays of elephant-ears
> Do not make a selfish end look like a noble one.
> Truly as the sun
> can rot or mend, love can make one
> bestial or make a beast a man.
> Thus wholeness—
>
> wholesomeness? best say efforts of affection—
> attain integration too tough for infraction.[35]

According to Bishop, Moore had originally titled this poem: "Efforts *and* Affection," and after changing the title, had gone out of her way to make the written revision in Bishop's copy of Moore's *Collected Poems* of 1951 (emphasis added). "I liked this change very much," said Bishop, "and so I am giving the title "Efforts of Affection" to the whole piece." But, of course, there were other reasons why Bishop chose this title for her recollections of Moore. Joanne Fiet Diehl, in her book, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity*, argues that Bishop's choice to use this poem for her title reveals her ambivalent relationship with Moore's influence, but there are perhaps other, more obvious reasons why Bishop would have chosen to title her memoir after Moore's poem. Moore's poem, after all, like Bishop's memoir, shows the degree to which Moore saw the dichotomies between art and labor, and man and beast, as overcome by a form of focused concentration (poetry) and the power of what she calls "love's extraordinary-ordinary stubbornness." It is not surprising, then that Bishop would have understood this poem to represent a shared poetic sensibility. Indeed, Bishop's memoir is itself,

[35] CPMM (147)

arguably, an effort of affection, a work of love, and the title, far from representing any kind of ambivalence reveals instead the deep and abiding affinities between the two poets.

Moore's "Efforts of Affection" is a short poem, but it succinctly lays out the foundation for an entire poetics of love and transformation that implicitly challenges many of the problematic philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic dichotomies that John Dewey was also seeking to dismantle. Moore recognized, like Dewey, that the differences between work and labor, between the useful and fine arts, or between writing and, say, building, were not *a priori* philosophical givens, nor were they fixed aspects of a world in which labor and joy were forever separated, but that they were largely the result of culture and prejudice, and that they arose out of culturally determined metaphysical and philosophical divisions between animal and man, mind and body, spirit and flesh. These divisions, as Dewey Notes in *Art as Experience* were often, like so much formal philosophical tradition, obstructions to greater aesthetic experience.

> Oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh all have their origin, fundamentally, in fear of what life may bring forth. They are marks of contraction and withdrawal. Full recognition, therefore, of the continuity of the organs, needs and basic impulses of the human creature with his animal forebears, implies no necessary reduction of man to the level of the brutes. On the contrary, it makes possible the drawing of a ground-plan of human experience upon which is erected the superstructure of man's marvelous and distinguishing experience. What is distinctive in man makes it possible for him to sink below the level of the beasts. It also makes it possible for him to carry to new and unprecedented heights that unity of sense and impulse, of brain and eye and ear, that is exemplified in animal life, saturating it with the conscious meanings derived from communication and deliberate expression.[36]

Although Dewey does not mention it here, these oppositions between mind and body, spirit and flesh, are directly implicated in our ideas about the divisions between art and life, between leisure and labor, and between the useful and the fine.

Moore raises this philosophical problem of the "compartmentalization" of experience in the very first lines of her poem:

[36] AE (28)

Genesis tells us of Jubal and Jabal.
One handled the harp and one herded the cattle.

From the beginning, Moore says here, western man has been convinced that there is and must necessarily be, a separation between labor and love, between work and art, between the useful and the fine; and that these differences should be as natural as the differences between summer and winter: one man makes music, while another man tends the flock. This is a decidedly anti-Emersonian picture of life, and one that Moore soon dismantles. Of course this differentiated world of Jubal and Jabal is not wholly dissimilar to the one in which Moore and Dewey would have found themselves in the 1940's. The increasingly industrialized nation had been moving for decades, with greater speed and efficiency, from an economy of tradesmen and crafts persons to an industrial economy of ever more alienated labor. The assembly line and the sweatshop had turned the arts and crafts of furniture building and dressmaking, for instance, into nothing more than a series of mindless activities, repeated twelve hours a day, with brief periods of rest in between. The aesthetic experience of the artisan had been largely eliminated from society and the divisions between work, in Richard Poirier's sense of the word, and labor, had crystallized.[37] In response to this, Moore and Dewey, like many intellectuals at the time were seeking for ways to reintegrate the concept of art into ordinary experience, but Moore was also working the other way, as she was also simultaneously seeking out ways to integrate and celebrate ordinary experience *within* her poetry. Although "Efforts of Affection" is daunting in its complexity and richness of quotation (the poem is one of a handful of Moore's notoriously difficult works) It effectively proposes, through its oblique series of quotations and observations, that the poet

[37] In *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, Poirier describes the value of work when it is a true and conscious interaction with environment: "To work is to cope with 'facts' in much the way the poet, ideally, confronts his medium—as something that, in response to his exertions of personal power, will lay bare an essential form which will at last absorb and transform such power into expression that is more than personal." NJ: Stanford UP, 1990. (284)

(Jubal) is really no different from the herdsmen (Jabal); that work, like poetry, is a form of love; and poetry, a form of work.

Indeed, Bishop's memoir becomes even more revealing here when we realize the importance that Moore placed on the difference between the words "of" and "and" in her title. Read as "Efforts *and* Affection" the title inadvertently, and Moore must have realized this, asserts and re-affirms the very dichotomies that she was looking to overthrow in her poem. Read as "Efforts *of* Affection," however, the realms of work (effort) and love (affection) become one and the same. Rather than two terms juxtaposed—effort and affection—Moore focuses, in an explicitly Deweyan way, the reader's attention on the relationship between the two words rendering them nearly synonymous. Work, Moore seems to be saying, is by its very nature an "effort of affection," pleasure, or satisfaction. In other words, work, at its best and in the right circumstances, is an aesthetic endeavor. The poem itself then becomes not a combination, a mere hybrid of effort and love, but all work, when work is a form of affection and not alienated labor. It is, after all, the expression of "Love's ordinary-extraordinary stubbornness," that leads to the initial integration that takes place at the end of the first section.

> by each as if by each alone,
> smiling and stemming distraction;
> How welcome:
>
> Vermin-proof and pilfer-proof integration
> In which unself-righteousness humbles inspection.

Although Pamela White Hadas reads this "how welcome" as a form of Pollyannaish optimism, "slightly incredulous and wishful, saying, more or less, 'wouldn't it be nice if this all worked out, ostracizing rats and thieves for good,'"[38] her reading seems to me needlessly cynical. If it would be nice, as Hadas, suggests, it would follow that Moore's "how welcome" might be best

[38] Hadas, Pamela White. *Marianne Moore, Poet of Affection*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1977.

understood as a sincere expression of need and desire that it be so, or at the least that we begin to think of it as such in an effort to bring about some kind of significant change in perception. Hadas, concerned as she is in unraveling the complexities of Moore's ideas about love, especially as they are expressed in Moore's poem "Marriage," sees what I would argue are unnecessary parallels between the similar dichotomies between man and woman in this poem. Although the poem is certainly about love, it is about a moral love of work, and concentrated focus "stemming distraction" and not the love of another individual. Likewise, this "unself-righteousness," the refusal, as an artist, to see oneself as separate from or above the lives of ordinary people, reinforces the idea that this is a poem that is earnestly seeking to mend the dichotomies that it presents in the first lines. This "pilfer-proof integration" is the result of "love's extraordinary-ordinary stubbornness" and offers a vision of the poet as an integral part of her environment, as a member of her community rather than somehow above or apart from it.

But it is the second section of the poem that is most important for a better understanding of Moore's approach to "animal life below the human scale." Here, Moore explicitly tackles the false dichotomies, obvious to even the most amateur of biologists, between man and beast.

> Truly as the sun
> can rot or mend, love can make one
> bestial or make a beast a man.
> Thus wholeness—
>
> wholesomeness? best say efforts of affection—
> attain integration too tough for infraction.

Although at first these lines may seem like an assertion of the differences between man and beast, it is their interconnectedness, their similarities that are stressed throughout the poem, not least in her choice of quotation. In characteristic fashion Moore quotes, and often simply steals quite liberally from other writers, but here it is as much about the associations connected to her quotations as it is about the quotations themselves. Shakespeare's "Hay, sweet hay, which

hath no fellow," spoken by the donkey-headed Bottom in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," is followed by an unquoted borrowing from La Fontaine, who, as we know from Moore's later translations, was equally obsessed with love and the moral qualities of animals. In both writers we see a conflation of the realm of the human and the animal, and in the case of Shakespeare's comedy, as Hadas rightly points out, a double conflation of the role of the creative artist (Titania) and the laboring mechanical (Bottom).

But what is most interesting about these lines is the way in which they are followed by the phrase "thus wholeness—." The words are obviously the opening clause to the couplet that follows, but positioned as they are, they seem to comment upon the previous lines as much as introduce a new thought. The potential in beast and man to be like one another reveals, thus, a kind of wholeness, a latency of association that is carelessly overlooked by a society intent on distancing itself from its animal origins. It is precisely, suggests Moore, this wholeness, (or is it wholesomeness), attained through these efforts of affection, that is too tough for infraction, too tough to be torn asunder again.

Just as she did in "Efforts of Affection," In "The Paper Nautilus" Moore takes on directly the fallacy that poetry can somehow stand alone and separate from the rest of experience. Ostensibly a poem about the maternal instincts of the paper nautilus, Moore wastes no time developing the symbolic connections between this small cephalopod, its treasured load of eggs, its beautiful shell, and the work of aesthetic creation. Indeed, for Moore, the paper nautilus, with its highly prized shell, and its complicated process of reproduction and gestation, represents in whole the transformative potential of aesthetic experience, grounded as it is in the experience of ordinary animal existence.

Moore makes this connection between the paper nautilus and the world of literary production clear in the very beginning of the poem.

> For authorities whose hopes
> are shaped by mercenaries?
> Writers entrapped by
> teatime fame and by
> commuters' comforts? Not for these
> the paper nautilus
> constructs her thin glass shell.[39]

This beautiful, glass-like shell, says Moore, in her stereotypically elusive way, produced as it is through an act of love and sacrifice, is not for these "half poets," as she describes them in "Poetry." Nor is it a product for these mercenary authorities. As Joanne Fiet Diehl elegantly explains in her essay on Moore's poem in *Women Poets and the American Sublime:*

> Turning away both from the generalized commercial values of society and more specifically from those writers who are trapped by false lust for fame and ease, the paper nautilus, with delicate tenacity, constructs something that will endure long enough to sustain life and become an object of loveliness.[40]

Fiet Diehl recognizes here the important contrasts between the actions of the paper nautilus and the actions of these lesser poets, whose inspiration comes not from a love of honest struggle and resistance, not from a real engagement with their environment, but from a desire for mere comfort removed from the world of natural experience. Moore, on the other hand, knows that real art is, as Fiet Diehl says, a kind of sustenance of life, and that it comes only out of struggle. Like the small nautilus eggs, "hindered to succeed," each aesthetic creation is a form of struggle and each glass shell is itself the beautiful record of that struggle.

It was, not surprisingly, Elizabeth Bishop who gave Marianne Moore the very shell that was the impetus for this poem, and many critics have therefore tended to see the poem as a kind of ironic warning to herself and to Bishop about the potentially suffocating nature of poetic influence and inheritance. Curiously Fiet Diehl never mentions "The Paper Nautilus" in her book-length study of the psycho-dynamics of influence between Bishop and Moore, but many

[39] CPMM (121)
[40] Joanne Fiet Diehl. *Women Poets and the American Sublime.* Indiana: Indiana UP, 1990.

other critics have called attention to the ways in which this poem might be understood as a response to Bishop's gift. Jeanne Heuving, for instance, in her book *Omissions are not Accidents: Gender in the Art of Marianne Moore* argues that

> Moore herself seems to have had mothering as well as mentoring inclinations toward the younger Bishop--a kind of mothering that, like the nurturance provided by the chambered nautilus and Moore's own mother, helps by hindering the young. Indeed, as noted previously, Moore seemed to have taken on the behavior of her own mother and urged Bishop--contrary to Bishop's own poetic interests--to express 'significant values.'[41]

Although the poem, like "Efforts of Affection," is enriched by an understanding of the relationship between Bishop and Moore, it is not wholly determined by it. It is clear that the poem was in some sense a note of gracious thanks for a thoughtful gift, and, indeed, as Heuving suggests, was a working out of the complicated relationship between a mentor and her charge, but the poem is also and perhaps more importantly, a clear statement of aesthetic principles. That it was written to Bishop as a kind of gift does not interfere with this reading. Just as Bishop must have understood the importance of Moore's small, but significant change in the title of her poem "Efforts of Affection," she would also have seen this poem as the expression of a shared aesthetic sensibility, for beginning where "Efforts of Affection" leaves off, this poem provides a concrete and detailed description of the aesthetic value of "animal life below the human scale."

The paper nautilus, as it's commonly called, is actually a member of the *argonautide* family and not the *nautilidae*, which is the family of the traditionally named and much more common "chambered" or "emperor" nautilus. In fact the paper nautilus and its shell are very different from the creatures we normally think of when we hear the word nautilus. The paper nautilus shell is much smaller, much thinner, and much more fragile than the chambered nautilus shell and while the shell of the chambered nautilus operates as a permanent home, the paper

[41] Heuving, Jeanne. O*missions Are Not Accidents: Gender in the Art of Marianne Moore*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992.

nautilus creates its shell exclusively for the purposes of reproduction. It is inside this small, paper-thin egg case, generated by the dorsal tentacles of the paper nautilus that she lays her many thousands of eggs, and it is precisely this complicated process of gestation that Moore focuses on in her poem, creating a biological allegory of the poetic process that reveals the innate similarities between animal and human aesthetic nature. Dewey also saw biological life and art as inherently interconnected as he makes clear in *Art as Experience*:

> Art is…prefigured in the very process of living. A bird builds its nest and a beaver its dam when internal organic pressures cooperate with external materials so that the former are fulfilled and the latter are transformed in a satisfying culmination. We may hesitate to apply the word 'art,' since we doubt the presence of directive intent. But all deliberation, all conscious intent, grows out of things once performed organically through the interplay of natural energies.[42]

Although for Dewey, the process described here is entirely between the organism and external nature, Moore extends this argument, by focusing on the paper nautilus, to include even the biological processes of reproduction and gestation, often synonymous, of course, with poetic and literary production. Even the most essential and basic activities, suggests Moore, are infused with aesthetic nature.

Moore's poem, however, resembles Dewey's ideas about the aesthetic impulse much more closely, for central to that process are the concepts of struggle and resistance, themes that Dewey articulated at length in *Art as Experience*. The paper nautilus broods over her young:

> Buried eight-fold in her eight
> arms, for she is in
> a sense a devil-
> fish, her glass ram's-horn-cradled freight
> is hid but is not crushed;
> as Hercules, bitten
>
> by a crab loyal to the hydra,
> was hindered to succeed[43]

[42] AE (30)
[43] CPMM (121)

Indeed, this resistance, this struggle, in an explicitly Darwinian sense, is essential to any possible evolutionary change or transformation. "Hindered to succeed," these "intensively/ watched eggs coming from/ the shell free it when they are freed" leaving behind the remarkable product of this creative process, which the paper nautilus carries with her for months or years afterward, a "perishable/ souvenir of hope." This process of birth is not so distinct from the act of expression as Dewey describes it in *Art as Experience* and captures well the essential tension that makes all aesthetic experience and in effect all great poetry possible.

This beautiful artifact, like the beaver's dam, or the bird's nest, is the culmination of a struggle, and like those structures, is a transformation of nature. In this case, however—and Moore must have been conscious of this—it is also something more than merely a transformation of nature. In a very real sense, it is an original and wholly organic *addition* to nature; something absolutely essential but entirely new, made seemingly out of nothing more than patience and will, for the paper nautilus makes the shell out of her own body, secreting the egg case from her two dorsal tentacles. This spontaneous creation, repeated generation after generation, is a form of what Dewey, in *Experience and Nature*, calls genuine creation. "Creation," says Dewey,

> may be asserted vaguely and mystically; but it denotes something genuine and indispensable in art. The merely finished is not fine but ended, done with, and the merely 'fresh' is that bumptious impertinence indicated by the slang use of the word. The 'magic' of poetry—and pregnant experience has poetical quality—is precisely sensation through the new. It radiates the light that never was on land and sea but that is henceforth an abiding illumination of objects…for nature is an intersection of spontaneity and necessity, the regular and the novel, the finished and the beginning[44]

It is no accident that both Dewey and Moore choose to use the language and imagery of pregnancy to describe aesthetic experience, for they both recognized the transformation of life,

[44]EN (360)

both biological and intellectual, as an implicit good, for "growth itself," as Dewey said, "is the only moral 'end.'"[45]

The paper nautilus shell, then, although a repetition in nature, is still a spontaneous and original contribution to the world, each shell being absolutely unique. It is only after the eggs, which are equally the product of her own making, have hatched, and the infants fled, "leaving its wasp-nest flaws/ of white on white and close-/ laid Ionic chiton-folds," does the shell become likened to an artifact.

> like the lines in the mane of
> a Parthenon horse,
> round which the arms had
> wound themselves as if they knew love
> is the only fortress
> strong enough to trust to.[46]

In this final image Moore manages again to conflate the aesthetic realms of animal and man. By comparing the shell to the mane of a Parthenon horse, Moore humanizes the paper nautilus, as if it were the rider, its arms wrapped around the carved mane of the shell that she has produced. This image also simultaneously shows the ways in which her intricately crafted shell is as much an integral part of our aesthetic life as were the palaces and the sculptures of the ancient Greeks. These final lines also call to mind Dewey's repeated references to the Parthenon in *Art as Experience*. Indeed, for Dewey, the Parthenon represented the pinnacle of a kind of art that was completely grounded in its environment and times and which overcame the modern distinctions between high and low, and it is interesting that Moore chooses to end her poem with a reference to that majestic and most representative of art works.

Perhaps the best and most direct example of Moore's embrace of animal life, however, can be seen in one of her earliest poems: "Black Earth" originally published by T.S. Eliot in *The*

[45] Dewey, John. *Middle Works: Essays, Miscellany, and Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Ed. Boydston, Jo Ann. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008.
[46] CPMM (122)

Egoist in 1918. Moore left this poem out of all of her future collections after 1951.[47] The reasons for this decision are inexplicable, but Moore was a notorious perfectionist, often revising previously published poems several times before republishing, so it is likely the decision had more to do with the form and sound of the poem than its actual emotional or philosophical content. Regardless of her reasons, the poem was, nonetheless a favorite of many early readers of Moore, including Ezra Pound, who wondered upon reading "Black Earth" if Moore was "Ethiopian." Moore later changed the title to "Melanchthon," which was the name she had given to the porcelain elephant that was the original inspiration for the poem.[48]

In "Black Earth" Moore captures perfectly, nearly twenty years before the publication of *Art as Experience*, Dewey's ideas about the true aesthetic value of "animal life below the human scale." Describing what appears to be the experience of an elephant bathing in a lake or stream, the speaker opens the poem with the following expression:

> Openly, yes,
> with the naturalness
> of the Hippopotamus or the alligator
> when it climbs out on the bank to experience the
>
> sun, I do these
> things which I do, which please
> no one but myself.[49]

The experience here is entirely sensual and offers a description of this kind of pleasure as an end in itself. But this experience is importantly not without meaning or use, for just a few lines later the creature speaker continues: "The sediment of the river which/ encrusts my joints makes me very gray, but I am used/ to it, it may/ remain there; do away/ with it and I am myself done away

[47] Miller, Cristanne. "The Responsibilities of Inclusion and Omission: Editing Marianne Moore's Poetry." Virginia Quarterly Review (2004).
[48] "A figurine among many MM collected. Phillip Melanchthon (1497-1560), Luther's assistant during the Reformation, originally named Schwarzerd (German for 'black earth'), translated his name into Greek." Moore, Marianne. *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*. (122)
[49] *Becoming Marianne Moore* (87)

with, for the patina of circumstances can but enrich what was there to begin/ with. This elephant skin which I inhabit."

This is a decidedly Deweyan moment, for this pleasure, the very possibility of this pleasure, is entirely contingent, possible only through an interchange between the creature and its environment. Encased in mud, the elephant is changed, transformed from black to gray, and this transformation, as Moore makes clear, is the product of a "live creature" completely at home in the world. Remove the world, remove the circumstances of our environment, and one necessarily removes oneself, for there are no individual existences—"no private feelings and sensations" as Dewey says—that are separate from the world of "objects and events" that surround us. Free of the divisive cultural dichotomies that tend to relegate aesthetic experience to a place outside or somehow above our daily environment, this creature provides a fine model for the idea of art as a form of experience. Equally interesting however, is the way that this poem criticizes the shallowness of human experience when it is removed from its animal origins.

As the poem progresses, Moore and the elephant, the creature and the Speaker, become one. Speaking now from the perspective of the elephant, Moore examines the deficiencies of human experience, saying

> My ears are sensitized to more than the sound of
>
> the wind. I see
> and I hear, unlike the
> wandlike body of which one hears so much, which was
> made
> to see and not to see; to hear and not to hear;
>
> that tree trunk without
> roots[50]

[50] *Becoming Marianne Moore* (88)

This description of a wand-like body, though certainly as oblique as any of Moore's often oblique descriptions, could only be the body of a man, for few other creatures walk upright like a wand "maintained intact/ by who knows what strange pressure of the atmos-/ phere." Therefore if indeed this is the human, as it seems it must be, this is a quite devastating critique, and one that, like so much of Moore's work, resembles the central argument of Dewey's opening chapter of *Art as Experience*. Made to see, man does not see. Made to hear, he does not hear. Divided from his animal forebears, "without roots" and hence disconnected from the soil, it is man and not, as Martin Heidegger claimed, the animal, who is so often "poor of world." [51]

The description of this wand-like image and the later repetition of that most wand-like pronoun "The I of each is to/ the I of each/ a kind of fretful speech," suggest that the human is too easily self-obsessed, too much an island unto itself, intellectually and emotionally removed from the dying world of sensual experience. And yet, despite this emphasis upon the first person, it is precisely here that the poem itself enacts what the critic Kirsten Hotelling Zona calls a "fleeting interaction," a Deweyan inter- penetration of self and world, where "the speaker is no longer distinct as elephant, human, coral plant, or omniscient 'I,' but exists as a fleeting interaction of them all."[52] Man, animal, and world, despite their differences, have become one, and Moore has managed to take on the skin of the elephant, as it were, while still remaining herself. She has managed to become both animal and poet. But this unity does not last long, and as the poem moves rather suddenly here from first to third person descriptions of the elephant, Moore returns transformed to her human self as an observer of animal life, affirming in wonderment that

[51] In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger argues famously that the stone is "worldless," that the animal is "poor in world," and that man is "world-forming." Heidegger, Martin. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Trans. McNeill, William and Walker, Nicholas. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995), 186.
[52] Hotelling Zona, Kirstin. *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint*. (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan UP, 2002), (34)

the elephant is?
Black earth preceded by a tendril? It is to that

phenomenon
the above formation,
translucent like the atmosphere—a cortex merely—
that on which darts cannot strike decisively the first

time, a substance
needful as an instance
of the indestructibility of matter

The elephant, then, is an indispensable part of its environment, a part of the earth, formed, like man, out of the necessary and indestructible substance of the soil, which protects it.

While these final lines praise the physical strength and toughness of the elephant, Moore is not only interested in surfaces here, but also cares deeply about the kind of mind that is made possible by and coexistent with this material being, its instinctive irrationality, asking "Will/ depth be depth, thick skin be thick, to one who can see no/ beautiful element of unreason under it?" This is a philosophically startling question for it asserts the interconnections between this depth of materiality and the creature's very irrationality, which is presented here as a form of mind. In other words the irrational here is seen as a virtue of the creature's own materiality, its embodiedness. Indeed, it is precisely this being as a form of unreasoning that is the elephant's greatest quality, providing it with both a connection to its environment and a defense against it. Dewey also sees this irrationality as an aesthetic virtue, for as he says in *Art as Experience* "even the greatest philosopher exercises an animal like preference to guide his thinking to its conclusions," adding that "reason at its height cannot attain complete grasp and a self-contained assurance. It must fall back upon imagination—upon the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense." It is precisely this "beautiful element of unreason," which lies at the heart of animal life, which is such an indispensable part of aesthetic experience.

Despite all of their similarities there is still little to suggest for certain that there was any direct influence between the works of John Dewey and Marianne Moore. Dewey's contemporaneous and explicitly pragmatist theory of art—grounded as it was in an understanding of the value of ordinary animal life as the source of aesthetic experience—nonetheless provides a new and important framework for better understanding the significance and meaning of Moore's many poems of animal life. Like Dewey, Moore was responding to a modern society that had all but abandoned any connection between the physical and the aesthetic and the animal and the human. Faced with a growing and false cultural disparity between ordinary and aesthetic forms of experience, Moore recognized, as Dewey later did, that any attempt to reinvigorate everyday life with the power and potential of the aesthetic would necessarily require a reconciliation between our human and animal natures. Moore's poetry, then, provides a usable and living record of her attempts to get at and understand "animal life below the human scale." In a world now overrun with electronic devices seemingly designed to take us out of the world of lived experience, and maybe someday out of our own bodies, Moore's celebration of the aesthetic potential of the embodied self, is more relevant than ever.

IV "THE FIERY EVENT OF EVERYDAY"

What can we give, yet not be rude,/ to show the proper gratitude? [53]
—"To the Admirable Miss Moore"

Marianne Moore was easily the most significant influence on Elizabeth Bishop's life and literary career and Moore's intense observations of animal nature, her close attention to the "facts" of ordinary life, and her interest in the transformative power of poetry are all subjects that Bishop explored with equal intensity and interest. Not only did Moore relentlessly defend and promote Bishop's work, sometimes at the expense of her own reputation, but she closely read and

[53] Elizabeth Bishop. *Edgar Allan Poe and the Jukebox: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*. Ed. Alice Quinn. New York: FSG, 2006 (84)

commented on many of Bishop's earliest published poems, often providing feedback and specific suggestions for revision. Despite her active editorial involvement with Bishop's poetry, Moore's real influence on her work, however, is best seen in Bishop's early and formative choice of subject matter, and in the younger poet's often successful attempts to mimic the intensity and scientific attention that Moore brought to her own poetry. Responding to a 1954 essay about Moore's influence on her work, Bishop wrote to Moore saying:

> In my own case, I know however that when I began to read your poetry at college I think it immediately opened up my eyes to the possibility of the subject matter I could use and might never have thought of using if it hadn't been for you.[54]

This "subject matter" is best exemplified by Bishop's scientific attention to environment, animals, and landscape in her first collection *North & South*, but is in evident abundance throughout her poetic career. Again and again, we see the influence of Moore's subject matter in poems like "The Sandpiper," "The Moose," and "The Armadillo;" and it would be difficult, near impossible, to read "The Fish," perhaps Bishop's most well regarded poem, without seeing the often noted Moore-like intensity and scientific detail evident in her descriptions of the animal's anatomy:

> the coarse white flesh
> packed in like feathers,
> the big bones and the little bones,
> the dramatic reds and blacks
> of his shiny entrails,
> and the pink swim-bladder
> like a big peony.[55]

This obvious influence, however, was reinforced by the much less obvious but equally important mutual influence of Dewey's aesthetic and cultural philosophies. Although Moore had introduced Bishop to her earliest subject matter, both poets were consciously and unconsciously

[54] Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. California: UC Press, 1995 (68)
[55] EBCP (42)

seeking in their poetry to explore and exploit Dewey's ideas about the significance of aesthetic experience in the everyday. Moore was intimately familiar with Dewey's work, having copied out—as related earlier—whole passages from *Essays in Experimental Logic* and *Democracy and Education* in her 1917 reading notebooks, and Bishop, although she confessed an ignorance of Dewey's philosophy, had been neighbors with the Deweys at Key West; was a life-long friend of John Dewey's daughter Jane; and was a frequent guest at their country estate in Havre de Grace, Maryland.[56] These connections, despite Bishop's characteristically modest and perhaps intentionally evasive declaration of philosophical ignorance, must have also had a profound impact on the way that Bishop thought about her subject matter and the value of her own work. Although Bishop was not as actively involved in the philosophical and political debates of her time as Moore was—indeed, Bishop could be incredibly reclusive for long periods, working only on her poems and writing letters—her poetry reflects the culmination and appropriation of many of the ideas that were filtering through the public conversations about the value and place of art in a modern society, its use and function. In many ways, Bishop's poetry, even more than her mentor's, captures, through its use of epiphany, that experience of total animal presence that Dewey and Moore both saw as a cure for the false divisions between feeling and idea, thought and action, high and low culture, and man and nature.

If Moore's poetry shows us that art and life, experience and nature, are inherently an "integration too tough for infraction," Bishop's work reveals in even greater detail the actual sense of that organic unity, and how it plays itself out in an environment of interactive meaning. Like Moore, Bishop emphasized the value of immediate and unmediated animal experience in her poetry by breaking down the barriers between action and thought, subject and object, spirit

[56] *Ibid* (146). Bishop's poem, which would become the title of her 1955 collection "A Cold Spring," was written at Havre De Grace and dedicated to Jane Dewey.

and flesh. This access to unmediated experience, the fusion of things commonly understood as separate, leads to a particular kind of aesthetic experience that is played out in her work, a form of what previous critics have recognized simply as epiphany. Bishop's use of epiphany, however, conforms remarkably well to Dewey's ideas about the very structure of an aesthetic experience opposed to mere inchoate experience. As Dewey says, "*an* experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship…the action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence" (AE 51, italics added). It is precisely this moment of perception and the realization of this relationship of doing and undergoing that lies at the heart of aesthetic experience; and Bishop's performance of this realization in her poetry is not accidental. Bishop is actively seeking to show in these poems the nature and structure of aesthetic experience by acting out its process, exploring it and expressing it at the same time, doing and undergoing simultaneously.

V "THIS STRANGE DIVIDED SINGLENESS OF OUR EXPERIENCE"

> The thing essential to bear in mind is that living as an empirical affair is not something which goes on below the skin-surface of an organism: it is always an inclusive affair involving connection, interaction of what is within the organic body and what lies outside in space and time.[57]
>
> —John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*

Interestingly, it was no less an astute critic than the young John Ashbery who, in his 1969 review of *The Complete Poems,* first articulated the central philosophical dilemma of Bishop's poetry:

> Her [Bishop's] preoccupation with wildlife and civilized artifacts comes through as an exemplar of the way we as subjects feel about the objects, living or inert, that encircle us. We live in a quandary, but it is not a dualistic conflict between inner and outer reality, it is rather a question of deciding how much the outer reality is our reality, how far we can advance into it and still keep a toe-hold on the inner, private one…This strange divided

[57] EN (215)

singleness of our experience is a theme that is echoed and alluded to throughout Miss Bishop's work.[58]

Of course, much of what Ashbery is talking about here can be applied with equal veracity to his own poetry, and indeed I will take up this subject in Chapter Four when I discuss Ashbery's and Ammons's reconstructive poetics; but what Ashbery describes here, although he may not have known it at the time, is explicitly Deweyan.

This dilemma of subjectivity, what Ashbery calls the "strange divided singleness of our experience" and its relationship to our animal nature ("wildlife") corresponds well to Dewey's ideas about the structure of experience more broadly. For Dewey, unlike other philosophical empiricists, experience and subjectivity were not merely the causal result of some set of external influences, but were fundamentally always structurally interactive. All experience, and especially aesthetic experience, is a shared and interactive response with and in an environment that includes our thoughts as well as the ideas and expressions of others.

> The whole history of science, art and morals proves that the mind that appears *in* individuals is not as such individual mind. The former is in itself a system of belief, recognitions, and ignorances, of acceptances and rejections, of expectancies and appraisals of meanings which have been instituted under the influence of custom and tradition.[59]

In part, because of this "influence of custom and tradition" our experience always problematically appears to us as both singular and divided—the world of nature appearing as something made and something experienced at the same time, a part of us and something we have become a part of.

Bishop captures Ashbery's idea of the divided singleness of experience perhaps most eloquently in her poem "In the Waiting Room." In this frequently studied and anthologized poem, Bishop explores the very nature of this split, recognizing the contingency of her own

[58] John Ashbery. "The Complete Poems." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz, Michigan: Michigan UP, 1983 (202)
[59] EN (219)

sense of self, and how that identity is radically dependent upon the relationships of which it is a part. As the poem begins, Bishop's youthful persona sits in the waiting room of the family dentist in Worcester Massachusetts, while her Aunt Consuelo is inside. The young Bishop busies herself by reading the *National Geographic*, "(I could read)" she says, and studying the photographs of African women she finds there:

> Black, naked women with necks
> Wound round with wire
> Like the necks of light bulbs.
> Their breasts were horrifying.
> I read it straight through.
> I was too shy to stop.[60]

The images of these women lead the young Bishop, not to a recognition of her difference, but ironically, to a realization of her own unique and intense interrelatedness with the world. As Helen Vendler says of the poem, "as the fact of her own contingency strikes the child, 'familiar' and 'strange' become concepts which have lost all meaning."[61] In fact, it is the intense alienness of these African "others" which leads to the child's eventual realization of her own contingency, her own cultural and biological connectedness with the "others" sitting around her in the waiting room: the "shadowy gray knees,/ trousers and skirts and boots/ and different pairs of hands/ lying under the lamps." And it is precisely at this moment that the poem reaches its climax as

> Suddenly, from inside,
> came an *oh!* of pain
> —Aunt Consuelo's voice—
> not very loud or long.
> I wasn't at all surprised;
> even then I knew she was
> a foolish, timid woman.
> I might have been embarrassed,
> but wasn't. What took me
> completely by surprise

[60] EBCP (159)
[61] Helen Vendler. "Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. (38)

was that it was *me:*
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I—we—were falling, falling,
Our eyes glued to the cover
Of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.[62]

This moment captures well the degree to which identity is a social construction, but this singular moment of recognition, with all of its built-in linguistic complexity and ambiguity also captures perfectly the experience of the sense of divided singleness that Ashbery points to in his essay. Bishop's persona feels at once a cry of pain that is both her own and her aunt Consuelo's, that both comes from inside the dentist's office and from inside herself. The child recognizes simultaneously and paradoxically that she is at once "an I, …an Elizabeth,…[*and*] one of them," and dares not to look out from herself for fear that she might "see what it was I was."

What similarities—
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*
and those awful hanging breasts—
held us all together
or made us all just one?[63]

Indeed, Bishop's identity and sense of self is dependent on her interactions with the world—she is defined by her environment; and as the poem makes clear our subjective experience is a complicated matter, appearing to us as a feeling of divided singularity, where we seem at once to be an independent "I" and simultaneously "one of them." Experience appears to us this way, Dewey would say, because of our shared and inherited sense of the dualistic nature of subjectivity, our sense that mind is something independent of the physical world. Reconsidered from Dewey's pragmatist perspective, however, we can begin to understand

[62] EBCP (160)
[63] *Ibid*

experience not as the interaction of two separate realms, that of the objective and the subjective, or the mental and the physical, but as a process, a movement—a transition, as Jonathan Levin would describe it—from one relationship to another. As Dewey says, in a characteristically Jamesian way:

> The trouble lies in the inadequacy of our present psychological knowledge…which, joined to spontaneous interest in 'inner' life, has set off psychological subject-matter as a separate world of existence, instead of a discovery of attitudes and dispositions involved in the world of common experience. In truth, attitudes, dispositions and their kin, while capable of being distinguished and made concrete intellectual objects, are never separate existences. They are always *of, from, toward*, situations and things.[64]

In "In the Waiting Room" Bishop's young persona recognizes the inherent interrelatedness of herself to her community through language and custom, but she touches only very briefly on the biological underpinnings of those connections—"those awful hanging breasts." Bishop's other work, however, not only seeks, like the previous poem, to capture and explore those conflicting states of divided consciousness—the sense of how much the world "outside" is, as Ashbery suggests, already a part of the world "inside"—but actively seeks to reconcile that sense of divided consciousness through an assertion of the more complete and much more readily noticeable interrelatedness that exists at the heart of aesthetic life "below the human scale," an inclination only hinted at in the previous poem.

Like Moore, Bishop has an interest in the fundamental interrelatedness of animal life, and this interrelatedness is precisely what the philosopher Thomas Alexander has called Dewey's concept of the "embodied mind." For Alexander, the idea of the embodied mind comes directly out of philosophical problems related to the idea of meaning. How, for instance, is meaning actually produced in the world and how does it function socially? For Dewey, Alexander argues, all meaning is grounded in both biological activity *and* aesthetic experience. As Alexander says

[64] EN (238)

"aesthetic expression presents us with a *paradigmatic* case of meaning rather than a peripheral one, as it has so often been regarded" (emphasis added).[65] In other words, Dewey's concept of meaning and knowledge cannot be separated from his ideas about environment and aesthetic experience. Meaning, and by extension what we think of as subjective consciousness, is neither an *apriori* faculty, nor the expression of some inner spirit, but is, by a decidedly Darwinian turn, the entirely new and original product of the interactions that take place between creatures and their environment. Like Moore's "Paper Nautilus," whose treasured load of eggs is a completely original and new addition to the world, meaning is always in the process of becoming through our biological and social interactions with an environment. As Alexander says "meaning was to be understood as the symbolic *use* of biological gestures toward the end of coordinating social action. The individual needed to be able to take a social standpoint or perspective in order to interpret himself." Subjectivity, in other words, develops out of biological being and along with language and symbolic thought not separate from it or previous to it.

In Bishop's poetry these more primitive "biological gestures"—for Dewey the groundwork of all meaning—are examined through her incessant use of animal imagery as an exploration of the social function and value of meaning more broadly, how a poem makes a change in the world through meaning, or how the everyday experiences that are the underpinnings of poetry operate in the world. Like Moore and Dewey, Bishop saw animal life and its relation to environment as the ground for any larger discussions of aesthetic life, and by extension social meaning, and Bishop's poetry explores with incredible accuracy the sense of organic unity that is at the heart of that aesthetic experience.

[65] Thomas Alexander. *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*. New York: NY UP, 1987

Not surprisingly, Ashbery's review also offers a good place to begin an investigation of Bishop's interest in the "embodied mind." In his review Ashbery notes the importance of an often-overlooked series of poems, originally written in 1967, and first published in the 1969 *Collected Poems*, titled "Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics." The poem is really a series of three interconnected prose poems, each depicting the thoughts and actions of a different and unique oversized tropical creature: the "Giant Toad," the "Strayed Crab," and the "Giant Snail." Just as the three prose poems make for a cohesive whole, the actions of the three creatures overlap so that experiences in one poem—the crab tapping his giant claw on the snail's shell, for instance—are explored and often mis-interpreted by the creatures in the other poems. For Ashbery, of course, the poem is yet another example of Bishop's preoccupation with the "divided singleness of experience."

> One can smile at the way that these creatures imperfectly perceive their habitat, but their dilemma is ours too, for we too confusedly feel ourselves to be part thing and part thought. And 'we'd rather have the iceberg than the ship/ although it meant the end of travel.'[66]

Ashbery is, perhaps obliquely, conflating the ideas of two different poems here, but his reference to Bishop's poem "The Imaginary Iceberg" is telling because it reveals, metaphorically, the importance of Dewey's concept of unitary organic experience. We would prefer some kind of fixed truth, what Ashbery calls the "inert thingness," of our undivided selves (Dewey's concept of "Body-Mind"), but we are forever frustrated in this effort.

The poem, however, despite this frustration, is also a paean to the very concept of the embodied mind, looking at the way that meaning and value evolve out of the most fundamental and basic biological activities. The creatures of these three poems do indeed mistakenly feel themselves to be part thing and part thought, but this confusion is the direct result of the kind of

[66] Ashbery: "The Complete Poems."

self-reflection and subjectivity that develops from communicating with others. Although Bishop is interested in exploring this split; she is equally interested in the aesthetic experience of animal life that precedes this division as a source of new potentially transformative meaning. Indeed, this is really the ideal state of aesthetic apprehension, and all of the creatures in Bishop's poem seem continually on the verge of discovering some new and wonderful relation to the world, new words, new forms of description—"perhaps the droplets on my mottled hide are pretty, like dewdrops," says the toad—even as they struggle to interpret the actions of others and to articulate themselves, for each interprets the world through their unique biological engagement with environment. "I live, I breathe, by swallowing," says the giant toad; "withdrawal is always best," argues the giant snail; while the strayed crab, arrogant as he is, admires "compression, lightness, and agility, all rare in this loose world."[67]

For Bishop, like Dewey, the physical body, the "thingness" of our being, the "iceberg" as it were, was the beginning of all meaning and interaction with the world. As Alexander says "The inhabitation of the lived body is our first work of art. But it is only as we strive to transform the body into a participant in community that it acquires a significant or expressive life." This was, of course, a fact all too often overlooked by other philosophers, who tended to think of meaning as little more than symbols and intellectual structures developed through a process of hermetic logic, overlooking the important and inescapable biological underpinnings of consciousness. Knowledge and meaning are the products of two things: natural being and interaction. Knowledge is highly contingent and grounded in our animal natures, and not somehow separate, above, or *a priori*. Bishop understood the vital philosophical importance of this interactive sensual experience and her poetry, through its intense attention to the senses and the very "thingness" of being, enacts this idea repeatedly. "Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics" offers a

[67] EBCP (39)

perfect example of this interrelatedness of experience, meaning, and expression, and in its overlapping structure creates a field of social interaction, an environment of the poem in which the important relationships between beings are more easily recognizable.

> The lichen's gray, and rough to my front feet. Get down. Turn facing out, it's safer. Don't breathe until the snail gets by. But we go traveling the same weathers.
> Swallow the air and mouthfuls of cold mist. Give voice, just once. O how it echoed from the rock! What a profound, angelic bell I rang! (*From* "Giant Toad")

> Cheer up, O grievous snail. I tap your shell, encouragingly, not that you will ever know about it
> And I want nothing to do with you, either, sulking toad. Imagine, at least four times my size and so vulnerable…I could open your belly with my claw. (*from* "Strayed Crab")

> That toad was too big, too, like me. His eyes beseeched my love. Our proportions horrify our neighbors.
> Rest a minute; relax. Flattened to the ground, my body is like a pallid, decomposing leaf. What's that tapping on my shell? Nothing. Let's go on. (*from* "Giant Snail")[68]

Through this tripartite structure, the sequence not only examines each animal's unique experience but stresses the importance of the relationships between them. As Frances Dickey, one of the only critics to recognize the explicitly Deweyan and Darwinian implications of this poem, says:

> Each creature's sense of his world is shaped by the exigencies of his body, it is true: a rainy day means droplets on his back to the toad, a damp surface to the crab, and shiny streams of falling water to the snail. But the differences among their perspectives don't add up to three different worlds; what the creatures tell us is that they inhabit the same rainy world. There is a fact registered by each and confirmed by the others: rain.[69]

Although Dickey is largely concerned with examining Bishop's concept of what she calls a "mind-independent reality," her analysis helps us to understand the ways in which this poem exemplifies Dewey's notion of the absolute interconnectedness of creature and environment, even when the environment includes the thoughts and actions of other creatures.

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[68] EBCP (139-142)
[69] Frances Dickey. "Bishop, Darwin, Dewey: What Other People Know." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol 44, No. 2. (Summer, 2003), p. 325.

Indeed, what Bishop describes in these poems is the movement from "body" as a mere receiver of sensations to what Dewey calls "body-mind," where

> body-mind simply designates what actually takes place when a living body is implicated in situations of discourse, communication and participation. In the hyphenated phrase body-mind, 'body' designates the continued and conserved, the registered and cumulative operation of factors continuous with the rest of nature, inanimate as well as animate; while mind designates the characters and consequences which are differential, indicative of features which emerge when 'body' is engaged in a wider, more complex and interdependent situation.[70]

In other words, meaning and culture more broadly are grounded in and emerge from the experiences of the body: they are its outgrowth through interactions within an environment and not something separate from it. This particular interrelatedness of the physical organism with its environment, a fact that Ashbery only hints at, is central to Bishop's work and this state of absolute interconnectedness is perhaps paradoxically both the source and the desired end of her poetics.

VI "ENDLESS ASSENTS:" EPIPHANY AS CONSUMMATORY EXPERIENCE

"I stared and stared/ and victory filled up/ the little rented boat" [71]
—Elizabeth Bishop, "The Fish"

Although the ideas explored in "Rainy Season Sub-Tropics" share vast similarities with Dewey's concept of the embodied mind, providing an example of the ways in which meaning is not only socially, but also biologically grounded, the creatures of the poem remain subjectively self-divided, unable to recognize their own contributions to the experience of their environments. They experience the world as animals completely integrated with their environments, but they do not have "*an* experience" of that interrelatedness. Their experience is without an active consciousness, leaving them ignorant of their own contributions. Aesthetic experience, in

[70] EN (285)
[71] EBCP (42)

Dewey, as in Moore and Bishop often enacts the exact opposite movement that we see in "Rainy Season: Sub-Tropics." Instead of moving towards a sense of dividedness and singleness, which language and meaning necessarily inaugurate, aesthetic experience in Bishop and Moore moves instead towards a conscious sense of the complete interrelatedness of "animal life below the human scale." For Bishop, the recognition of these moments of integration is frequently explored and enacted in her poetry. From "The Sandpiper" to "The Fish," "The "Moose," "The Filling Station," and "The Armadillo," each poem captures the movement toward a recognition of the essential interrelatedness between organism and environment at the heart of aesthetic experience. Consider, for example, Bishop's short and often overlooked poem "The Sandpiper."

> The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
> and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
> He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
> in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.
>
> The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
> of interrupting water comes and goes
> and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
> He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.
>
> —Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
> where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
> rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
> he stares at the dragging grains.
>
> The world is a mist. And then the world is
> minute and vast and clear. The tide
> is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
> His beak is focused; he is preoccupied,
>
> looking for something, something, something.
> Poor bird, he is obsessed!
> The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
> mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.[72]

[72] EBCP (131)

Much like Moore's "Paper Nautilus," this is a poem about the integration of human and animal forms of aesthetic experience. The poem is also a fine explication, in brief, of Dewey's broader concept of experience more generally. For Dewey, aesthetic experience as "*an* experience" is like a river; it has a flow that is permeated by the quality of that particular experience, whether it be eating a meal, catching a fish, or finishing a piece of sculpture. "*An* experience" is always united and defined by whatever pervading quality distinguishes it from the greater flow of more general experience. Each experience of this kind is a consummation rather than merely a cessation; it leads somewhere rather than simply ending, it is whole and complete rather than broken or ruptured. What Dewey calls the "flow" of our experience more broadly is composed of many individual moments of experience. In this sense Deweyan experience is not unlike William James's idea of consciousness as a flow which is nevertheless constructed of a series of abrupt "flights and perchings."[73] For James these perchings are *substantive* states made possible only by the *transitive* moments that lead each to each. For Dewey, each of those "flights and perchings" as it were, is what he would call "*an* experience." The transitive moments are moments of active doing, while the substantive moments are the moments of undergoing and relation that make future perchings a meaningful part of the larger stream of experience. It is in the piling up of these relations that experience and aesthetic life is constructed as a flow. As Dewey says in Art as Experience: "each resting place in experience is an undergoing in which is absorbed and taken home the consequences of prior doing, and, unless the doing is that of utter

[73] William James famously describes this phenomenon in Chapter XI of *Psychology* titled "The Stream of Conscious" where he writes: "When we take a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is the different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest." (*Writings, 1878-1899*. New York: Library of America, 1992 p. 158).

caprice or sheer routine, each doing carries in itself meaning that has been extracted and conserved."[74]

The sandpiper, in its seemingly obsessive search for food, captures an extreme example of the general flow of experience. The bird moves through a series of perchings, as it were, where each time the waves recede back into the ocean, the world becomes "minute and vast and clear." These three qualities, minute, vast, and clear, remind us at once of the close scientific attention necessary for understanding the larger integration of things. Each receding wave offers a new vision of clarity, of how the large and the minute, the tiny grains of sand, and the vast expanses of the beach are all integrated into one another. This vision is not what we would normally think of as aesthetic, however, since the bird, we assume has little knowledge of this relation; for him, like the creatures in "Rainy Season Sub-Tropics," it simply is. But as Dewey says in his chapter on "Ethereal Things," the feelings we experience in profound and even mundane moments of consummation and sudden clarity, have their grounding, in the most strict and scientific sense, in primitive animal experience.

> I do not see any way of accounting for the multiplicity of experiences of this kind (something of the same quality being found in every spontaneous and uncoerced esthetic response), except on the basis that there are stirred into activity resonances of dispositions acquired in primitive relationships of the living being to its surroundings, and irrecoverable in distinct or intellectual consciousness.[75]

This seemingly obsessive bird, in his search for food, lives life on the "qui vive," as Dewey says, aware of even the slightest disturbances and differences in the shifting sands he observes, occasionally encountering as a result the beauty of "quartz grains, rose and amethyst." If we are tempted as readers to dismiss these obsessive observations as merely descriptions of instinct devoid of all aesthetic properties, it is important to note that this is not the only time this image

[74] AE (62)
[75] AE (35)

appears in Bishop's work. This sandpiper interestingly has its human corollary in one of Bishop's much earlier and sadly overlooked works of prose fiction: "The Sea and Its Shore." Originally published in 1937, the story describes the almost religious activity of an imaginary beach comber who lives in a small shack on the beach and whose only job is to collect and remove the growing piles of papers that litter the sand. His head," she says "in the small cloud of light made by his lantern, was constantly bent forward, while his eyes searched the sand, or studied the pages and fragments of paper that he found…Papers that did not look interesting at first glance he threw into his bag; those he wanted to study he stuffed into his pockets"[76] Like the sandpiper of Bishop's poem, Edwin Boomer, the protagonist of Bishop's story, searches obsessively for some meaning among the world, which presents itself to him, not surprisingly, as printed words, just as, for the sandpiper it is a series of sand grains awash in the surf.

This remarkably similar image, written a full thirty years prior to "The Sandpiper," reveals, as does so much of Marianne Moore's work, the fundamentally animal nature of aesthetic experience. Indeed, it seems clear that this story was likely the impetus for Bishop's later poem, since it actually contains in embryonic form the central image of the 1965 poem.

> Boomer held up the lantern and watched a sandpiper rushing distractedly this way and that.
>
> It looked to his strained eyesight, like a point of punctuation against the 'rounded, rolling waves.' It left fine prints with its feet. Its feathers were speckled; and especially on the narrow hems of the wings appeared marks that looked as if they might be letters, if only he could get close enough to read them.[77]

This sense of "reading the world," of finding the right perspective, the right language, the right word, naturalizes the poetic process.[78] Just as the naturalist defines and discovers the truth of the

[76] *The Collected Prose* (172)
[77] *Ibid* (178)
[78] Such acts of reading nature of course immediately call to mind Ralph Waldo Emerson's great essay of 1836, and no doubt Emerson, as Patricia Wallace argues, would have greatly appreciated the "wildness" of Bishop's work. Wallace, Patricia. "The Wildness of Elizabeth Bishop." *The Sewanee Review*. Vol 93 No 1, Winter, 1985.

world around him through close observation, the poet finds in language also the key to the world around her.

This attention to detail and the importance of observation captures well the idea of Bishop's own explicitly Darwinian poetics of attention. This Darwinian poetics is perhaps best summed up in a letter that Bishop wrote to her friend Anne Stevenson just one year before she wrote "The Sandpiper." In the letter Bishop describes what she calls Darwin's "heroic observations:" saying

> I can't believe we are wholly irrational—and I do admire Darwin!—but reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phase, and one feels the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.[79]

This "useless concentration," of course, was in fact quite useful for generating poetry, as Bishop's work at this same time reveals.

The sandpiper's greatest virtue after all, is the intensity of his vision, his ability to pay attention to the world around him even as it continually explodes and evaporates under his feet. Although it is hard to find any one particular moment of consummation in this poem, it points nevertheless, in its final lines to the possibility of redemptive and consummatory experience, that feeling of "sliding giddily off into the unknown," as always just below the surface. There is in each ebb and flow of the tide, the possibility that this "something, something, something," which the bird is obsessively looking for will make itself known. This close observation, as Bishop mentions in her letter to Stevenson, is as much a form of creation as it is a form of discovery, and Bishop is as interested in conflating the two here as she is in many of her other poems. Meanwhile, the consolation of this obsession is made clear by the gems described in the final

[79] Bishop, Elizabeth. *One Art: Letters by Elizabeth Bishop*. Ed. Giroux, Robert. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994.

line. There is in this most ordinary experience of life, in the chaos and madness of wave upon wave, always the possibility of ameliorative pleasure in the small wonders of each individual experience.

While the previous poem captures the relationship between "*an* experience" and the larger flow of experience more broadly speaking, "The Fish" captures well the nature of "*an* experience" as a unique and consummatory moment. Although I have already mentioned "The Fish" earlier, it is important to return to this poem, since it is one of a handful of characteristic works that have come to define Bishop's poetics of experience. The poem is, like so many of Moore's poems an obvious experiment in scientific accuracy and attention—indeed, as we saw with "The Sandpiper," this level of scientific attention is almost synonymous with Bishop's poetics—but it is also a carefully crafted example of what Dewey called "*an* experience." According to Dewey "experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living." Unlike the inchoate and interrupted flow of experience that we see in "Rainy Season Sub-Tropics," and "The Sandpiper," we have "*an* experience," says Dewey, only

> when the material experienced runs it course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency (42).

Although always part of the larger stream of common experience, "*an* experience" inevitably results in consummation, or the fulfillment of whatever impulse, need, or quality is behind that experience. In Bishop, this impulse, this need is, in a complicated and explicitly self-referential way, always toward an understanding and performance of aesthetic experience itself. Like the

other great American poet of experience, Emily Dickinson, Bishop's poetry is, underneath all of its scientific attention to the world, primarily interested in the generation of states of aesthetic significance. These moments of consummation are almost always the result of the speaker's own realization of the implicit fullness of meaningful experience in ordinary action, something like James Schuyler's consummatory poem, "February," where, simply looking across his desk and out the window he says: "I can't get over/ how it all works in together."[80] That these similar moments in Bishop are almost inevitably the result of close, scientific observations of animal life is no accident, since for Dewey, Moore, and Bishop, animal life in its most ordinary and uncomplicated state represents the very foundations of aesthetic experience.

In "The Fish" we see precisely how the general flow of experience, as Dewey describes it, grows, evolves, and develops into "*an* experience" of joyful, almost ecstatic consummation. The poem begins, innocuously enough, with the speaker describing quite frankly and matter of factly, her most recent catch:

> I caught a tremendous fish
> and held him beside the boat
> half out of water, with my hook
> fast in a corner of his mouth.
> He didn't fight.
> He hadn't fought at all.
> He hung a grunting weight,
> Battered and venerable
> And homely.

The tone here is extremely prosaic, almost intentionally muted, as if to say, this was not an especially significant event; but there are already in these first lines tell-tale signs of something unusual at work. The fish is "tremendous," so large in fact that he can only be held "half out of water," and the hook is not merely in the creature's mouth, but "fast in a corner of his mouth," suggesting the flesh might not have been able to otherwise withstand the "grunting weight" of

[80] Schuyler, James. *Collected Poems.* New York: FSG, 1993. (4)

his own body, and either line or jaw would have been broken or torn. The fish seems to have lost its very will to live, and yet, "battered" and "homely," it is still at the end a "venerable" specimen of the species and this event is, as it begins to develop, more meaningful than it first appears.

It is upon this sense of the venerableness of the fish that the poem really turns, for the rest of the poem offers a detailed, if at times bizarre, examination of the creature's physical and spiritual virtues. He is, like Bishop herself, a tough and determined fighter; having narrowly avoided death more than once, he is wise and Bishop seems to admire his fierce determination to live, just as she must have felt a similar determination to carry on in the face of so much personal loss and ruin. Indeed, the years of Bishop's life leading up to this poem were marred by death, alcoholism, and quarrels with friends, including Moore. But the fish is much more than merely a metaphor for her own troubles. It is, first and foremost a "real" fish, with real lice, real barnacles, and real "rags of green weed," hanging from its fins.

> …Here and there
> his brown skin hung in strips
> like ancient wallpaper,
> and its patter of darker brown
> was like wallpaper:
> shapes like full blown roses
> stained and lost through age.
> He was speckled with barnacles,
> fine rosettes of lime,
> and infested
> with tiny white sea-lice,
> and underneath two or three
> rags of green weed hung down.

Although there is no consensus about exactly what kind of fish this was it seems likely that it was what is today commonly called a "Goliath Grouper," which were extremely common in Key West Florida and the Bahamas. These grouper can reach enormous weights, and have a mottled, almost striped coloration with "pattern[s] of darker brown," that might very accurately

be described as resembling "ancient wallpaper." The "Goliath Grouper" also has an enormous lower jaw that juts out slightly and eyes, which, in the bigger specimens would be much larger than a human's eye. Whether or not Bishop actually caught such a fish, it seems clear from her specific descriptions that she had at least witnessed one close up. Bishop, however, knew more about this fish than what you would find in any angler's guide, for the poem moves from this kind of close description of the fish's exterior to a contemplated description of his interior structure.

> I thought of the coarse white flesh
> packed in like feathers,
> the big bones and the little bones,
> the dramatic reds and blacks
> of his shiny entrails,
> and the pink swim-bladder
> like a big peony.

This close, scientific observation builds to an almost ecstatic pitch as the speaker observes every element of the fish, from his entrails to his "yellowed" irises and "the mechanism of his jaw." Like the poem "Cirque d'Hiver," from the same collection *North & South*, there is an intense connectedness between the speaker and this animal, and it is precisely when this seemingly paradoxical moment of sympathetic and scientific observation reaches its apex that the poem breaks open[81]. Something important has been discovered here, and as she turns the fish around, "like the tipping of an object toward the light," she sees the "five old pieces of fish-line," attached to his lip. These fish-lines, she says, are "like medals with their ribbons/ frayed and wavering," and the observation of this unique and revealing detail unites all of the previously dissolute descriptions of the fish, as the complex quality that pervades all of them coheres into a sense of "victory."

[81] In "Cirque d'Hiver," Bishop has a very similar encounter with a mechanical horse: "Facing each other rather desperately—/ his eye is like a star—/ we stare and say, 'Well, we have come this far.'"

I stared and stared
And victory filled up
The little rented boat,
From the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

This victory, however, importantly, has less to do with successfully catching this fish than it does with the deep sense of personal, spiritual, and, most importantly, biological interrelatedness between herself and it. Clearly the poet has recognized some not insignificant part of herself in this oversized creature, and as the poem breaks away from the close focus on the fish and the relationship between observer and object, as the poem cinematically moves away from the speaker, revealing the larger picture, the boat, the engine, and the rainbow inflected water; the reader is given a glimpse of the ecstatic moment that results from this close sympathetic observation. Everything "works in together" here, and this moment of consummation as a uniquely transformative aesthetic experience distinct from the larger flow of common experience, is exemplified by the sudden recognition of these rainbows. Everything in these final lines is pervaded by this sense of victory, where victory is simply the experience of the complete interrelatedness between the speaker and her world and the sheer meaningfulness implicit in her close attention to the redeeming quality of experience itself, how her interactions with that world are an integral and transformative part of the world.

VII "SOME AFFLUENCE IF ONLY HALF PERCEIVED"

His self and the sun were one/ And his poems, although makings of his self,/ Were no less makings of the sun.

—Wallace Stevens, "The Planet on the Table"

The poetry of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop exemplifies the close interrelatedness between creature and environment that Dewey was also articulating in his aesthetic philosophy. Responding to the events of their time and seeking out a rationale for the value and importance of poetry in a world dominated by industry and war, both poets saw art and life as deeply interdependent, and both articulated a pragmatic and naturalist poetics that valued precision and close observation as a means of using and manifesting the aesthetic impulses implicit in ordinary animal experience. Although I have focused exclusively on the poetry of Moore and Bishop, it is important to recognize that this poetics was not something completely new or revolutionary; like the creatures that they wrote about, their work evolved organically, out of the soil of which it was a part, and their poetry represents the culmination of a largely pragmatist American philosophical outlook that had found its latest, most intense, and most original expression in the aesthetic philosophy of John Dewey. Just like Moore and Bishop, many of the other American modernist poets, including Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein, steeped in this American grain, were also responding similarly to the culmination of these cultural and philosophical developments. Among these, however, it is Wallace Stevens' poetry that most explicitly and forcefully explores and articulates the importance of the necessary tension and resistance that underlies and makes possible aesthetic experience. In the following chapter I will examine more closely Dewey's concepts of tension and resistance, examining how these very same ideas can be seen in the deeply philosophical poetry and prose of Wallace Stevens.

3
"THE TANG OF OVERT CONFLICT:" WALLACE STEVENS AND THE POETICS OF RESISTANCE

"Neither a world wholly obdurate and sullen in the face of man nor one so congenial to his wishes that it gratifies all desires is a world in which art can arise" [1]
—John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

I "A MAN IN THE BODY OF A VIOLENT BEAST"

"The poetical, in whatever medium, is always a close kin of the animistic."[2]
—John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

"The angelic ones/ Speak of the soul, the mind. It is/ An animal."[3]
—Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

In her two volume biography of Wallace Stevens, Joan Richardson recounts one particularly revealing moment in the poet's life. A friend of the great art collector, Walter Arensberg, and a regular visitor to his New York City apartment, Stevens often recorded in great detail descriptions of the many paintings, sculptures, and artifacts he had seen on display in the Arensbergs' living room. Stevens, it turns out, was especially fond of the works by Brancusi and Villon. However, according to Richardson, Stevens was repulsed by the many pre-Colombian artifacts and sculptures that make up a large part of the Arensberg collection, declaring such work to be "completely hideous."

> In this atmosphere Stevens' strong negative reaction to the pre-Colombian pieces was just as valuable in revealing attitudes and thus contributing to the substance of his work as his positive reaction to Villon or to any of the other things that he liked. In some ways it was perhaps even more valuable because it precisely circumscribed an area of human experience that he was wholly unwilling to consider. In terms of the overt bestiality and violence that he despised in pre-Colombian art, contrasted with the hidden bestiality and violence in his poetry—and especially evident in *Harmonium*—his harsh judgment and refusal to examine both the pieces and his perception are very instructive.[4]

[1] AE (341)
[2] AE (36)
[3] WSCPP (142)
[4] Richardson, Joan. *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years.* New York: Beech Tree, 1985. (471)

This strong reaction, as Richardson correctly intuits, reveals much more than merely a preference for modernist art. After all, much of the underlying form of modernist sculpture and painting were deeply influenced by the study of African and pre-Colombian works. Instead, Stevens' aversion reveals a deep sensitivity to and strong awareness of the bond between human and non-human animal life. As many of his poems such as "Earthy Anecdote" and "Jouga," reveal, Stevens was, like Marianne Moore, fascinated by the thin line separating human and animal experience. The idea that such a fascination would have manifested itself negatively in response to Arnsberg's collection of pre-Colombian works is no surprise given the still-strong social and philosophical aversion to serious considerations of animal life (many of Arnsberg's pieces were of serpents, jaguars, and other animals) and, as Richardson explains, Stevens' sense of his own barely contained impulse for destruction and violence.[5] This other less refined and less abstract side of Stevens' poetics has been often overlooked. Dewey's philosophy, however, helps us to better understand the degree to which what Richardson calls Stevens' "rude aesthetic" was grounded in a particularly naturalist approach to poetry as aesthetic experience.

Despite the playfulness of his lyrics, his interest in animal life, and his sometimes exotic subject matter, Wallace Stevens was one of a handful of American poets, including Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams, who, regardless of the complexity of their work, openly valued and celebrated the aesthetic power and potential of the ordinary and the commonplace. From the simple lyricism of *Harmonium*, and *Parts of A World*, "celebrating the marriage of flesh and air," to the philosophically dense, but still intensely sensual work of *The Auroras of Autumn* and "the inevitable knowledge" of the "plain sense of things" in *The Rock*, Stevens' entire body of work is invested in exploring and detailing the intricacies of the everyday

[5] For more on the pre-Colombian works in the Arensberg collection see: *Louise & Walter Arensberg Collection: Pre-Columbian Sculpture*. Ed George Kubler. Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1954.

and "finding what will suffice" in that "freshness of transformation." Although intensely philosophical, Stevens' work remains engaged with ordinary experience on a deeply sensual level where the emotional and the intellectual, the human and the animal are fully integrated.

Indeed, Stevens' poetry, with its central conviction that "the theory/ Of poetry is the theory of life," is a testament to Dewey's argument that art is always fundamentally a product of the encounter between live creature and its environment. As Dewey says in the opening pages of *Art as Experience*: "in order to understand the meaning of artistic products, we have to forget them for a time, to turn aside from them and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as esthetic. We must arrive at the theory of art by means of a detour."[6] The logic behind this argument: that we must temporarily forget art in order to better experience and understand it, is tantalizingly close to the concept, expressed in all of Stevens' work, that in order to experience a richer and more satisfying reality, we must first be willing to strip bare our experiences of life and that we must regularly return "To a plain sense of things." If the theory of poetry is the theory of life, it must be equally true that the theory of life is the theory of poetry; the two are inevitably and finally inseparable. "His soil is man's intelligence," wrote Stevens in "The Comedian as the Letter C," and just as "Mountain peaks do not float unsupported," but are, as Dewey explains, merely "the earth in one of its manifest operations," art is the manifestation of aesthetic experiences that are both literally and figuratively grounded in the soil of human experience.[7] Art is not a realm separate from the affairs of the ordinary, but an extension and elaboration of its most meaningful and beautiful moments.

[6] AE (10)
[7] AE (9)

Central to his examination and elaboration of the ordinary, was Stevens' deep fascination with the power and potential of animal life, which he shared with poets like Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. For Stevens, the aesthetic, the poetic, and the natural all partake of the same source of power, and the poet at his best is often more like an animal than an angel or philosopher. If "Poetry is a Destructive Force" as one of Stevens' poems attests, it is because it is the product of aesthetic experiences that are grounded in animal life: because it is, as Stevens says, like a lion that "sleeps in the sun;" "it can kill a man." Indeed Stevens' work challenges, in much the same way that Moore's did, the precious distinctions between man and beast, poetry and life, and reality and imagination, offering instead an account of poetry that is firmly grounded in a shared animal experience of the body-mind and its relationship to the environment. Moore's first version of "Poetry," and Stevens' "Poetry is a Destructive Force" are two good examples of this relationship. Both poems explicitly conflate aesthetic experience and poetry with the natural world of animal life. From Moore's description of the genuine in "Poetry" to Stevens' "man in the body of a violent beast," both poets make the argument that poetry is as much an affair of the body as it is of the intellect. Indeed, "Poetry is a Destructive Force" provides an especially direct and explicit example of the relationship between poetry and the violence of animal life that both reifies and reiterates Stevens' concept of the imagination as a "violence from within that protects us from a violence without."

> That's what misery is,
> Nothing to have at heart.
> It is to have or nothing.
>
> It is a thing to have,
> A lion, an ox in his breast,
> To feel it breathing there.
>
> Corazon, stout dog,
> Young ox, bow-legged bear,
> He tastes its blood, not spit.

He is like a man
In the body of a violent beast.
Its muscles are his own…

The lion sleeps in the sun.
Its nose is on its paws.
It can kill a man.

This poem, appropriately published as the second poem in *Parts of a World* and preceded only by the "Long-tailed ponies" of "Parochial Theme" with its final call to "Piece the world together, boys, but not with your hands," was composed shortly after Stevens had completed his now well-known essay on Moore: "A Poet That Matters." In that essay Stevens describes, among other things, Moore's extensive use of animal imagery in her work, listing all fifteen of the different creatures mentioned in "The Steeple-Jack," arguing that in that poem "Miss Moore makes the most lavish snake-charmer look like a visitor." What is most striking however is Stevens' close reading of Moore's "Poetry," which, understood in this context, turns out may have been an important influence on "Poetry is a Destructive Force." About that poem, and Moore's poetic sensibility more broadly, Stevens remarks: "If the conception of the poet as a creature ferocious with ornamental fury survives anywhere except in the school books, it badly needs a few pungent footnotes."[8] This characterization of poetry and the poet as a "creature ferocious with ornamental fury" sounds a good deal like the personification of poetry as "a man/ In the body of a violent beast," and captures as well as any line from the poem, its central argument: that poetry and poets have a power that far exceeds the mere power to inform, delight, and amuse. Poetry is not only creative, but is, as the title suggests, fundamentally and positively destructive, devouring even in its ferocity. As Angus Cleghorn has detailed in his book-length study of Stevens' critique of rhetoric, Stevens felt that his poetry had the power to destroy as

[8] "On One of Marianne Moore's Poems"

well as create; it had, as Shelley said of Mont Blanc, the power "to repeal large codes of fraud and woe" and to fundamentally change the way that we see and thus think about the world around us.[9] But more than merely detailing the destructive or decreative power of poetry, this poem, along with "Earthy Anecdote," and "Jouga," two more poems about ferocious felines, are themselves the "pungent footnotes" necessary for a greater understanding of that ornamental animal fury that characterizes so much of Stevens' poetry and which is at the heart of Dewey's aesthetics.

The conflation between man and beast exacted in the fourth and fifth stanzas of "Poetry is a Destructive Force," argues in effect that the aesthetic experience of poetry is grounded, not in some divine or spiritual faculty, but most grossly and viscerally in our animal being. One telling example of this is the way that Stevens carefully chooses in this poem to describe the lion as if it were a man rather than the more expected trope of describing a man as if he were a lion. The poet, in this sense, is not merely like a beast, but the beast is like the poet and of the same noble and powerful nature. This is an important choice, for it is precisely the ascription of animal traits to human action that tends to denigrate the animal, suggesting that such creatures are somehow merely metaphorical and derivative of human needs and expectations. For humans to behave like animals, on the other hand is generally considered a debasement of the human. Stevens' poem challenges this dichotomy. By making the "beast" the vehicle for the simile, the animal here is instead conflated with the human; it is "like a man," but in the body of "a violent beast," a rhetorical move that in this case strangely elevates both man and animal. The description becomes even more intensely ambiguous in the phrase "its muscles are his own," where it is—not without accident—nearly impossible to distinguish between which muscles belong to the lion and which to the man. This line echoes a similar sentiment found in another of

[9] Cleghorn, Angus J. *Wallace Stevens' Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

Moore's poems, "Efforts of affection," which was published a full six years after *Parts of a World*. In language reminiscent of Stevens' "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" with its "warty squashes, streaked and rayed" Moore explores the very same concept, arguing that

Truly as the sun
Can rot or mend, love can make one
Bestial or make a beast a man

Drawing upon one of Stevens' favorite tropes (that of the power of the sun), Moore compares this transformative solar energy to the power of "Love's extraordinary-ordinary stubbornness," and in the process eliminates the false distinctions between the worlds of the human and the animal, the material and the intellectual, and the extraordinary and the ordinary. Both man and animal are capable of bestial behavior, and both are in turn equally capable of love and affection.

In "Jouga," published just five years later in *Transport to Summer*, the complex inter-relationship of experience between man, beast, and art that is at the heart of Dewey's aesthetic, becomes even more explicit. There Stevens conflates the man and his guitar, saying:

> …There is Ha-eé-me, who sits
> And plays his guitar. Ha-eé-me is a beast.
>
> Or perhaps his guitar is a beast or perhaps they are
> Two beasts. But of the same kind—two conjugal beasts.
> Ha-eé-me is the male beast…an imbecile,
>
> Who knocks out a noise. The guitar is another beast
> Beneath his tip-tap-tap. It is she that responds.
> Two beasts but two of a kind and then not beasts.

Just as in Moore's "Efforts of Affection" and Stevens' "Poetry is a Destructive Force," in "Jouga" there is an intense ambiguity that surrounds the bestial nature of the poem's subject, where the reader is continually encouraged to interrogate the relationship between the words "man," "animal," and "beast." Indeed, the intense questioning that takes place in this poem, where no definition or statement is left to stand for long without contradiction, is itself reflective

of a mind engaged in the project of restoring some kind of equilibrium between these seemingly disparate worlds. Even as he questions the temporary classifications of the objects of the poem, Stevens goes out of his way to show that art, too, even music, is a part of our animal natures, for the guitar and the poet-player, these "conjugal beasts," are intimately linked, married even.

By use of the word-play implicit in "Ha-eé-*me*" (which sounds at once like the Spanish given name "Jaime" and the phrase "hi me,") Stevens, as he so often does, inserts himself, in explicitly self-deprecatory fashion, into his poem. The guitar player—Jaime, perhaps—is both Spaniard and poet. He is the imbecile who "knocks out a noise," but he is also simultaneously the "male beast," the chimerical "man with the blue guitar," whose "claws propound" and whose "fangs/Articulate its desert days." This sense of the animal nature of the artist is reiterated again less explicitly but with the same kind of ingenious word-play in the poem's very title, which sounds a lot like a bastardized, conjugation of the Spanish "jugar," or "to play"—as in to play guitar.[10] Nor is it an accident that this title also simultaneously calls to mind the idea of the "Jaguar," which then appears at the end of the poem.[11]

This obsession with animal life is arguably less explicit in Stevens' work than in Moore's, where nearly every poem is populated with some sort of animal or animal behavior. There are, however, as we've seen, several notable and important examples in Stevens' poetry, all of which reveal a poet deeply engaged with the natural world and the power and violence of animal experience. Stevens' first volume, *Harmonium*, is no exception, and like the other volumes, is littered with references to nature and animal life. It is likely no accident, therefore,

[10] In Spanish, of course, "to play a guitar" is usually *Tocar*. However, it is possible that Stevens may not have been aware of this fact or, more likely, that his choice was deliberately meant to imply a larger form of play, which would include poetry and word-play.

[11] As Joan Richardson notes in *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, these kinds of linguistic disruptions "like emergent properties of his system, his style, run through the corpus." "Each of these instances of flickering/sonic camouflage, like a linguistic Necker cube, imitates how the mind moves" (201-202).

that the book begins with a poem about yet another carnivorous cat.[12] Like the lion of "Poetry is a Destructive Force," and the Jaguar that prowls the jungle at the end of "Jouga," the firecat and the clattering bucks of "Earthy Anecdote" stand simultaneously as symbols of the power of poetry and an imaginatively conceived description of what Stevens insisted were "actual animals."[13] Although Stevens' poetry can at times be highly symbolic, he realized, just as Moore did, that animals had an important place in poetry and art beyond the merely metaphorical or symbolic; that their natural existence as animals, free of metaphorical elaboration, was already a profound source of aesthetic experience and a subject worthy of close attention and admiration. But all objects of experience, inevitably become infused with the meanings we associate with them, and Stevens' firecat is no exception. The image of the firecat captures at once the carnivorous violence and power of "actual animals" in the natural world, while still offering a perfectly conceived objective correlative for an explicitly confrontational poetics. It is as if with this opening poem, Stevens is preparing his readers for the violence of the imagination that is everywhere present in this first volume.

> Every time the bucks went clattering
> Over Oklahoma
> A firecat bristled in the way.
>
> Wherever they went,
> They went clattering,
> Until they swerved
> In a swift, circular line
> To the right,
> Because of the firecat.
>
> The bucks clattered.
> The firecat went leaping,
> To the right, to the left,

[12] Footnote about Book on Stevens, Frost, Moore, Williams and nature.

[13] In a letter to Carl Zigrosser regarding the illustration accompanying the publication of "Earthy Anecdote" Stevens wrote: "Walter Pach's illustration is just the opposite of my idea. I intended something quite concrete: actual animals, not original chaos. Still, it is quite nice as it is. And anyhow, it was very decent of Walter Pach to go to the trouble." LWS (209)

And
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept.

I am not the first critic, however, to note the naturalist tendencies in what may very well be one of Stevens' most important poems.[14] In his essay "An Encounter with the Firecat: Wallace Stevens' 'Earthy Anecdote'" John Miles explores both the naturalist and pragmatic conventions inherent in the poem. In an explicitly Deweyan statement Miles says "Human thought processes are simply a more developed form of animal consciousness," adding that "['Earthy Anecdote'] is a poem with which the Presocratics might feel at home, but its anti-intellectualist primitivism makes it natural to look in the direction of pragmatism and related tendencies." Although Miles never mentions Dewey, his subsequent readings of the influence of Pierce, James, and Santayana on Stevens' poem—although never direct—show how much Stevens' poem was a reflection of and an elaboration upon the naturalist impulses running through American philosophy, the aesthetics of which were so nicely articulated by Dewey. Although much has been made of the fact that there seems to be no such animal as a "firecat," it is clear that Stevens' anecdote is an attempt to capture in poetry, the power and the instinct of the native mountain lion, which in Stevens' imagination becomes the more colorful and colloquial "firecat."[15] Despite Stevens' insistence that this is a poem about actual animals and not a symbolist experiment as early critics of the poem argued, it would hardly be a stretch to suggest, especially at this early stage of his career, that Stevens the poet would have wished this kind of power for himself and would have identified with this bristling creature, whose most

[14] Joan Richardson calls "Earthy Anecdote" "One of [Stevens'] most important poems," noting that it was not only the opening poem for *Harmonium*, but that it was also the opening poem for his 1954 *Collected Poems*.
[15] Although Mountain Lions are rare in Oklahoma today, there is ample evidence that their populations were much larger earlier in the century. For more on this see Pike, Jason, et al. "The Mountain Lion in Oklahoma and Surrounding States." *Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Sciences*. 77:39-42, (1997).

basic biological desires to hunt and feed drive the herds first in one direction, then another. Just as Stevens' poetry was always an attempt to respond to and influence his environment, this firecat responds to the resistances and tensions it finds in its own environment (the unrivaled discipline and self-control of the hunt), and in turn drives the clattering bucks, making of their unordered "clattering," a "swift, circular line." I can think of few images that better capture the way that living and meaningful aesthetic structures are always formed *in* the corporeal and material conditions of animal experience and active participation with the world, as Dewey suggests, and not abstractly or spiritually within the intellect alone.

We see this same confrontational attitude, this same bristling posture in "Bantams in Pine-Woods," another anecdote about the power of nature, except that here it is the woods themselves and not the bantam that does the bristling.

> Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt!
>
> Damned universal cock, as if the sun
> Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.
>
> Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
> Your world is you. I am my world.
>
> You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!
> Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines,
>
> Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,
> And fears not portly Azcan or his hoos.

Instead of controlling and mastering its landscape like the firecat, this "ten-foot poet among inchlings," this "damned universal cock" is confronted with a world of bristling pines that refuse to be silent or submissive in his domineering presence. Unlike the cattle clattering across the plains in "Earthy Anecdote," these "inchlings" will not be moved; they are an emblem of the

fact, as Dewey noted well, that reality is always indifferent, even resistant to our wants and needs.

What is most revealing about this poem, however, is the fact that once again, the source of poetic virility, whether successful or not, is grounded in the animal world, and it is not hard, if one knows anything about Stevens' biography, to see how closely this diminutive rooster and his self-congratulatory "hoos" is more than just a "ten-foot poet among inchlings," but is, in several ways, a self-effacing, self-deprecatory depiction of Stevens the poet "in the body of a violent beast."[16] As Biographer Joan Richardson has pointed out, Stevens' sense of himself as an ungainly giant, out of proportion and ill-suited to parlor life, was a frequent source of insecurity for the poet.[17] This image of the giant, which Stevens was and which he tried to hide, appears throughout the poet's work, and is often associated with the violence of authority and the loss of individuality.[18] It is no surprise then that Stevens would have seen his own giantess as both a source of self-ridicule and a metaphor for the kind of violence of authority that poetry itself helped to resist. In this sense the poet not only sees himself and his relationship to nature as inherently animalistic, but also inherently confrontational, providing an image of the overly ambitious poet-animal frustrated and checked in its progress, an image that must have resonated with Stevens' own self-conception and self-critique at the time of the poem's composition.[19]

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[16] Bantams, of course, are ironically, some of the smallest of chickens.

[17] "Being giantlike as he was—Alfred Kreymborg and others remembered feeling dwarfed by his bulk—was something that contributed a real, physical sense to Stevens' uncertainty about fitting in. This was clear in the incident where he described himself as a clumsy giant after injuring the yellow jacket, as it was in his referring to his body as "that monster." *The Early Years*. (101)

[18] The sea vessel "*The Masculine*" in "Life on a Battleship," and the "inhuman" giants of "Gigantomachia" are two good examples of Stevens' frequent distaste for the large.

[19] Critic Mario D'Avanzo offers a similar critique of the poem, except that for D'Avanzo the bantam-poet is not Stevens but the Emerson of "Nature" and "The Poet." "In the argument, or dialectic, of Stevens' poem, the inchling condemns the chieftain of our major strain in American poetry. He is the Emersonian, transcendental poet-chanticleer." "Emerson and Shakespeare *in* Stevens' 'Bantams in Pine-Woods.'" *American Literature*. Mar 1977, Vol. 49 Issue 1 (103). D'Vanzo's Bloomian conception of Stevens' confrontational relationship with his influences is an apt one, and only reinforces the idea that this poem is itself a kind of morality play about the value of immediate experience and the pitfalls of the transcendental.

Less obvious in this poem, perhaps, but equally central to its message, is the depiction of the pine needles, which although not animals, are an equal part of nature, and offer their own form of resistance, so that these "Appalachian tangs," in their adaptation to their own environment of seed-destroying predators, ironically become the small, rebellious heroes of the poem, adapting to and resisting the pressures of their environment. In this way Stevens depicts just how ferocious and resistant nature itself can be, even to the animals that encounter it in their daily activities. Indeed, in a strange way this poem is a kind of morality play, warning against the self-deceptive and self-aggrandizing excesses of the poet of pure imagination, "as if the sun/ Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail," while simultaneously offering one of Stevens' (and surely one of American poetry's) most extreme examples of pure imaginative reverie. The intense wordplay, which early critics, with the notable exception of Marianne Moore, found largely offensive and dandyish, and the almost absurdist conceit of a native wild rooster that is at once both Aztec prince and portly New England poet, violently confronted by a tribe of pine-needles is almost too much.[20] But the poem is saved by the poet's steady and underlying critique of his own imaginative excesses. Although we may sometimes piece the world together *without* the use of our hands, as Stevens suggests in "Parochial Theme," that does not change the fact that we are still part of an insistent physical world, which we must continually navigate, and which exists in simultaneous interchange with our minds *and* our bodies. These poet inchlings may be the "personal," but as the critic Fred Robinson notes "The inchling asserts his own power both because and in spite of his smallness. He 'bristles' and 'points' the 'tangs' of the pines that dwarf him, as though infused with their own nature, rather than imagining, as the puffed-out Chieftain

[20] Moore found the poem to be one of the many examples of Stevens' unrivaled rhetorical competency, arguing that the poem's depiction of the bantam offered a "characteristically ironic use of scale." In "Conjuries that Endure," *CPMM* (347)

poet does, that the phenomenal world attends him."[21] In other words, Stevens seems to be saying that the point is not to transcend nature but to draw from our relationship with it the power to face the universal. To move too violently and single-mindedly through this world, as the belligerent bantam does, is surely a mistake, but that is precisely the point, for the truly successful animal must always adapt to its circumstances, just as the fire-cat does, leaping "to the right and the left" as needed.

Although Stevens shares Moore's conviction, as evidenced in her work and his, that poetry is at heart an affair of the ordinary experiences of human animals, his fascination with the ordinary and the commonplace differs from Moore and Bishop in so far as he is more explicitly interested in the cultivation of those moments of tension and resistance that drive and transform the undifferentiated flow of experience and give it its character as "an experience." Stevens' vision of animal nature, as we've seen, is arguably much more violent and confrontational, and it is clear that on a certain level even Moore, who, perhaps more than any other poet, shares Stevens' vision of poetry's violent potential, found this underlying ferocity to be a bit unnerving. In her aptly titled review of *Harmonium*, "Well Moused, Lion" Moore ends her general praise for the book with a strange bit of possible wish fulfillment. "In the event of moonlight and a veil to be made gory," says Moore, "[Stevens] would, one feels, be appropriate in this legitimately sensational act of a ferocious jungle animal."[22] The title of Moore's review—which in a very general sense equates Stevens' poetry, and perhaps all poetry, with the stalking of prey—combined with this almost surreal vision of a "veil to be made gory," of a maiden torn to pieces by some "jungle animal," reveals not only the power of Stevens' verse to move, and at least in 1924, to shock, but also says something about Moore's underlying, almost subconscious interest

[21] Robinson, Fred. "Strategies of Smallness: Wallace Stevens and Emily Dickinson" *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.Spring1986, Vol. 10 Issue 1, (27)
[22] CPMM (98)

in this animal violence: an interest that is always seething below the surface of much of her own work. As Robin Schulze details in her book *The Web of Friendship: Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens*, Moore was shocked by the ruder aspects of Stevens' aesthetic, but also oddly attracted to its overall energy and verve.

> Even while Moore chastises Stevens for his wilder moments of poetic impropriety and anxiety, throughout her review she is most apt to praise Stevens for what she claims to despise…Fascinated by the same contradictory and skeptical energy that she finds disturbing, Moore openly admires the exciting motion that results from Stevens' poetic 'violations' as he creates and decreates in turn—slithering free, again and again, of any idea or image…[23]

Like the snake that has "shed its skin upon the floor," this image of Stevens "slithering" between poles of belief and disbelief, reality and imagination, is yet another apt metaphor for a poet whose philosophic thought was always grounded in an animal-like sensuality. While Moore and Bishop both explored and captured many of these same ideas through their close observations of animal life, Stevens not only wrote about animals, but composed an entire poetics of imaginative life that, in its attention to and cultivation of a kind of poetic violence and confrontation, mirrors in remarkable ways, Dewey's explicitly naturalist theory of human aesthetic experience as always an affair of tension and resistance between and within the "live creature" and its environment.

II "FINDING WHAT WILL SUFFICE"

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. [24]

—Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"

> The need that is manifest in the urgent impulsions that demand completion through what the environment—and it alone—can supply, is a dynamic acknowledgement of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings. It is the fate of a living

[23] (46)
[24] "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" Section IV, CP (332).

creature, however, that it cannot secure what belongs to it without an adventure in a world that as a whole it does not own and to which it has no native title.[25]

—John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

As the two passages above make clear, Wallace Stevens and John Dewey both understood (as did Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop) that aesthetic experience is not something that exists independent of our relationship to the environment, but is instead always an immediate response to the inevitable tensions and resistances encountered in that environment. The place in which we live, as Stevens says, is indeed hard "in spite of blazoned days," and as Dewey suggests we have no "native title" to it; it is the site of frequent and perpetual conflict between need and fact, desire and what is possible. It is only out of these often inhospitable circumstances, however, that any kind of art or aesthetic experience can manifest, for As Dewey makes clear, "without resistance from surroundings [we] would have neither feelings nor interests, neither fear nor hope, neither disappointment nor elation. Mere opposition that completely thwarts, creates irritation and rage. But resistance that calls out thought generates curiosity and solicitous care, and, when it is overcome and utilized, eventuates in elation."[26] It is precisely because of the transformative potential of this moment of elation and consummation that both thinkers recognized the value of direct engagement with and even cultivation of resistances, for it is only through our encounters and conflicts with our lived environment that we secure a place for ourselves within the world, however temporary.

The consummation that results from overcoming these resistances, however, was by no means for either thinker an end in itself, but was instead always the beginning of further engagement. The whole process of aesthetic experience, from the sudden impulsions of need, to encountered resistance, and the transformations of consummation, is always part of the larger

[25] AE (65)
[26] AE (65)

ongoing process of life itself, or what Stevens called "the fundamental and endless struggle with fact." A life of permanent bliss and fulfillment, an environment entirely congenial, is not only impossible, but would be entirely without any aesthetic quality and thus without art. As Dewey makes clear:

> We envisage with pleasure Nirvana and a uniform heavenly bliss only because they are projected upon the background of our present world of stress and conflict. Because the actual world, that in which we live, is a combination of movement and culmination, of breaks and re-unions, the experience of a living creature is capable of esthetic quality. The live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his surroundings. The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life.[27]

In other words, to borrow a phrase from William James, life really is "in the transitions," for it is only in those exquisite but temporary moments of consummation that we most deeply experience life as an aesthetic whole. While much of Bishop's work, as I've shown, focuses on those moments of consummation as exemplary, Stevens' work instead focuses on the cultivation of the tensions and resistances that make those moments possible, for Stevens' poetry is a profound example of Dewey's argument that "the time of consummation is also one of beginning anew," and that "Any attempt to perpetuate beyond its term the enjoyment attending the time of fulfillment and harmony constitutes withdrawal from the world."[28]

Indeed, this arguably melancholy realization that every consummation is always the ground for further tension, every poem an opportunity for further revision and renovation, is a vital part of the emotional tenor of much of Stevens' work, including "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where every seeming satisfaction, every resolution of every dialectic, is immediately followed by yet another seemingly irreconcilable emotional or intellectual dilemma. This continual elision of consummation is not unique to "Notes," but appears throughout Stevens' career, including many of the shorter lyrics from *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*. Joseph Riddel,

[27] AE 22
[28] AE 23

one of the earliest and best critics of Stevens' theory of imagination, offers a fine explanation of precisely this aspect in Stevens' work.

> Stevens' dialectic celebrates its own shortcomings, for there is no progressive thesis-antithesis-synthesis but only the one process continuously repeated, coming back always to the invincible presence of the world's otherness and time's destructive impermanence, which are not to be transcended. Thus, the theory (of the interrelation of abstraction and change, imagination and reality, perception and vitality, self and world) is the one permanent reality in a world of flux: the enduring gestalt of life, the comic the mythic-dance that frames human experience and makes life and poetry one analogous process.[29]

As Riddel aptly notes, for Stevens at least, life and poetry were one and the same, part of the larger processes of nature that compose our lived environment, our "reality" as it were. Stevens' poetry never fully escapes the paradoxes he created for it, since it relies at heart upon a recursive tension between the two ideas of reality and imagination as fluctuating definitions of that experience of life. This paradox captures the nature of experience itself, where we are always both making and resisting our environment (*doing* and *undergoing*, as Dewey put it), and was central to Stevens' poetics, for this tension, implicit in all experience, provided him not only with the impetus and the impulsion to make poetry, but also frequently provided him with the subject material for those poems.

The tension between imagination and reality, and the poet's responses to it mark the developing and organic nature of Stevens' thought and provides a source for the temporary but necessary satisfactions that poetry offers. In this way, Stevens' work provides the material for a perpetual transformation of its environment. Among the many forms of adjustment possible in these circumstances is the very act of expression itself, which enters the world in the form of its medium, whether it be stone, marble, oil and pigments, harmonious sounds, or, in the case of poetry, the sound, structure, and meaning of words. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey uses the

[29] Riddel, Joseph N.. "Wallace Stevens' 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.'" Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, Vol. 2, No. 2. (24)

example of a wine press to explain how expression works: "It takes the wine press as well as grapes to ex-press juice, and it takes environing and resisting objects as well as internal emotion and impulsion to constitute an *expression* of emotion."[30] But this act of expression is, importantly, "a construction in time, [and] not an instantaneous emission." In this way, expression is not a one way street, but is simultaneously a doing and an undergoing: "the expression of the self in and through a medium, constituting the work of art, is *itself* a prolonged interaction of something issuing from the self with objective conditions, a process in which both of them acquire a form and order they did not at first possess."[31] These encounters, however, are not limited to the environment of objects but include the tensions generated within individuals and societies, and every consummation, each poem, each new success, each experience that is fruitfully absorbed, inevitably becomes the material for further conflicts.

> Familiar things are absorbed and become a deposit in which the seeds or sparks of new conditions set up a turmoil. When the old has not been incorporated, the outcome is merely eccentricity. But great original artists take a tradition into themselves. They have not shunned but digested it. Then the very conflict set up between it and what is new in themselves and in their environment creates the tension that demands a new mode of expression.[32]

Indeed, as Dewey makes clear, artists not only incorporate the old, but actively cultivate and seek out these moments of tension. "Since the artist cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake but because of their potentialities."[33]

This idea of aesthetic experience as the cultivation and eventual consummation of tension and resistance in Stevens' work is exemplified in one of his most representative poems: "Of Modern Poetry." Here Stevens captures not only the transformative potential of ordinary

[30] AE (70)
[31] AE (71)
[32] AE (163)
[33] AE 21

experience, but directly engages and collapses the dichotomy between body and mind that, for Dewey, had tended to obscure the real meaning and potential of aesthetic experience.

> The poem of the mind in the act of finding
> What will suffice. It has not always had
> To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
> Was in the script.
> Then the theatre was changed
> To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
>
> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time. It has to think about war
> And it has to find what will suffice. It has
> To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
> And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
> With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
> In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
> Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
> Of which, an invisible audience listens,
> Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
> In an emotion as of two people, as of two
> Emotions becoming one. The actor is
> A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
> An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
> Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
> Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
> Beyond which it has no will to rise.

This poem elegantly describes the entire process of Deweyan aesthetic experience, from resistance and tension through to the pleasure of consummation. The cultural theatre, Stevens argues, has been changed; the poetry of the past, which had fruitfully served us so well for so long can no longer satisfy. Like Plato's charioteer (which I will discuss later) it has become "a souvenir," a slight trace or remembrance of something once meaningful and rich, and because of this it is in constant need of reconstruction and readjustment to its times. Therefore, as Stevens argues, modern poetry, if it is to be modern, cannot merely be the repetition of past poets, but must be in and of its world; it must learn the speech of its own place and time and learn to "face

the men of the time and to meet/ The women of the time. It has to think about war," and it must ultimately

> Be *the finding of a satisfaction*, and may
> Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
> Combing. The poem of the act of the mind. (Italics mine)

This intensely secular characterization of the "poem of the act of the mind" as "the finding of a satisfaction" is similar to Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience as a kind of consummation, and as the images here make clear, is really not an "act of the mind" in any commonly understood sense of the word, but is more an act of what Dewey would call the "body-mind." Stevens not only insists on conflating the ordinary and the poetic, the human and the animal, but also the physical and the mental. The act of the mind and the act of the body—skating across a pond, dancing, or combing one's hair—are invariably one and the same. There are no stark divisions in Stevens or Dewey between thinking and action, since both of them realized that the fundamental interactive experience of the aesthetic inevitably meant that thought itself, "the act of the mind," was always an interaction with, and thus a simultaneous transformation of the self and the environment. Like Yeats' vision of "labour" as a "blossoming or dancing" in "Among School Children," it is impossible in this instance to know "the dancer from the dance," and Stevens' description of this process captures perfectly the kind of unitary nature of experience that Dewey was always examining, articulating, and upholding in his own aesthetic philosophy.[34] Indeed, the ordinary everyday experiences described in the final lines of Stevens' poem resonate well with Dewey's descriptions of the "live creature" in *Art as Experience* when he says:

> To understand the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens. …The sources of art in

[34] Yeats, W.B.. *Collected Poems*. New York: Wordsworth Editions, 2000. (185)

> human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals (10).

As Stevens says in the *Adagia*, "poetry is a renovation of experience," and both thinkers were dedicated to the transformation of the ordinary through aesthetic processes. For Dewey, who was always at heart an instrumentalist, art and aesthetic experience provided the surest and most effective means of improving the world simply by expanding the possibilities of ordinary life. Although he believed wholeheartedly in active political engagement and participatory democracy, and although it would be difficult to find a philosopher more immediately engaged with the political questions of his time, Dewey nonetheless shared Stevens' distaste for art that was overtly or rhetorically political, or whose aim was to convince the reader of one political position or another. "'Social reform,'" said Dewey "is conceived in a Philistine spirit, if it takes to mean anything less than precisely the liberation and expansion of the meanings of which experience is capable."[35] Stevens, for many of the same reasons, shared these ideas and felt compelled, as did Dewey, to defend art and poetry from what he considered the impositions of sociological or political obligations. As Stevens' says in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," when it comes to the "sociological or political obligation[s]" of the poet:

> He has none. That he must be contemporaneous is as old as Longinus and I dare say older. But that he *is* contemporaneous is almost inevitable…Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality; that is to say, the imagination and society are inseparable.[36]

For Stevens and Dewey both, poetry and art were, at the most fundamental level, already inevitably contemporaneous, social, and political, and at their best, through their engagement

[35] EN (411)
[36] WSCPP (660)

with ordinary experience, would inevitably provide a model for what Stevens called in an early poem: "How to Live. What to Do."

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Ironically, what is, perhaps most interesting about the many similarities between the aesthetic predispositions of Stevens and Dewey is the fact that there is so little evidence of any direct influence. Although it is possible, and I would argue highly likely, that Stevens was influenced by the writings of Dewey, both thinkers nonetheless seem to have independently and nearly concurrently reached many of the same conclusions about the value and use of aesthetic experience in art and in ordinary life. This is not unusual, since as I've already noted, many of Dewey's ideas had, by the late 1930s become a part of the intellectual environment of American modernism, but it is strange that two thinkers so closely allied in thought would seem to have had so little to say about each other's work. There is no epistolary evidence, for instance, that Stevens had ever read *Art as Experience*, and the archives of Stevens' personal library, although certainly not representative of everything the poet ever read or owned, do not indicate that Stevens had any books at all by Dewey at the time of his death.[37] What Stevens owned or read of Dewey before this is difficult to say. It is possible that he may have read or at least been familiar with the arguments in *Experience and Nature*, arguably Dewey's most influential and widely read philosophical text, and it is likely that he would have been regularly exposed to articles by Dewey and discussions about his work in the many magazines and journals that he subscribed to and, as he himself suggests, dutifully read, sometimes more than once.

As Alan Filreis painstakingly argues, Stevens experienced a significant political sea change in the 1930s, and became involved with, and an avid reader of many of the most progressive magazines and journals of the period, including *The Partisan Review*, *The Nation*,

[37] The archive of Stevens' library, surprisingly, seems to have few books by any of the prominent pragmatists.

The New Republic, and *The New Masses*.[38] Dewey was, of course, one of the leading figures of the progressive movement and was a regular contributor to many of these journals and magazines, so it is possible and highly likely that Stevens may have had several occasions to engage with Dewey's thought. Surprisingly, there is only one, more or less offhanded reference to Dewey in all of Stevens' extant writings. In a 1943 letter to his close friend Henry Church, Stevens says:

> This last weekend I had meant to read with more care the last number of the PARTISAN REVIEW, which I have gone through once, but without quite making everything in it my own. There is an article by John Dewey on Philosophic Naturalism which strikes me as being valuable. The article that precedes it, by Sidney Hook, ought to be good, but somehow isn't, or so it seems to me. He tries to deal with too much, without first having reduced many thoughts to one or two.[39]

The Article referred to here is Dewey's "Anti-Naturalism in Extremis," in which he offers a focused and impassioned critique of anti-naturalism, arguing that anti-naturalism:

> has operated to prevent the application of scientific methods in the whole field of human and social subject matter. It has thereby prevented science from completing its career and fulfilling its constructive potentialities, since it has held the human is extra-natural and hence reserved for organs and methods which are radically different from those that have given man the command he now possesses in all affairs, issues, and questions acknowledged to be natural. It is beyond human imagination to estimate the extent to which undesirable features of the present human situation are connected with the split, the division, confusion, and conflict that is embodied in this half-way, mixed, unintegrated situation in respect to knowledge and attainment of truth (163).[40]

Although this reference to Dewey comes relatively late in Stevens' career, the poet's seeming approval of Dewey's ideas on naturalism, striking him as "valuable," are a good indication that, whether he had read much of Dewey's earlier work, he may have shared many of the same convictions about the importance of the integration of animal life and aesthetics.

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[38] Filreis, Alan. *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*. Princeton: UP, 1991.
[39] LWS (441). The article referred to is "Anti-Naturalism in Extremis," published in *The Partisan Review*, January of 1943.
[40] Dewey, John. *The Essential John Dewey*. Eds. Alexander, Thomas and Hickman, Larry. Indiana: UP, 1998. (163).

Stevens' subsequent critique of Sidney Hook, who was ironically Dewey's most fervent advocate and loyal student, is perhaps even more telling, for it reveals, on a certain level, an even more fundamental connection between the philosophical thought of Stevens and Dewey. As the Dewey scholar Abraham Kaplan argues in his introduction to Dewey's *Art as Experience*, all philosophers have a particular inclination to certain numerical structures, "the number that the philosopher finds most congenial, so that he elaborates or collapses distinctions till he arrives at his magic number." For Dewey these magic numbers, according to Kaplan, were always two and one. "Dyads, like the organism and its environment, means and ends, are an inseparable feature of Dewey's philosophy. Dewey resolves dualisms, not by refusing to countenance the distinctions being drawn by dualists, but by reinterpreting differences thought to be substantive and intrinsic as being instead functional and contextual."[41] This reduction of "many thoughts to one or two," which was missing from Hook's article is also a recurring element of Stevens' thought, where the world is intellectually reduced in large part to the elements of imagination and reality which are themselves simultaneously interrelated and in tension. Stevens does not reduce imagination and reality to separate substances, nor does he simply negate the differences between them, but sees them instead as *qualities* of experience in tension. They are, as Kaplan suggests, *forms of thought* instead of Kantian categories of reality. This shared rhetorical strategy is, in effect, then, a prerequisite for many of the other fundamental similarities between the two thinkers and, as I will show, is central to Stevens' poetics as it's articulated in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," two works that address, each in their own way, the ontological and the political nature of tension and resistance.

Nowhere is the concept of the necessary cultivation of tension and the inevitable response to resistance involved in aesthetic experience better articulated than in the late essays collected in

[41] AE (xii)

The Necessary Angel. Originally published in 1951, *The Necessary Angel* collects seven lectures that Stevens had delivered between 1941 and 1951. Except for his essay on Moore: "About one of Marianne Moore's Poems," all of the essays were, as he says, "written to be spoken and this affects their character." How this affects their character, Stevens does not say, but the essays are all rich in examples from the history of poetry and in this sense they sometimes have the feel of an academic lecture. In addition to the rather academic tone of these pieces, which is in sharp contrast to the gaiety and playfulness of much of his poetry, they all deal explicitly in one form or another with the central problem of the imagination's relation to reality.

For Stevens, however, the subject of all of these essays is the definition of poetry: "I mean poetry itself, the naked poem, the imagination manifesting itself in its domination of words."[42] Indeed, for Stevens the problem of the imagination and the definition of poetry were practically synonymous and nearly everything that he says about poetry is also applicable to aesthetic experience more broadly. The imagination's manifestation in "its domination of words" may sound exclusive to literature, but both Stevens and Dewey believed in a fundamentally universal aesthetic, and as Stevens makes clear in his essay on "Relations Between Poetry and Painting" "There is a universal poetry that is reflected in everything," adding that there may be "a fundamental aesthetic of which poetry and painting are related but dissimilar manifestations." Like Dewey, whose *Art as Experience* quotes heavily from the visual arts as well as the poetry of the English romantics, and the sculpture and architecture of the Greeks, Stevens is not concerned with merely writing "another *ars poetica*" but of articulating the fundamental structures underlying our experience, structures which poetry is uniquely, but certainly not exclusively capable of revealing. As Stevens makes clear "poetry is an illumination of a surface, the

[42] WSCPP (639)

movement of a self in the rock" of which our world and our environment is made, and it is ultimately our experience of that world, our life *in it* that matters.

III "THE HUMAN OCEAN BEATS AGAINST THIS ROCK"[43]

> Philosophy like art moves in the medium of imaginative mind, and, since art is the most direct and complete manifestation there is of experience *as* experience, it provides a unique control for the imaginative ventures of philosophy.[44]
>
> —John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

> In Philosophy we attempt to approach truth through the reason. Obviously this is a statement of convenience. If we say that in poetry we attempt to approach truth through the imagination, this, too, is a statement of convenience. We must conceive of poetry as at least the equal of philosophy.[45]
>
> —Wallace Stevens, "The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet"

Of the seven essays collected in *The Necessary Angel* perhaps the best known and certainly one of the most difficult is "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Of all of Stevens' essays "The Noble Rider…" is the most widely read and consequently the most misunderstood. The essay is best characterized as an apology for poetry in a world that has seemingly outgrown its use for poetry, and because of this it is often understood, alongside "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," as one of the central texts of Stevens' poetics. It is no accident, therefore, that Stevens chose to begin *The Necessary Angel* with this particular essay. Indeed, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" provides a vital framework for understanding Stevens' poetics and many of the other essays in the volume seem to be variations and elaborations upon the ideas that are expressed in that opening essay.

The original impetus for the work was an invitation to give one of a series of talks at Princeton University about poetry. The lecture series had been organized by Stevens' close

[43] From "Two Versions of the Same Poem" CP (309).
[44] AE (301)
[45] WSCPP 668

friend Henry Church with whom he had earlier discussed the possibility of creating a chair of poetry at Harvard "for the study of the history of poetic thought and the theory of poetry."[46] When Church decided to organize the lecture series at Princeton, it was natural that he would ask his friend to give the inaugural address. Of course by this point in Stevens' life, he had become increasingly interested in the nature of his legacy as a poet, and must have seen this lecture as the opportunity finally to express in prose the philosophical underpinnings of his already explicitly philosophical poetry, offering not only a guide to understanding his work, but a source of inspiration and thought for future poets to follow. In response to this invitation, Stevens began work on the essay, writing to Church that "the subject of my paper will be THE NOBLE RIDER AND THE SOUND OF WORDS. It will trace the idea of nobility through what may be called the disaster of reality, and particularly the reality of words."[47] "The Nobel Rider and The Sound of Words," as Stevens suggests does in fact trace the idea of nobility in its many manifestations throughout western history, but as his letter to Church makes abundantly clear in its use of the word "disaster," the real subject of the essay is not nobility as such but reality, or more accurately, the important inter-relationship between reality and imagination. In this sense, Stevens' essay is not only about poetry, but also about the importance of aesthetic experience more broadly. Indeed, for Stevens, the idea of nobility and the value of aesthetic experience, as I will argue, are inseparable.

Although on first reading the essay may seem like a disorganized collection of ideas borrowed from Plato and Hegel, C.E.M. Joad and Benedetto Croce, the more one reads Stevens' essay the more it takes on a distinct shape and the more it becomes clear that Stevens is presenting an explicitly historical vision of the ongoing struggle between the imagination and

[46] LWS 358
[47] LWS (386).

reality. Here, however, as in all of Stevens' work (as Joseph Riddell reminds us) there is no "progressive dialectic" at work, but only the continual search for equilibrium between the forces of the imagination and reality. Stevens' argument, finally, is that we live in a time of violent and overwhelming reality, and he ends his essay with an arguably self-aggrandizing call for a revolutionary response, one along the lines of the many responses offered by the great artists of antiquity and the Renaissance. In this way, Stevens' essay, coming as it does so late in his career, and still long before his Pulitzer in 1955, is a strange and subtle attempt at self-canonization, for the poet is setting himself up as the next in line, the inevitable hero in his own epic struggle against the spiritual violence of a world itself overrun with the violence of war.

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Stevens begins his essay with a long quotation from Plato's *Phaedrus,* offering the reader an image of both lost vitality and consequently lost nobility. One of Plato's best known allegories, the passage depicts the human soul as a charioteer drawn by a pair of winged horses, traversing "the whole heaven in divers forms appearing." Unlike the chariots of the gods, whose horses are "all of them noble and of noble breed," we instead have "a charioteer who drives them in a pair, and one of them is noble and of noble origin, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble origin; and as might be expected there is a great deal of trouble in managing them." Although Stevens' stated subject is nobility, there are few figures from philosophy more adequate to describe the way that Stevens, at least superficially, conceived of the tensions between the imagination and reality, for just as the two horses are pulling in different directions, so too do we find ourselves caught between the imaginative and the real, between a desire for a world of form and meaning imposed by ourselves and the resistances encountered in our environment. Ironically, however, it is precisely the inadequacy of this figure to describe the human experience that Stevens wishes to explore, for although the figure is emotionally moving, it lacks vitality

and subsequently we are not free to yield ourselves to what Coleridge called Plato's "dear, gorgeous nonsense."

According to Stevens, Plato's figure fails not because it lacks poetry, or because it does not please us with its images of nobility, but precisely because it is a thing that no longer adheres to the real.

> In Plato's figure his imagination does not adhere to what is real. On the contrary, having created something unreal, it adheres to it and intensifies its unreality. Its first effect, its effect at first reading, is its maximum effect, when the imagination, being moved, puts us in the place of the charioteer, before the reason checks us. The case is, then, that we concede that the figure is all imagination. At the same time, we say that it has not the slightest meaning for us, except for its nobility. As to that, while we are moved by it, we are moved as observers. We recognize it perfectly. We do not realize it. We understand the feeling of it, the robust feeling, clearly and fluently communicated. Yet we understand it rather than participate in it.

The centrality of "feeling," of sensual perception expressed here, is explicitly naturalist as well as anti-Platonic, and reiterates and confirms the importance of the ordinary in Stevens' poetics. For Stevens the biggest problem with Plato's figure is that it lacks the vitality of the sensual world. The figure is all imagination without any of the real to sustain it. As Stevens says, the imagination "has the strength of reality or none at all." The figure may have worked for Plato, but for us, it is no longer a living option or possibility. We understand it but we do not *feel* it. It is "antiquated and rustic." It has become an abstraction, a "bodiless serpent" whose "head is air" and little else.[48] In the face of this abstraction, Stevens suggests, diffidence is our only possible response. We become timid, shy, embarrassed by what appears to us as little more than a children's fable, a pretty image that we admire but that we can no longer believe in.

This idea of the vitality of the real also lies at the heart of Dewey's aesthetics. In *Art as Experience* Dewey argues that aesthetic experience, when it is "an experience," when it is of the world, is itself a form of "heightened vitality." Dewey recognized that this vitality was dependent

[48] The quotation is from Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," CP (397).

upon an adherence to and an adaptation of external reality to the wants and needs of the live creature. The aesthetic was not, as in Plato, pure form or pure thought, but was instead grounded in and made possible by the material world, just as our experience of the material world was itself made possible through aesthetic organization. In language remarkably similar to Stevens own, Dewey lays out the Stevensian conflict between imagination and reality as a conflict between inner and outer vision, arguing finally, just as Stevens does, that an adherence to the real always contributes to the aesthetic nature of any given experience.

> There is a conflict artists themselves undergo that is instructive as to the nature of imaginative experience. The conflict has been set forth in many ways. One way of stating it concerns the opposition between inner and outer vision. There is a stage in which the inner vision seems much richer and finer than any outer manifestation. It has a vast and enticing aura of implications that are lacking in the object of external vision. It seems to grasp much more than the latter conveys. Then there comes a reaction; the matter of the inner vision seems wraith-like compared with the solidity and energy of the presented scene. The object is felt to say something succinctly and forcibly that the inner vision reports vaguely, in diffuse feeling rather than organically.[49]

Were we to apply Dewey's argument to the figure of Plato's charioteer we would inevitably come to the same conclusions as Stevens. The idea of Plato's image of the charioteer, Plato's "inner vision," is clearly, at first at least, a thing of great beauty and nobility, but it loses any hold it may have had upon us, and becomes "wraith-like," unreal, as soon as we begin to compare it to the world of our external vision. The imagination then, as Stevens' says, has "lost its power to sustain us," and without the vitality and the immediacy of the real, "we droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground."

In the next section Stevens continues to explore the tension between the imagination and reality over time by tracing its articulation through the history of art, from Andrea de Verrocchio's statue of Colleoni in Venice to a little known modernist painting by Reginald Marsh titled *Wooden Horses*. Through this historical analysis, Stevens shows that "just as in this

[49] AE 273

or that work [of art] the degrees of the imagination and of reality may vary, so this variation may exist as between the works of one age and the works of another." According to Stevens, Andrea del Verrocchio's famous sculpture of Colleoni (which represents the age of the Italian Renaissance) ultimately fails precisely because it is a thing too easily assimilated into the imagination. Rather than providing something new and original, it merely perpetuates itself. On first glance one indeed "feels the passion of rhetoric begin to stir and even to grow furious," says Stevens, but ultimately one finds that "after all, the noble style, in whatever it creates, merely perpetuates the noble style." Like the figure of the winged chariot, its immediate effect is its greatest. It does not "respect the nobility of man as a real animal," with all of the tension and resistance inherent in aesthetic life, and therefore "in this statue, the apposition between the imagination and reality is too favorable to the imagination." It is overpowering and magnificent and a great accomplishment of art, but, for Stevens' purposes, it is too much of the noble and the ideal without any semblance of the real. Dewey, not surprisingly offers a very similar critique of European sculpture after the Greeks:

> Greek Sculpture owes much of its effect to the fact that it expresses the idealized human form—so much so that its influence upon subsequent sculpture has not been altogether happy, since it has overweighted European statues and busts, till very recently, with a tendency to expression of idealizations, which except at the hand of masters in well adjusted conditions…tend to the pretty, trivial, and the illustration of wish fulfillments (238).

Dewey's critique of European sculpture captures pretty well Stevens more specific critique of Verrocchio's *Colleoni*, which is that the sculpture is largely over-idealized and too much an attempt to articulate a single ideal: here the ideal of the noble warrior, undaunted and unafraid, who, in contrast to Stevens' mock-heroic "Bantams in Pine Woods," remains entirely unchecked by the force of reality and its "Appalachian tangs."

Stevens next turns his attention to Don Quixote whom he seems, at least temporarily, to suggest is the opposite of Verrocchio. Here he provides the reader with the central observation of this second section, which is that "the relation between the imagination and reality" is not a matter of one or the other, where "the tradition of Italy [Verrocchio] is the tradition of the imagination" and "the tradition of Spain [Cervantes] is the tradition of reality," but is rather "a question, more or less, of precise equilibrium." In any work of art and any age, then, one must find a balance between the impulsions of the imagination and the environment of fact that is reality in its current state. This idea of precise equilibrium strongly echoes Dewey's argument in *Art as Experience* that "equilibrium comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of, tension."

> There is in nature, even below the level of life, something more than mere flux and change. Form is arrived at whenever a stable, even though moving, equilibrium is reached. Changes interlock and sustain one another. Wherever there is coherence there is endurance. Order is not imposed from without but is made out of the relations of harmonious interactions that energies bear to one another.[50]

Indeed, for Dewey and Stevens both, aesthetic order cannot be "imposed from without," but is always part of an ongoing process of simultaneous doing and undergoing. As Stevens says in "Connoisseur of Chaos," "A violent order is disorder," adding that "an old order is a violent one;" and just as the imaginative violence of Plato's horses and charioteer are too much for us, just as his "gorgeous nonsense" leaves us cold, wanting something more real, and more substantive to believe in, too much reality is equally violent, and invites us to seek out a new balance through the exertion of energies: in this case the expression of a new form of nobility, one not posed "for a vista in the Louvre," but "chalked/ On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see."[51]

[50] AE 20
[51] WSCPP 195

Although Stevens does not say it explicitly, we see an emphasis on this movement toward equilibrium in his discussion of Don Quixote, for "certainly… Cervantes sought to set right the balance between the imagination and reality," and indeed, few authors have been as successful as Cervantes in bringing the idea of nobility and goodness down to earth. As Stevens says, Cervantes rightly saw nobility not as a thing of the mind, but as part and parcel of reality itself. For Stevens, however, this new relation to reality inaugurates a period of western culture where "we may derive so much satisfaction from the restoration of reality as to become wholly prejudiced against the imagination." This argument here is consistent with the central aim of Stevens' talk—which is to show the shifting fortunes of the imagination over time (with an emphasis upon his historical present)—but the swift and highly ambiguous way in which he moves on from his discussion of Cervantes, saying simply that this argument may "reach a conclusion in respect to something as to which no conclusion is possible or desirable," seems odd. Perhaps Cervantes *Don Quixote* is more of an ideal for his own time than Stevens would have liked to admit, and perhaps Stevens recognized the deep admixture of imagination and reality that is already at work in Cervantes' novel—a piece of work that in many respects supports Stevens own argument about the need for a precise balance between reality and the imagination.

Stevens' following two examples, however, deviate slightly from the form that he has set up thus far. The movement here is still forward in time and still largely from the imaginative to the real, as we saw with Stevens' discussion of Verrocchio and *Don Quixote*, but it also traces what the critic Sidney Feshbach describes as a "pattern of cultural decline."[52] As Stevens says "the idea of nobility exists in art today only in degenerate forms or in a much diminished state, if,

[52] Feshbach, Sidney. "The Structural Modes of Wallace Stevens' 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.'" *Wallace Stevens Journal* 28.1 (Spring 2004): 81-100.

in fact, it exists at all or otherwise than on sufferance." This is, Stevens argues "due to [a] failure in the relation between the imagination and reality." Following up on this, Stevens presents two arguably degenerate artworks, which although they each attempt to find a balance between reality and the imagination, ultimately fail for different reasons.

Sticking with his theme of men on horseback, the first of these two examples is the statue of General Jackson in Lafayette Square, a work of art that Stevens sees as largely a piece of beautiful propaganda. This statue, in its violent attempt to portray the gaiety of General Jackson, "saluting the ladies of his generation," and to capture the spirit of the people in an idealized and ultimately composite and derivative figure, fails precisely because it is not an act of the mind, responding to its environment, but one of mere fancy. According to Dr. Richards, Stevens says, fancy "is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed." In other words, the statue of General Jackson and his horse, with its beautiful tail, like the sculpted horses and valiant riders in "Owl's Clover" and "Dance of the Macabre Mice," becomes a parody of itself precisely because it is an imposition upon reality rather than an integrated product of that reality abstracted. "In such cases," says Dewey "mind and material do not squarely meet and interpenetrate. Mind stays aloof for the most part and toys with material rather than boldly grasping it. The material is too slight to call forth the full energy of the dispositions in which values and meanings are embodied; *it does not offer enough resistance*, and so mind plays with it capriciously" (Italics Mine). In this sense, ironically "the statue may be dismissed, not without speaking of it again as a thing that at least makes us conscious of ourselves as we were, if not as we are. To that extent, it helps us to know ourselves." In other words the statue's

value seems to lay only in its negative qualities and ironically it becomes, if nothing else, at least a means to "acquire immunity to eloquence," an object lesson in how *not* to make art.[53]

If the statue of General Jackson is a thing without "the slightest trace of the imagination," but also something completely and self-evidently unreal, then Reginald Marsh's painting *Wooden Horses* is its opposite, a work of art that is both "wholly favorable to what is real," but also "not without imagination." Stevens' discussion of Marsh is, for the most part, incredibly even-handed and almost exclusively descriptive, and it is difficult to see immediately how Marsh fits in with the rest of Stevens' argument. In many ways Stevens describes the painting as if it had achieved an ideal equilibrium of imagination and reality, but the tone of his observations, his use of the negative phrase: "it is not *without* imagination" offer a clue to how Stevens saw this painting in the context of his argument. The painting may indeed capture reality while still offering something of the imaginative, but what is missing from this painting, as evidenced from Stevens' description of it, is any true sense of the noble. The painting is of a merry go-round populated with adult riders, smoking cigars, and holding one another tightly, all of whom seem in their extreme sensuality and vice, to be involved in some kind of carnival or party. It is, as Stevens' describes it, a "picture of ribald and hilarious reality." But there is little else to the work besides this. Unlike the "The Emperor of Ice-cream," a poem that this painting, with its sensuality and cigar-rolling strong man immediately calls to mind, there is no body laid out in the other room, no lamp to "affix its beam," upon the dreary facts of death and dying. It is an imaginative presentation of reality, but one, at least for Stevens, of seemingly little consequence, offering no constructive response to the world of meaningless circularity which it captures and ridicules.

[53] The phrase "acquire immunity to eloquence" is quoted by Stevens from a comment by Bertrand Russell "To acquire immunity to eloquence is of the utmost importance to the citizens of a democracy." *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1938, V162, p447)

Feshbach argues provocatively that each of the works in this section represents a different "mode" of art and that while the statue of General Jackson correlates to the *low mimetic mode*, Marsh's *Wooden Horses* correlates to what Northrop Frye later called an *ironic mode*, where, as he describes it, the hero is "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves," and "we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity." This indeed captures well the effect of Marsh's *Wooden Horses* and we can see how the ironic mode, if that is what Stevens had in mind, is obviously anathema to the very idea of nobility, especially the kind of pragmatic nobility that Stevens was looking to achieve in this essay and in his poetry. In this sense, Stevens does indeed capture not only a historical progression and simultaneous descent from the ideal to the real, as evidenced in his discussion of Verrocchio and Quixote, but shows how this descent, unchecked, unattended to, can become its own undoing, resulting in a world where the imagination becomes little more than a self-reflective source of cultural ridicule, a "degenerate form of nobility," that exists only on sufferance. It is, in essence, another example of fancy, where the tension between the real and the imaginative are so slight that the experience is meaningless.

In the following section, Stevens moves from the tensions between the imagination and reality to those between the connotative and denotative use of words. Just as the balance between the imagination and reality may change from period to period, so too, Stevens says, may the "variation between the sound of words in one age and the sound of words in another age." This variation, Stevens argues is the result of what he calls here for the first time, the "pressure of reality." For Stevens, the history of the sound and meaning of words is the history of various different conflicts, and "these conflicts are nothing more than changes in the relation between the imagination and reality," between a desire to expand the meanings of words and a practical need to limit them. From Locke and Hobbes, who valued the scientific, denotative use of language,

denouncing the more poetic use of words, to the connotative language of Joyce and what Stevens calls "the dilapidations of Braque and Picasso," he traces the movement from connotative to denotative, and back again, arguing finally that the current age is an age where the tendency is toward the connotative use of language. This "tendency toward the connotative," however cannot continue against what he again calls "the pressure of reality."

This pressure, which for Stevens had reached unprecedented levels, is more than political or economic circumstance (which exerts its own kind of pressure), but marks a potentially radical change in consciousness and a deprivation of the "normal" state of life. This constant pressure of reality, as Stevens puts it, becomes the "content of consciousness," and essentially threatens the very possibility of imaginative or aesthetic life.[54] To explain this new pressure and its consequences for aesthetic life, Stevens quotes from Croce's 1933 Oxford lecture:

> If…poetry is intuition and expression, the fusion of sound and imagery, what is the material which takes on the form of sound and imagery? It is the whole man: the man who thinks and wills, and loves, and hates; who is strong and weak, sublime and pathetic, good and wicked; man in the exultation and agony of living; and together with the man, integral with him, it is all nature in its perpetual labour of evolution.

Stevens goes on to comment that "Croce cannot have been thinking of a world in which all normal life is at least in suspense, or, if you like, under blockage. He was thinking of normal human experience." In other words, although Croce is right that indeed, poetry and the aesthetic are "a triumph of contemplation" over circumstance, the pressure of reality has become so great that meaningful imaginative contemplation has become impossible. In Deweyan terms, the pressure of reality is so great that the flow of experience itself is forever interrupted by what Stevens calls the "extraordinary pressure of news…of the collapse of our system, or call it, of

[54] Indeed although Stevens insists that there is "no point to dramatizing the future in advance of the fact," his descriptions of this pressure are incredibly prescient for they anticipate both the horror and violence of the holocaust and the Second World War as well as the crisis in aesthetic philosophy that would follow, including Adorno's oft-repeated argument that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz, and the repudiation of pragmatist aesthetics by Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School. For an excellent reading of this debate see Ross Posnock's *Trial Of curiosity: Henry James, William James and the Challenge of Modernity*. Oxford UP, 1991. (76-79).

life." In the face of this pressure, argues Stevens "we are confronting…a set of events, not only beyond our power to reduce them and metamorphose them, but events that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real, and events that involve the concepts and sanctions that are the order of our lives and may involve our very lives."

For Stevens, the solution to this dilemma requires the response of a "possible poet" who is capable of "resisting or evading" the pressure of this new reality, and who can abstract himself as well as abstract his reality, "which he does by placing it in his imagination." Although this form of abstraction may, at first sound like the antithesis of Dewey's argument that aesthetic experience is always in and part of the world, it is in fact quite consistent with Dewey's ideas about the nature of the imagination. Although they use different terms, Stevens and Dewey both agree that aesthetic experience is the result of the fusion and interdependence of what Stevens called imagination and reality and what Dewey, wanting to avoid the pitfalls of the dichotomy of real and unreal, called inner and outer vision. Although Stevens sometimes talks about imagination and reality as if they are separate things, the possible poet that he calls for is precisely the kind of poet capable of understanding that they are not opposites, and that the ultimate point of these abstractions, of this placing reality within the imagination, is always to arrive at a state where they are in fact not opposite at all, but "equal and inseparable." For Stevens this means recognizing, in an explicitly pragmatic sense, that the real is not an affair of objects existing in some space outside of ourselves, nor is it merely the product of thoughts existing in some ideal realm of the mind, but is importantly "the life that is lived" in the scene created by the interactions of those two worlds which are really one.

> The poet has his own meaning for reality, and the painter has, and the musician has; and besides what it means to the intelligence and to the senses, it means something to everyone, so to speak. Notwithstanding this, the world in its general sense, which is the sense in which I have used it, adapts itself instantly. *The subject matter of poetry is not that "collection of solid, static objects extended in space" but the life that is lived in the*

scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. (Italics mine).[55]

This is very close to the way that Dewey describes the same situation in *Art as Experience*. There, Dewey argues that the mutual tension and interdependence between inner and outer vision is itself the site of meaningful, lived experience, and that rather than choosing between one or the other we live within the tensions between them. Although "the artist is driven to submit himself in humility to the discipline of the objective vision," Dewey says:

> the inner vision is not cast out. It remains as the organ by which outer vision is controlled, and *it takes on structure as the latter is absorbed within it*. The interaction of the two modes of vision is imagination; as imagination takes form the work of art is born. It is the same with the philosophic thinker. There are moments when he feels that his ideas and ideals are finer than anything in existence. But he finds himself obliged to go back to objects if his speculations are to have body, weight, and perspective. Yet in surrendering himself to objective material he does not surrender his vision; *the object just as an object is not his concern. It is placed in the context of ideas and, as it is thus placed, the latter acquire solidity and partake of the nature of the object*. (Italics mine)[56]

The similarity between Dewey's notion of the outer vision absorbed within the inner vision and Stevens' image of reality abstracted in the imagination, is striking. Equally important is the way that both Stevens and Dewey stress the importance of life lived within the tensions between what in both cases essentially comes down to a conflict between the live creature and its environment. Whether it is reality abstracted in the imagination, or the outer vision absorbed within the inner vision, what matters to both thinkers is the *relationship between* the two, for it is precisely through the exploitation of the tensions inherent in that relationship that we thrive as both poets and animals.

Although this relationship, as Dewey makes clear, is inherently naturalist, it is not exclusively so. Both Dewey and Stevens also recognized the inescapable insistence of culture, which, like the "natural" environment, provides its own resistances and elicits its own tensions.

[55] WSCPP 658
[56] AE 273.

In this same section Stevens talks about the importance of history and tradition when he describes the nature of this "possible poet." Moving fluidly from his previous discussion of the history of the imagination, Stevens argues that this poet must learn to integrate the past with the present. He must be able to recognize, as Dewey explains, that what he "retains from the past and what [he] expects from the future operate as directions in the present."[57] Art, as Dewey says: "celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is."[58] Indeed, for Dewey, aesthetic experience and art more broadly are near impossible without this integration. "In order to perceive aesthetically," says Dewey:

> [The artist] must remake his past experiences so that they can enter integrally into a new pattern. He cannot dismiss his past experiences nor can he dwell among them as they have been in the past.[59]

Therefore, although Stevens' possible poet "cannot be a charioteer traversing vacant space," he likewise cannot simply ignore Plato or Plato's "dear, gorgeous nonsense." He must, as Stevens says: "have lived the last two thousand years, and longer, and he must have instructed himself, as best he could, as he went along."

> He will have thought that Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton placed themselves in remote lands and in remote ages; that their men and women were the dead—and not the dead lying in the earth, but the dead still living in their remote lands and in their remote ages, and living in the earth or under it, or in the heavens—and he will wonder at those huge imaginations, in which what is remote becomes near, and what is dead lives with an intensity beyond any experience of life.[60]

This description of the "possible poet" and the emphasis here on the remote, but still living quality of the works of the past, is a good example of Dewey's notion of the "live creature," for whom the past and the future are always an integral part of the present. For Stevens and Dewey

[57] AE 24.
[58] Ibid.
[59] AE 143
[60] WSCPP 657

both, the experiences and the discoveries of culture and art, philosophy and science are not ideas separate from our daily lives, but are always a present part of our environment, insistently influencing our behavior, providing the material for resistance as well as consummation.

The whole history of the movement toward the real that Stevens describes in the previous sections is precisely this: a resistance to be overcome and transformed into something new, an experience to be integrated into new patterns and new more meaningful experiences. The physical and spiritual violence of the war, as Stevens describes it, correlates, and is in some sense the logical outcome, of what he argues is our obsession with the real as a thing somehow separate from the imagined. In response to this violence, Stevens argues, we must press back against this overwhelming pressure, asserting the place of the imagination alongside the real. "We have been a little insane about the truth," says Stevens, and this obsession must eventually, lead us to look beyond the truth and to recognize that "It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential."[61] It is precisely this process of recognizing the interdependence of reality and imagination that Stevens tackles in the next and final section of the essay, where he lays out not only the role and function of the poet, but situates that role within the historical moment of the essay.

In this next and final section Stevens comes back to the idea of nobility—which is the ostensible subject of his essay—but only after an extended discussion of the nature of poetry and the poet. For Stevens, the role of the poet is ultimately "to help people to live their lives," to "make his imagination theirs," and to shape the world in which we live, "giving life whatever savor it possesses."[62] The world of poetry, Stevens argues is:

[61] WSCPP 663
[62] WSCPP 660

> indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it.

This idea of the poet as maker, is of course, nothing new. What is new, however, is the way that Stevens associates this making and the imagination more generally, including the sound of words, with a sense of the noble. For, although aesthetic experience may be grounded in animal impulse, it is not exclusive to it and we may often find ourselves, like Plato, constructing whole worlds out of words; not out of any desire to escape from the everyday, but out of a desire to infuse it with greater meaning. And this need to express ourselves in words, as Stevens reminds us, is as great as any other.

> The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. Those of us who may have been thinking of the path of poetry, those who understand that words are thoughts and not only our own thoughts but the thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is they are thinking, must be conscious of this: that, above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds.[63]

As Dewey says:

> Full recognition…of the continuity of the organs, needs and basic impulses of the human creature with his animal forbears, implies no necessary reduction of man to the level of the brutes. On the contrary, it makes possible the drawing of a ground-plan of human experience upon which is erected the superstructure of man's marvelous and distinguishing experience.

It is precisely this "marvelous and distinguishing experience," the "sound of words" with all of their power to astonish and create, that Stevens is interested in when he talks about the nature of the noble. For Stevens the noble is not a fixed idea or element as it was in Plato's allegory, but is, as he makes clear in the final paragraph of the essay, more like a force or a wave. In this sense,

[63] WSCPP 662-63

when Stevens talks about the noble he is really talking about "art *as* experience." Just as Dewey saw art as something that was active in experience rather than a series of fixed and static objects, Stevens understood nobility the same way. Indeed, for Stevens, nobility and art are nearly synonymous when considered from Dewey's perspective. Just because we are no longer capable, as Plato was, of belief in the immortal soul, just because we have already, as it were, come down to ground, does not mean that our lives must remain devoid of meaning and substance beyond sensual appetite or impulse. For Stevens, as for Dewey, there still remained in life the always present, always necessary aesthetic impulse which was at the heart of all meaningful experience. A recognition and appreciation of the value and necessity of this impulse was a recognition of everything that was noble in human life.

Although Stevens is remarkably coy about actually defining what he means by the noble and although he insists that it cannot be named, that "to fix it is to put an end to it," what Stevens' notion of nobility ultimately boils down to is an impulse toward the aesthetic, toward the continual structuring and restructuring of the world, an assertion of the imagination's vitality, but also a recognition of the inescapable presence and value of the real. It is because of this, that Stevens suggests that "the decline, not to say the disappearance of nobility," may be due to nothing "more than a maladjustment between the imagination and reality." In other words, were we more aware of the integrations of imagination and reality, and inner and outer vision, were we more attuned to the fact that experience is always an affair of simultaneous undergoing as well as doing, then we would be able more easily to recognize and value the very nature and transformative potential of the aesthetic as a force for change in our lives.

In his first attempt to describe the nature of this nobility, Stevens turns again to a subject that he cared deeply about: painting. In this case Stevens is interested in a recent gallery exhibit of several paintings by the sculptor and painter Sir Jacob Epstein. The pictures themselves, as

objects, however, seem far less central to Stevens' argument than the critical commentary on the show which was published in the magazine *Apollo*. Stevens quotes an unnamed "commentator" as saying that Epstein's paintings "make no pretense to fragility. They shout, explode all over the picture space and generally oppose the rage of the world with such a rage of form and colour as no flower in nature or pigment has done since Van Gogh." This image of "the rage of form and colour" which is opposed to "the rage of the world" captures perfectly the idea of nobility and aesthetic experience as a form of resistance as well as integration. Indeed, the "ferocious beauty" of Epstein's flowers resembles Stevens' description of the poet as a "creature ferocious with ornamental fury," and is itself one of the many manifestations of the noble, unfixed and undefined, literally operating as a force within the world; a potent and necessary reminder of our own power to shape the world even in the face of an overwhelming and violent reality.[64]

In a strange way then, the noble becomes not only the aesthetic, but the aesthetic as it exists as a form of engagement with the world. We should not, however, confuse Stevens' concept of engagement here with the violence that he describes earlier; we must not confuse the figurative structure of Stevens' argument with the literal, for when Stevens describes the imagination as a "violence from within that protects us from a violence without," he does not mean merely a force of will, or an unchecked assertion of fancy. What he is ultimately describing is in fact not a violence at all, but a transformation of the world through imaginative engagement. Although the period in which Stevens is writing is unique in several ways, not least because it lays just on the cusp of the one moment in human history when man literally became capable of destroying himself entirely, as he makes clear in the rest of the essay, the response has been the

[64] In his 1935 essay on Marianne Moore, "A Poet That Matters," Stevens describes, among other things, Moore's extensive use of animal imagery in her work, meticulously listing all fifteen of the different creatures mentioned in "The Steeple-Jack." About that poem and Moore's poetic sensibility more broadly, Stevens' remarks: "If the conception of the poet as a creature ferocious with ornamental fury survives anywhere except in the school books, it badly needs a few pungent footnotes."

same throughout history, and just as Cervantes and Milton each had to struggle nobly against their own historical moment, the possible poet of Stevens' essay must do the same. But nobility, as Stevens makes perfectly clear in the last passage of the essay is not a thing of individual talent or integrity, but is more like a force, which operates through history and through culture. It is ultimately the creative impulse inherent in all aesthetic engagement; it is the very impulse to assert ourselves in the world and through that assertion to find a new balance between the imaginative and the real, inner and outer vision. It's static, material manifestations are only one small part of its existence, for just as

> a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same. Possibly this description of it as a force will do more than anything else I can have said about it to reconcile you to it….it is a violence for within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.[65]

What is most interesting about these oft-quoted final lines is not only the way that Stevens conflates nobility and imagination, but the way that he then frames those concepts as active forces operating within an environment, protecting and preserving us, and helping us to live our lives. In other words, Stevens also recognizes that aesthetic experience is a vital and indispensable part of our existence as human animals.

In much the same way as Dewey's *Art as Experience*, Stevens' essay is, on a certain level, both a philosophical description of the aesthetic, as well as a call to action, demanding greater attention to the value of the imagination and the importance of ordinary aesthetic experience as a continual adaptation and transformation of the real. As Stevens says: "It is not only that imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential." This concept of the tensions inherent in the interdependence of

[65] WSCPP (665).

imagination and reality, life and art, man and animal, is at the very heart of Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which in several ways, puts the very concepts exhibited in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" into imaginative action.

IV "AND NOT TO HAVE IS THE BEGINNING OF DESIRE"

> A generation ago we should have said that the imagination is an aspect of the conflict between man and nature. Today we are more likely to say that it is an aspect of the conflict between man and organized society. It is part of our security. It enables us to live our own lives. We have it because we do not have enough without it.[66]
>
> —Wallace Stevens, "Imagination as Value"

> The material of esthetic experience in being human—human in connection with the nature of which it is a part—is social. Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization.[67]
>
> —John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

As mentioned earlier, Stevens' entire body of work is a testament to the recurring repetition of tension and consummation that composes our lived experience of the world when we are most alive and most engaged. For Stevens as well as for Dewey, this repetition, this concept of life as a series of conversions and consummations followed by further resistance and tension, was more than merely an inevitable state of nature; it was the result of active and engaged participation with our environment. Not all experiences, even those experiences that result in the fulfillment of need, are necessarily aesthetic, for aesthetic experience requires conscious engagement or what Dewey called "impulsion" as opposed to mere impulse. Aestehtic experience represents a state of life where the balance between need and resistance is equal and recurring, where we have access to need as well as the materials to fulfill that need, whether they are physical, intellectual, or emotional. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens described in detail the

[66] From "Imagination as Value" CP (735)
[67] AE (329)

consequences of a world out of balance. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens offers instead an object lesson in how to cultivate that balance as a permanent source of transformative creativity in life as well as poetry. For Stevens the "supreme fiction" is not as Thomas Jensen Hines argues "the poetry of being," but is life (being itself) infused with the aesthetic satisfactions and potentialities that are exemplified by the poetic as aesthetic experience.[68] Such a shift is more important than it might immediately appear, for it highlights the degree to which Stevens saw poetry and life as inherently inseparable.

It Must Be Abstract

If we look at the first section of the poem, *It Must Be Abstract*, we can see immediately how Stevens' concept of the abstract is an attempt to explain and even cultivate important and necessary resistances in the environment as a source of transformative experience. In other words, the very first section offers the reader a good example of exactly how to begin to conduct the war between the perceiving mind, which must continually make abstractions from out of its environment, and the impositions and insistences of a natural world that is not our own. Indeed, this opening section essentially amounts to a kind of Emersonian call for resistance and a cultivation of tensions that, in their agitation, will result in a new and more satisfying relationship to the environment.

When Stevens' speaker says to the young Ephebe that you must see the sun "clearly, in the idea of it," that you must see it stripped of all of its accumulated meaning, "washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven/ That has expelled us and our images…," this is not only a rejection of the current "cash value" of those meanings, but is an attempt to open them up to the very possibility of future transformation by momentarily chipping away at the calcified meanings

[68] Hines, Thomas Jensen. *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels With Husserl* ....New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1976. (141)

that have adhered to them and of which they are a part. This decreative process, as Simone Weil might have called it, is not original to this particular work, indeed, it can be seen throughout Stevens' career, but here, in the context of this poem, it takes on an arguably greater significance, for it is precisely the absence of this meaning, the difficulty of being in a world not our own, that is the source of and impetus for aesthetic creation.[69] In an explicitly pragmatic sense then, Stevens uses the word abstract as both a verb and a noun, and his insistence that "it must be abstract" is both a call to step outside of our preconceived ideas about the world, to see it again with new eyes (to abstract out from it), but it is also a recognition of the inevitable calcification of tired ideas in the concepts of logic and reason (as abstractions, not unlike the Statue of General Jackson in "The Noble Rider"). In this way Stevens is examining both the inevitable necessity of the abstract as a source of creative potential, while simultaneously recognizing its anesthetic properties.

That we must continually move beyond our ideas of the world as they are, that we must always be willing to abstract our reality within imagination, becomes the central argument for the rest of this first section of the poem, especially canto II, where Stevens explores the inherent resistances and dissatisfactions that drive aesthetic experience. After the initial call to action in canto I, after the admonition to "see the sun again with an ignorant eye/ And see it clearly in the idea of it"—in other words, to see it as an animal or child would—Stevens turns to the concept of desire, exploring the underlying impulses and resistances that send us back to what he calls

[69]Several critics have noted the importance of Simone Weil's concept of decreation to Stevens' poetry. Decreation, as Stevens described it was the process of "making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness." Though the actual term as used by Weil is not published until *Gravity and Grace* (1947); and although Stevens does not first employ the term until his 1951 lecture at the Museum of Modern Art "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" the practice of decreation was, as Cleghorn and others note, already a central aspect of his work, including "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" which Angus Cleghorn calls a "decreative poem." For more on Stevens and decreation see Angus Gleghorn, *Wallace Stevens Poetics, the Neglected Rhetoric*, Leonora Woodman, *Stanza My Stone: Wallace Stevens and the Hermetic Tradition*. Indiana: Purdue Research Foundation, 1983; and James Lindroth, "Simone Weil and Wallace Stevens: The Notion of Decreation as Subtext in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.'" *Religion and Literature*, Vol. 19, No.1, (1987).

the "first idea." For Stevens, interestingly, these resistances have less to do with physical need, and more to do with a kind of spiritual ennui, or lack of meaningful engagement with the world around us.

> It is the celestial ennui of apartments
> That sends us back to the first idea, the quick
> Of this invention: and yet so poisonous
>
> Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
> The truth itself, the first idea becomes
> The hermit in a poet's metaphors,
>
> Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.

"This first idea," "the quick of this invention" is, after all, nothing less than the living source of creative power; it is what Joseph Riddell aptly called "the emotions of animal spirit and vitality, as well as the pain which motivates our quest for resolutions."[70] But just as the accumulations of abstract meaning have clouded our sense of the real, too much concrete reality, too much truth is also destructive; so much so that even the articulation of the first idea becomes its own dissatisfaction. "May there be an ennui of the first idea?" Stevens asks, and then quickly answers "What else prodigious scholar, should there be?" For it is precisely this idea of ennui as a kind of psychological resistance and unease, that drives life. Although James Baird argues that "Notes Toward a supreme Fiction" urges nothing "save insistence upon newness of perception and absolute freedom of mind,"[71] it is in fact an engagement with, not a disavowal of, tension and resistance, above all else, that the poem promotes. Put simply we write poetry "because we do not have enough without it," and because "the mind is never satisfied," indeed, can "never" be finally satisfied with any one idea.

[70] Joseph Riddel. Wallace Stevens' Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction. Wisconsin studies in Contemporary Literature, Vol 2, Number 2. 1961. P20-42.
[71] Baird, James. *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1968.

This concept of aesthetic experience as a means of continually overcoming ennui, as the very antithesis of ennui, is explored in the rest of the section, where Stevens once again conflates the spiritual and the sensual, thought and feeling, man and animal. What is most striking about this first section of the poem, and about all of Stevens' work, is the way that he simultaneously idealizes thought even as he insists upon its evident corporeality, its active life in experience. Canto III returns to the concept of the "first idea" arguing that by sharing in this first idea, this candor of the blank slate, poetry not only "refreshes life," but satisfies our "belief in an immaculate beginning." Few concepts sound more idealistic or essentialist than the idea of an immaculate beginning, but despite this, or perhaps because of this, Stevens is quick to reassert the value and importance of the temporary nature of this new beginning, arguing that we move "between an ever-early candor" and "its late plural." In other words, like the hermit of truth in canto II, this immaculate beginning "comes and goes and comes and goes all night." In this sense there is nothing essentialist about this beginning precisely because it is a thing of constant change and constant becoming. It is also, as Stevens describes it, simultaneously "what we feel from what we think" and "thought/ Beating in the heart." Thought and feeling then are interdependent, just as the mind and body are. While Dewey would refer to this interdependence as "body-mind," Stevens will refer to it later in Canto VI as an "abstraction blooded," an idea made corporeal: "An elixir, an excitation, a pure power." This "power," this abstraction blooded, "as a man by thought," is, like the force that drives the wave in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the very essence of the aesthetic, which is itself the fundamental integration of thought and substance. It is what Dewey called that animal "unity of experience which we so fractionalize when work is labor, and thought withdraws us from the world." Interestingly, at the heart of a section that begins with the admonition that "It Must Be Abstract," we find Stevens

questioning the very notion of the abstract by asserting instead the importance and necessity of the sensual and the immediate.

In cantos IV and V Stevens continues to assert the vitality of the sensual, while exploring the interdependence between thought and feeling and nature and experience. As he makes clear in several of his poems, "man is the intelligence of his soil," and thus, we are not surprised to see Stevens, once again asserting the value of the material origins of his "supreme fictions" when he says: "There was a muddy center before we breathed./ There was a myth before the myth began,/ Venerable and articulate and complete." As Stevens suggests here, the world is not our own, and was not made for us; it is a place of difficulty and challenge with its own mythologies, its own "first ideas." As Stevens says, "The air is not a mirror," but is instead, "bare board,/ Coulisse bright-dark" and "tragic chiaroscuro," a dark and ever changing stage on which we actively enact the world of color and meanings, from which, in resistance to this dark and bare material, we make our world, often in opposition to the one that is.

It is no surprise, then, given what we already know about the inherently animal nature of Stevens' poetics, that the first example he provides of this process of creation and expression would involve several wild animals, for it is in animal life that we are closest to the raw material of aesthetic experience.[72]

> The lion roars at the enraging desert,
> Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise,
> Defies red emptiness to evolve his match,
>
> Master by foot and jaws and by the mane,
> Most supple challenger. The elephant
> Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares,

[72] For Stevens, as we saw earlier, the poet and the poetic were often, and not accidentally, represented in the form of animal life.

> The glitter-goes on surfaces of tanks,
> Shattering velvetest far-away. The bear
> The ponderous cinnamon snarls in his mountain
>
> At summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow.

Continuing the argument of the previous canto, we see here how both color and sound, as forms of the aesthetic, add "sweeping meanings" to the abysmal instruments of the world. Most interesting, however, is the fact that Stevens again as he so often does, returns to the animal as a vital source of poetic power and prowess. The lion, the elephant, and the bear, are all three in concert with their world. Each adds something to the scene, expressing an explicitly confrontational relationship to the "bare board" of the "desert," the "darkness," and the "winter snow." Unlike "The Snow Man," whose mind would have to be blank in order to "behold" the world of ice and snow "and not to feel any misery in the sound of the wind," these animals, just like the poet who suffers and desires, are defiant and responsive to their environment. Their expressiveness, however, is unfocused and reactive. It is expression without tension; it is what Dewey would have called "inchoate experience." Though these animals respond powerfully to the resistances they encounter, there is no internal tension, no structuring back and forth (no "doing and undergoing" as Dewey would put it) in their response to their environments. That the lion reddens the desert, with his "red-colored" noise is, like the "noble style" in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," nothing more than self-perpetuation. Although Stevens makes it clear here that the aesthetic impulse is in every sense of the word grounded in this kind of animal expression; in us, it is more than mere reaction, but requires a more self-conscious and less violent interrelationship with the environment.

Stevens, of course, is a master of the well-turned line, and rather than beginning his comparison between animal and human aesthetic interaction with a new tercet, as might immediately seem appropriate when beginning a new idea in a long philosophical verse essay

such as this, he instead begins his comparison precisely in the middle of the stanza, and notably, in the exact middle of the canto. Doing this Stevens not only shocks the reader out of her contemplations of these creatures with the sudden "but" of the second line, but also manages to reassert the inherent interconnections between these animals and the young man whom the poet so gently, almost lovingly, berates in the following lines:

> But you, ephebe, look from your attic window,
> Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie
>
> In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner
> Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press
> A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,
>
> Yet voluble of dumb violence. You look
> Across the roofs as sigil and as ward
> And in your center mark them and are cowed…

These lines are at once both earnest and ironic. Indeed, there is so much implicit irony embedded in this canto and all of this first major section, that it is difficult to know where to begin to unravel its meaning. If we look at the last two lines of the fourth stanza, however, we can more easily piece together the meaning of this irony, for Stevens' line breaks in this particular tercet are incredibly revealing, most importantly the dangling and startling "you lie," which hangs for a full two lines before it is followed with "in silence upon your bed" in the next stanza. This is, of course, no accident. How could it be? We could endlessly speculate about what exactly Stevens means by the word "lie," but in the context of this particular reading, and indeed in most interpretive contexts I would argue, it seems clear that Stevens is making one of a handful of important contrasts between the aesthetic lives of poets and animals.

The creatures of the previous stanzas do not lie; their relationship to the world is unfettered by conventional dualisms like body and mind, and their experience of the world is unmediated and immediate. This is precisely what makes "animal life below the human scale,"

as Dewey defined it, such a formidable example of the unity of experience that is the center of aesthetic life. Humans, on the other hand, as Stevens spent so much of his career detailing, are quite competent self-deceivers. In this sense, these lines are meant at least in part to show the inadequacy of the young ephebe, whose attic residence with its rented piano reveals both his poverty and his inexperience. This student of the aesthetic, unlike these animals, is practically incapable of action. Like a young Prufrock, he writhes in indecision upon his bed; his utterances are "bitter," and his voice, his expression is all at once paradoxically "voluble," "dumb," and "violent," capturing the internal tensions necessary for meaningful expression. Looking out at the world, divided by roofs and houses, he is "cowed" by his own inability to abstract his world in imaginative engagement. He is intimidated and overcome, unable to articulate, even "in flawed words and stubborn sounds" the world as supreme fiction. And yet, despite all of this, the poem goes on, after a long ellipsis, to argue nonetheless that

> These are the heroic children whom time breeds
> Against the first idea—to lash the lion,
> Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle.

It is strange that so few of the many significant examinations of this poem have failed to sufficiently trace the extent of the irony in these last lines, for what Stevens is ultimately describing here is little more than a circus show; it is life and experience denatured and tamed for our entertainment.[73] Our young ephebe may eventually become major man, but for now he is little more than a lion tamer, in control of an animal power but not in possession of it. In a sense, Stevens seems to be saying that these "heroic children" are meant for something better than the construction of easy abstractions. The external resistances and internal tensions that have left this young man cowed and overwhelmed may have come to not, but they are nonetheless still a vital

[73] One notable exception to this is Helen Vendler, who describes these lines as "at once a triumph and deprecation, as Stevens uses rhetoric of climax ("to do X, to do Y, to do Z") combined with the increasing absurdity of the actions…" Vendler, Helen. *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*. Cambridge: Harvard Up, 1969.

part of the aesthetic process, a beginning and not an end. Although the reactionary violence of these animals in response to the blank severity of their environment is problematic, so is the incapacity of our young poet-in-training to abstract and ultimately overcome the myriad resistances within his own culture and environment. Stevens seems to be saying that although we should not violently impose our imagination and our desire upon the alien world, we must nonetheless learn, after we have abstracted and returned the world to its first idea, to expound new possibilities in a form of language that is feeling as well as thought, a symbol of the world as well as a vital part. It is as if, at this very mid-point of section one, Stevens has presented us with a dilemma that he will then at least partially solve in the rest of this section.

Indeed, in the rest of this first section Stevens seeks to find a sort of middle ground between the lion's roar and the bitter utterance of the ephebe, between the weather and the giant of the weather, and finally, between McCullough and major man, in a process that Stevens himself described, in a letter to Hi Simons, as a constant back and forth between the abstract and the real.[74] Although the ostensible subject of Canto VI is the "weather by Franz Hals," it is not with the weather that Stevens begins, but with the difficulty of the abstract itself, which is, as he puts it "Not to be realized because not to/ Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because/ Not to be realized."[75] This process, whereby the abstract must first be seen in order to be realized and realized in order to be felt, is tantalizingly paradoxical, asserting a deep interconnection between the eye and the heart, between the thing seen as it is and as we would like to see it. This

[74] In a letter to Hi Simons Stevens wrote: "The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract. First I make the effort; then I turn to the weather because that is not inaccessible and is not abstract. The weather as described is the weather that was about me when I wrote this. There is a constant reference from the abstract to the real, to and fro." Quoted in Harold Bloom's *The Poems of Our Climate*, p.186.

[75] Indeed, a quick overview of the many paintings of Franz Hals reveals that he worked almost exclusively in portraits and almost never "painted" the weather. Stevens, of course, would have known this fact well, and such irony is no doubt intentional, contributing to the sense of paradox implicit in this section. Though he rarely painted the weather, that does not mean it is not a present element of the artist's or the viewer's experience of his portraits, which are full of light.

paradoxical relationship between sight and realization, between the perception of the thing and its reality, is similar to the relationship between the weather and the giant of the weather.

> It must be visible or invisible,
> Invisible or visible or both:
> A seeing and an unseeing in the eye.

Interestingly it is precisely the simplicity of these lines, their very abstract nature which make them so difficult, for there is almost nothing tangible to hold onto here. It would be easy from our post-writing-workshop perspective to criticize the abstract nature of Stevens' language, but there is, after all, a point to all this airy conjecture. What Stevens means to capture here is precisely the difficulty of teasing out of existence what is abstract and what is concrete, what is the weather and what is the giant of the weather, for the two are inherently interrelated and self-defining. Nonetheless, even though the whole section is an argument for the value of the abstract, the real lesson that Stevens takes from this difficulty is recognition of the value and importance of the material world as a source of poetic productivity, and Stevens realizes finally that any abstraction must have some blood to it, whether it is "An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought," "the blood of paradise," or the lion who "tastes its blood not spit," it must be *realized* in all senses of the word: made both real as well as regal.[76]

Stevens continues to move his reader in the direction of the sensual and the corporeal in the next canto as he pushes back against the "brushy winds in brushy clouds" of the giant of the weather, asserting quite matter-of-factly that

> It feels good as it is without the giant,
> A thinker of the first idea. Perhaps
> The truth depends upon a walk around a lake,
>
> A composing as the body tires, a stop
> To see hepatica, a stop to watch
> A definition growing certain…

[76] No doubt Stevens was familiar with the more obscure use of the word "realize" to mean "to make royal or regal."

This return to the world of sensual fact, where "the truth depends upon a walk around a lake," where the body and the senses are an integral and integrated part of the composition of experience itself, where a kind of mechanical Swiss perfection prevails, marks a return to the province of the more than rational distortion, where "music is feeling…not sound." What Stevens presents to us here is an ideal description of the world as consummation: without resistance, without tension, without need or desire, where even the "Schwarmerei" set up here seems effortlessly and entirely requited: "not balances/ that we achieve but balances that happen." This is the moment of animal perfection, of complete integration between self and world, a moment of awakening that is "extreme" but "fortuitous," a moment of perfection from which the abstractions of the giant of the weather: logos, reason, mathematics, seem like things in some distant valley eclipsed by cloud.

This moment of consummation, although temporary, reveals precisely the degree to which the abstractions we take for granted, the foundations of our world, whether sun, logos, or man, are themselves nothing more than necessary fictions, "like structures in a mist." They are not, no matter their value or their significance, in any sense permanent or in any way fixed. We cannot, "Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc," the modern architect who took pains to remodel and restore several medieval castles, build an edifice great enough to protect and contain the first idea from change, dissolution, and re-creation "in ghostlier demarcations" and "keener sounds." Like the peripatetic singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the MacCullough too is a part of the world that he sings, and his song, though his, is influenced by that shifting world. The MacCullough as "expedient/ Logos and logic," is, like "the word" floating in the void "a pensive giant prone in violet space."

If MacCullough himself lay lounging by the sea,

Drowned in its washes, reading in the sound,
About the thinker of the first idea,
He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

Or power of the wave, or deepened speech,
Or a leaner being, moving in on him,
Of greater aptitude and apprehension.

The MacCullough as major man, then, is ultimately a mistake, a misnomer, a mere word, a place-marker for a thing that cannot be, which exists as name and name alone, for MacCullough is little more than a symbol that illuminates the way that natural man, man in his environment, that potentially "leaner being, moving in on him," makes and transforms his own abstractions of the world in language that "suddenly" and "with ease,/ [says] things it had laboriously spoken."

This leaner being as major man, Stevens makes clear, is not the result of romantic apotheosis, nor can it be merely the product of "reason's click-clack," but is ultimately "the object of/ The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind," and just as the sun in canto I must remain unnamed, "the hot of him" remains "purest in the heart." In other words, he is most potent in the abstract, but in an abstract that is nonetheless full of immediate feeling. For Stevens, the word "abstract," as the use of "heart" here suggests, does not imply some kind of distance from the shifting world of experience, but is, on the contrary always a synonym for the evasions of reason's cold categories, and represents instead the continual abstraction from out of reality and transformation of an idea from fixed thought, to image, and finally to feeling itself, much like the very transformation that takes place at the end of Canto IX in which the idea of major man as an evasion of thought is nonetheless immediately and almost irresistibly personified and represented in images of romantic languor as: "he that reposes…"

On a breast forever precious for that touch,
For whom the good of April falls tenderly,
Falls down, the cock-birds calling at the time.

In this way, major man, the idea of man, the collection of the "infected past" as representations of this feeling, maintains its power as a force operating within our lives, but is freed from any narrow or fixed origins. Major man as able "exponent" then, becomes the very source of a "flor-abundant force" that resembles the aesthetic itself, and is more than mere exception, but is an integral, even "heroic" part of "the commonal" and the everyday

From the ancient fascinations of the celestial and the solar in the first canto, to the image of modern man as what Harold Bloom rightly describes as a Chaplinesque tramp, searching among the ruins, the movement of this entire first section has been a slow journey from heaven to earth, from an idea of the aesthetic as mere mimetic sanctification, to one of active expression. This movement captures not only a naturalist image of man as active participant in his physical and cultural environment, but is infused throughout with a recognition and celebration of the generative potential of conflict and resistance, "not to console nor sanctify," but to put forward and express as a new form of life.

It Must Change

If the first section of "Notes," was about the inherent tension of existence "in a world that is not our own," *It Must Change*, explores the same tensions as they are manifested in a world of continual flux, and just as the "first idea" represented a world of fixed accord, unusable and alien, here it is precisely the absence of that order that must be overcome. In the same way as Dewey, Stevens recognizes that it is precisely within the limits of these two poles that the aesthetic becomes possible, a kind of sweet spot between complete order and complete chaos, and just as in section one, Stevens explores and examines the negotiations between these two poles as an example of the very nature of aesthetic experience as "consummation."

Just as he did in the first section, Stevens begins *It Must Change* with an example of tension in the form of dissatisfaction and ennui, except here it is not the celestial ennui of apartments, not the boredom of foundations, but rather the overwhelming boredom of repetition without reason, of sound without music, flux without order or intention. The young ephebe of *It Must be Abstract* has been replaced with an "old seraph," here a kind of wise elder, and yet for all of his years he seems no more content in this "universe of inconstancy" than that voluble ephebe was content to writhe upon his pillow. Although he looks about him and he sees the violets and the doves, and the young girls with flowers in their hair, it is an image he has seen before, generations past, and will see again. The scene is merely a repetition of "bees booming," "a repetitiousness of men and flies," as Stevens more harshly put it in "The Plain sense of Things." It is a constant inconstancy, and while this inconstancy is a necessary element, a potentially vital decreative power, it can also be an overwhelming anaesthetic: a blunt booming "not broken in subtleties," without form or rhythm. "In such cases," as Dewey says, "organization of energies is piecemeal, one replacing another, while in the artistic process it is cumulating and conserving…for whenever each step forward is at the same time a summing up and fulfillment of what precedes, and every consummation carries expectation tensely forward, there is rhythm."[77] This first canto then captures and illustrates the essential tension created by this inconstancy and the absence of a notable rhythm or structure, a tension whose resolution will be discussed in the next section "It Must Give Pleasure." In the meantime, Stevens explores the implications of this life in a world of flux, criticizing first in Cantos II and III, the folly of permanence, and arguing finally in Canto X, for a world where the only constant is a constant and active transformation.

[77] AE (177)

Canto II opens with an ordination and a command: "The President ordains the bee to be/Immortal." This is a curious image, but it follows nicely from the previous canto where the very changes of the seasons are seen as a kind of immortality, a secular mythology that Stevens had already explored in great detail in "Sunday Morning." Here, however, Stevens is less convinced that this seasonal recurrence is a positive attribute of nature. "Why should the bee recapture a lost blague?" asks Stevens, implying that this immortality is itself a false conception, an imposition on nature, whereby real change, real transformation is made impossible. "This warmth," Stevens argues is instead "for lovers," whose love is a beginning and not merely a resuming, a "freshness of transformation" and not merely a reiteration of what was and what will be again. While nature and history both may have their cycles of repetition, each new cycle is the potential source of something entirely original.

Canto III continues this argument, except that here Stevens provides us with an image of the folly of thoughtless permanence. The president may "ordain the bee to be/ immortal," and may even commission the creation of great public statues, but these attempts to stave off change, to fix the world once and for all in its final character, inevitably result in nothing but lifeless and bloodless architectures. Similar to the statue of General Jackson in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the statue of General DuPuy described in Canto III is an imposition upon reality "without the slightest trace of imagination." It is as Joseph Riddel describes it "the absolute abstraction against the absolute flux," "an inhuman bronze," atrophied and "vestigial," and ultimately "rubbish:" another degenerate image for the dump of western culture, over which the tramp of "It Must be Abstract" searches heedlessly "for what was, where it used to be."

This intensely negative description of the folly of permanence in the image of the statue of General DuPuy leads naturally to the next canto, in which Stevens again offers an argument for the importance of resistance and tension as the source of aesthetic transformation, except here

it is the finding, the articulation, and the eventual collapse of the dialectic that is the source of that experience. In an explicitly Deweyan way Stevens moves from the inherent interdependence of "man and women," and "day and night," as a self-conscious dialectic, to the integration of "the captain and his men," and "the sailor and the sea:" things that are not of opposite natures but nonetheless partake of one another interactively, and in a famously Whitmanian turn ends finally with the complete fusion of self and other: "Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,/ Sister and solace, brother and delight." This dialectic, Stevens argues, "is the origin of change," but that change is more than merely a synthesis of two opposites; it is part of an interactive process whereby the tensions between these two opposites inform and structure the very nature of experience itself.

> The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
> The child that touches takes character from the thing,
> The body, it touches…

The description of this child, not coincidentally, sounds a great deal like Dewey's description of the child subject in his paper on the reflex arc.[78] There, as I've already noted, Dewey lays out the foundations for his theory of interactive experience, describing the many immeasurable interactions that are involved in even the most seemingly basic reflex response, such as a young child reaching out toward and then removing its hand from a candle flame.[79] Here, in an arguably much more positive, and as Bloom notes, explicitly Whitmanian and sensual description of this process, Stevens captures the vast network of largely aesthetic interactions between what must be an infant and its mother, the child and "the body it touches."

[78] Whether or not Stevens had read Dewey's essay on the reflex arc, it is possible he may well have had in mind William James's own discussion of the same phenomenon in the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology*, where James describes in great detail and with several diagrams, how the child's first experience of fire, "usually protects the fingers forever." James, William. *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1. New York: Henry Holt and Company. 1890. (25).

[79] For a more detailed discussion of Dewey's important "Reflex Arc" essay see Chapter 1: "'Heightened Vitality': The Evolutionary Aesthetics of John Dewey."

This important philosophical lesson about the essential interdependence of man and nature is then qualified and further examined in canto V, which offers an anecdotal description of the immortality of nature as an organic process of constant change that continues long after we are gone, but of which we are nonetheless a vital and integrated part. Indeed, this canto offers one of Stevens' best and most vivid images of an explicitly Deweyan form of aesthetic organic development, and it is no accident that Stevens described this stanza as "one of the things in the book that I liked the most."[80] Stevens' "planter" is, as we quickly discover, much more like a painter or an artist than a farmer, and the house that he has built, and the trees that he has planted, the limes and the oranges, "continue to bloom and bear" long after his death, becoming his "turquoise,/And his orange blotches," his "zero green:" a canvas from which eventually and inevitably rises the abstraction of the "banana tree,/ which pierces clouds and bends on half the world." This organic movement from the simple pleasures of color to the grander transformations of mountain and sky as pineapple and banana shows the way that man's intelligence not only grows out of his soil, but how it inevitably follows an explicitly aesthetic directive, from the delight of color to the satisfactions of philosophy and religion. Stevens' planter/painter captures the indispensable union of man and nature in aesthetic transformation, for the planter/painter has himself also been transformed by his labor.

> An unaffected man in a negative light
> Could not have born his labor nor have died
> Sighing that he should leave the banjo's twang.

His life, like that of the poet of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" has been a constant serenade of things as they are, transformed through aesthetic work. In this way, change itself, the repetitions of the seasons, and the "booming" of the bees become the very media of a life lived well.

[80] Quoted in Bloom's *Poems of Our Climate*

As Bloom rightly notes, this phrase takes place at the exact center of the section, which is also, because of the tripartite structure of the poem, the exact center of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." In this sense it is also the moment of greatest integration in the poem between the abstractions of the first idea, and the shifting world of nature, which immediately reasserts itself more forcefully in the following stanza. There, the tensions between man and nature that had been largely consummated in Stanza V come back with a new forcefulness. Instead of the consummations of fusion and integration, Stevens describes the folly implicit in a world of constant self-perpetuation where the very possibility of integration becomes impossible.

Throughout this entire section, Stevens has been playing upon the tension between permanence and change and here we see that even though nature seems to be in a constant state of change; without a formalizing structure, without integration, that change is little more than repetition and "granite monotony."

> Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade,
> And you, and you, bethou me as you blow,
> When in my coppice you behold me be.
>
> Ah, Ké! The bloody wren, the felon jay,
> Ké-ké, the jug-throated robin pouring out,
> Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade.

This "Bethou me," is ultimately nothing but a monotonous self-assertion in the face of nature without any formal integration, without the "doing and undergoing" necessary for aesthetic construction, where even the beauty of birdsong is "like so many clappers going without bells." This hollow sound, this "single text," is the end result of an "earth in which the first leaf is the tale/ Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird/ Of stone, that never changes." It is not adequate to simply impose one's identity (one's abstractions) upon nature, for nature is its own repetitious and self-asserting entity (it has its own "muddy centre"). One must instead become a vital and contributing part of that nature. The nightmare of nature without integration, Stevens seems to

say, is precisely the nightmare of flux without change; it is like a symphony without movements, or a melody endlessly repeated, the tension of empirical nature without abstraction, without contributing structure or form. The sparrow's cry, like the fierce self-assertion of Lion and Elephant and Bear that we saw in Canto V of "It Must be Abstract," fails precisely because it is "lacking minstrelsy." It lacks the aesthetic structure that results in transformation. The lesson here is simple: satisfaction and pleasure are not found by shaping the world in one's own image, nor by conforming to the image of the world that one is confronted with, but instead through a mutual and continual reconstruction of self and world. It is in response to the "constant inconstancy" of nature that Stevens insists on a different, more active kind of change, and in the following four cantos, he provides the reader with a vision of this process, moving from the "ever ready passion" of "our earthy birth:" the recognition of ourselves as part of nature, to the necessity of expression in "the hot dependent Orator," and finally to the "freshness of transformation" itself in a world that inevitably becomes "the freshness of ourselves."

Despite the inherent lesson of Canto VI Stevens' vicious deconstruction of birdsong is a bitter pill for his readers to swallow, and as he so often does after such harsh pronouncements, the poet returns us at least temporarily to the "accessible bliss" of an earthly world of sensual pleasure free of the "seducing hymns" of a possible paradise, and Canto VII offers several stanzas of sensual description largely uninterrupted by abstraction.

> For easy passion and ever-ready love
> Are of our earthy birth and here and now
> And where we live and everywhere we live

This bliss, however, depends upon "the fluctuations of certainty, the change/ Of degrees of perception in the scholar's dark." In other words, not only must it change, but so must our ideas about it, "as in the courage of the ignorant man,/ Who chants by book, in the heart of the scholar, who writes/ The book, hot for another accessible bliss." Stevens it seems has become aware

again, even in the heat of his most passionately involved reverie, of his status as poet-scholar, and these final lines move from the immediacy of ecstatic lyric to the more literary form of anecdote.

The following canto, widely known as the anecdote of Nanzia Nunzio, is easily one of the most sensuous and erotic passages in "Notes..," for here Stevens has found perhaps the perfect metaphor for the inherently sensual (even sexual) nature of the aesthetic impulse as creative act. In this canto a young vestal, as Stevens describes her (both chaste virgin and, importantly, the keeper of the sacred fire of Vesta, goddess of the hearth) presents herself to Ozymandias stripped bare of all artifice. "I am the woman," Says Nunzio,

> …stripped more nakedly
> Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
> Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.
>
> Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
> In its own only precious ornament.
> Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.
>
> Clothe me entire in the final filament,
> So that I tremble with such love so known
> And myself am precious for your perfecting.

Although Nunzio's undressing may at first seem like an act of contrition, or worse, as a mere expression of sexual fantasy, her power in this position is great. Although naked before Ozymandias she is also confronting him and she is the one in control of the conversation—indeed she is the only one who speaks—and the message she delivers to Ozymandias is a testament not only to the limits of abstraction and power in a world of continual change but to the inevitable insistence of meaning to attach itself to that flux. Although she may very well be "the bride stripped bare," although she may give herself completely to the world around her, she nonetheless remains clothed in what the poet calls "a fictive covering" which "weaves always

glistening from the heart and mind."[81] The aesthetic impulse, then, the impulse to weave these fictive coverings is both a thing of the most fundamental and ordinary experience, and an act of resistance to a world of imposing order.

In this "marriage" of Ozymandias and Nanzia Nunzio we are truly given an image of "the marriage of flesh and air," for even arrayed in diamond coronals, she too contributes, both emotionally and intellectually, to her own transformation. The confrontation between abstraction and the concrete sensual here takes the form of an implied sexual union, where the result is both pleasure and transformation through pro-creation. And this is truly the point of this second section as it leads toward the final section *It Must Give Pleasure*: the pleasures of the aesthetic are never possible without a will to change, without the "freshness of transformation" exhibited by Nunzio's sensual nakedness, which is at once both a stripping away of abstraction as well as an invitation to sexual and imaginative procreation.

Moving on, through the "poet's gibberish" to the gibberish of the vulgate "and back again," Stevens returns us to the scene of Canto I, except that now we see the world through a new set of eyes. The Seraph has been replaced with the poet/speaker, and the world of constant inconstancy and natural change that seemed so overwhelming in Canto I, has given way to a world of fictive coverings. Like Nanzia Nunzio, whose nakedness was never truly without artifice, the world the poet sees, the world he has already described in Canto I, has become a "Theatre of trope," "full of artificial things." Eight cantos of philosophical enquiry later and the very tone of the scene has changed dramatically. What had been a blunt, inhospitable booming of bees has become instead "a will to change" and the "freshness of transformation," which is "the

[81] According to Richardson, Stevens had an on and off but more or less convivial relationship with the artist Marcel DuChamp, and would have been intimately familiar with his work: "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even," which was owned by their mutual friend Walter Arensberg. Indeed, the golden, almost glowing centerpiece of that work resembles, at least connotatively, the descriptions of Nunzio here.

freshness of ourselves."[82] The poet recognizes that the world is indeed a world of constant change, except that here, instead of nature's unending repetitions, the poet sees the transformative possibility inherent in aesthetic experience.

> The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
> To which the swans curveted, a will to change,
> A will to make iris fretting on the blank.

Like the bucks of "Earthy Anecdote," whose circular clattering is driven by the sensual impulses of the firecat, the west wind (the very source of Shelleyan mutability and poetic inspiration) causes the swans to leap and splash among the irises on the bank, which Stevens ever so subtly and portentously conflates with the word "blank." Indeed, in case there was any doubt left that Stevens was talking about the aesthetic impulse here, the very "will to change" is itself described as a kind of music, and just as this music drives change, so too is the world itself "like a page of music," mutable and revisable, in which the swans are "changing essences." It is this will to change, the will to constantly re-make the world, which is at the very heart of aesthetic experience. Of necessity, it is more than mere pleasure, but nonetheless, without pleasure it is still nothing, since the end result of aesthetic experience is always itself a form of satisfaction.

It Must Give Pleasure

While both of the previous sections explored the necessary tensions inherent in aesthetic experience, this third and perhaps most important section explores the consummation of that conflict as pleasure, offering a kind of temporary dialectical synthesis between the inevitable abstract and the always changing sensual, the imagined and the real, constancy and natural

[82] It is likely no accident that this phrase, "a will to change" sounds suspiciously like James's two phrases "the will to believe" and "the will to live," the second of which, according to Gertrude Stein, itself described the very impossibility of repetition. In *Lectures in America* Stein wrote: "No matter how often what happened any time anyone told anything there was no repetition. This is what William James calls the 'Will to Live.'" Originally quoted in Steven Meyer's excellent: *Irresistible Dictations: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001. (209).

change. The result of this always ongoing dialectic is a temporary pleasure, for only through an engagement with the environment of thought and substance, of nature and culture, desire and possibility, is there any transformation at all. As I have noted earlier, without this tension that makes pleasure possible, without the resistances that constantly drive transformation, the world would be only an intolerable nothingness, mere chaos or mere stone, forever unchanging.

When Stevens says that it must give pleasure, it may at first appear that he is merely begging the question, since pleasure is itself the result of aesthetic experience. However, it is this very fact that Stevens is trying to point out in this poem—that is, the inevitability of the aesthetic. When Stevens says "It must be abstract" he is at once admonishing poets for not abstracting their ideas out from the weight of already accrued meanings, but he is also saying that all fictions, supreme or otherwise are inevitably abstract. When he says that "it must change" he is at once directing and encouraging his reader to transform the world around him and not merely succumb to its whims, but he is also recognizing and in part trying to ameliorate the fact that permanence is always a temporary state of life. In this same way, Stevens seems to be saying here that the supreme fiction not only must seek to be a thing of pleasure but that it is always inevitably so: "it *must* give pleasure." All successful imaginings are merely the finding, the making of a new, more satisfying relationship to the world and it is that satisfaction that lies at the heart of all transformative experience. Because of this, pleasure and the aesthetic are not distractions from what is real and important, but are invariably useful, absolutely necessary parts of experience. As Joseph Riddel so eloquently explains:

> His [Stevens] obsession with the aesthetic moment does not dictate to him the 'hedonist's progress' into solipsism. It suggests rather that he is pursuing experience back to its origin, in the elements of perception, and finding there the truth that *life begins as an aesthetic*. His poetry is a struggle to retain the purity of those origins within the inhuman

complexities of living in a civilized world which would obviate the physical, its very basis. (Italics mine)[83]

In the third section Stevens captures precisely this vital element of experience, where "life begins as an aesthetic," and in so doing exalts both the immediate sensual as well as the irrational. Indeed, much of this last section is preoccupied with the value of pleasure as an irrational, but nonetheless vital and indispensable element of life.

As he does in each of the other sections, Stevens begins with the presentation of a problem, which, in the course of the next ten cantos will be examined, questioned, and eventually transformed. Here, the problem is neither the necessity of abstraction nor the inevitability of change, neither the desire of the mind nor the dominance of the sky, but is rather concerned with the conflict between pleasure as mere repetition of past pleasures and pleasure as representative of a new relationship to the world. While there is certainly pleasure to be had in repetition and tradition, in singing "jubilas at exact, accustomed times;" this, Stevens says is not enough.

> To speak of joy and to sing of it, borne on
> The shoulders of joyous men, to feel the heart
> That is common, the bravest fundament,
>
> This is a facile exercise.

It is, as Stevens says later in "The Auroras of Autumn," like "A happy people in a happy world—/ Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar."

Instead of this easy exercise in cultural repetition, Stevens urges that we seek out new, more difficult pleasures in perception: what Emerson would have called "an original relation to the universe." Indeed, the point here is not to reject the commonal or the immediate sensual, but as throughout the entire poem, the object is to find a balance between the sensuous, the

[83] Riddel, Joseph N.. "Wallace Stevens' 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.'" (41).

immediate, and the abstract. This balance is found in the irrational pleasures of perceiving, of observing and conceiving the world in new and original ways. Just as the "celestial ennui of apartments" "[sent] us back to the first idea," and nature's insistent changes asked us to find aesthetic value within that flux, this last section urges us to continue that struggle through finding pleasure in what Dewey would call the union between past experience and present circumstance or "the union of the features of present existence with the values that past experience have incorporated in personality." While children may be happy to repeat the games of the past, to simply "speak of joy and to sing of it," for most of us this integration is a far more complicated process involving much greater degrees of tension and resistance. As Dewey explains:

> In the case of the expressions of happy children the marriage of past values and present incidents takes place easily; there are few obstructions to be overcome, few wounds to heal, few conflicts to resolve. With mature persons, the reverse is the case. Accordingly the achievement of complete union is rare; but when it occurs it is on a deeper level and with a fuller content of meaning (AE 78).

In much the same way Stevens also urges us to "catch from the image of what we see" the irrational unreasoning of feeling that is the complete, but always temporary, integration of our animal selves and our environment.

Stevens begins his examination of this pleasure by presenting the reader with an explicitly Hegelian dialectic, where cantos II-IV represent accordingly the "immediate," the "mediated" and the "concrete." This is not the first time, of course, that Stevens had used this form of argument. In "Sunday Morning," for instance, a poem that Stevens explicitly had in mind when composing this section, the argument follows the same pattern, moving from "the complacencies of the Peignoir," to the "need for some imperishable bliss," and resolving finally in the concrete objective correlative of "casual flocks of pigeons "on extended wings." The structure here is quite similar, moving from the pleasures of the real, to the failed potential of the

abstract, ending finally in a mystic marriage of the two that recognizes the importance of environment as concrete context.

Canto II begins with the immediate and seems to offer a perfect example of the "irrational moment of unreasoning" that Stevens' described in canto I. The incredibly sensual language of this canto evokes a scene of complete aesthetic delight and seemingly effortless perfection, where past and present, remembered and real observations seem to blend in easy harmony. This moment of integration, however, is perhaps too easily attained, too dependent upon an imagined remembrance, for the April scene as it is depicted moves connotatively from the immediate and ready passions of "sexual blossoms" and "fierce addictions" to a cold and "coldly delineating" reality. The scene becomes, finally, what Keats would have called a "cold pastoral:" unchanging beauty without consummation and "without intrusion," without struggle and without transformation. The woman's life is self-contained, house-bound. Like the young Ephebe of the first section she sees the world only through her windows and the weather she observes is not the beginning but the end of desire.

In direct contrast to this calm, cold pastoral, canto III offers a rude antithesis in the form of an idol covered in vines and serpents. One of the most violent and menacing cantos of the entire poem, Stevens presents his reader with an apocalyptic vision of the fall of Christianity, a vision of a failed fiction "that might have been./ It might and might have been. But as it was,/ A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell." The image of Christ bringing hell to earth echoes, As Harold Bloom astutely notes, Yeats' apocalyptic image out of *spiritus mundi*, of the anti-Christ crouching "toward Bethlehem to be born," except that here it is Christ himself that is depicted; this is not a future catastrophe but an ancient, still lingering tragedy that infects both the past and the future.

Just as "The dark encroachment of that old catastrophe" imposes itself upon the woman's consciousness in "Sunday Morning," this "face of stone" intrudes violently upon the calm of the previous canto. The perfect present established in Canto II is seemingly overwhelmed by the imposition and need for a more perfect future. It is "the need for some imperishable bliss," some "unending red," some "permanence within change," as Riddell argues, that ultimately interrupts the purity and simplicity of the previous canto. Even though Christianity here has seemingly failed and its idol is overgrown, "a little rusty, a little rouged,/ A little roughened and ruder," it nonetheless still has "a crown/ The eye could not escape, a red renown/ Blowing itself upon the tedious ear." It remains for all of its faults the still lingering desire for an abstract permanence whispering to us, calling us out of our satisfactions of a world well lived. Ironically it is precisely this desire, this lack of future consummation in the present that makes the scene here aesthetically incomplete. In order for there to be any kind of aesthetic experience this future desire must be proleptically consummated in the present. As Dewey notes in *Art as Experience* "Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive."[84] Stevens, however, takes this idea a step further, suggesting that only when the future has already been imagined as an integral part of the present, can we ever be truly free of the anxiety of what is to come. So long as the future and the present, the real and the imagined, the sensual and the abstract remain divided, there can be no bliss, no happiness that is not permanently transient.

The tension generated between the immediate real and the mediated (future) abstract is finally consummated in canto IV in the form of a "mystic marriage" between the "great captain" and "the maiden Bawda." Stevens begins the canto, however, by returning to the proleptic concept of "a later reason," that was expressed, but never fully defined in canto I:

[84] AE (24)

> We reason of these things with later reason
> And we make of what we see, what we see clearly
> And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves.

This later reason as it is manifested in the rest of the canto, is an early variation of the "more than rational distortion" of Canto X, and describes precisely the very presence of the wished for moment of consummation *within* the present moment. Out of this consummation, out of this integration with our environment of past and future we make, in part by simple realization, a world that is "dependent on ourselves," since the world observed is the world experienced; we realize that there is, finally, no independent outside, no "lasting visage," no "unending red" to contend with. Instead there is only this later reason, which is the fusion of the rational and the irrational, the abstract and the real of Cantos II and III. It is a recognition and realization that all reason is itself already the product of previous feeling. Because of this we do not find satisfaction through the mere application of reason, but instead through the application of this "later reason" which is really little more than the intellectual adaptation to what already gives pleasure.

In this way the marriage between captain and maiden (between the past of the Catawba and the future America of the captain) is only part of the equation. The important part of this marriage is not the fusion of the two lovers, nor the ideal love of each for the other, but the experience and transformation of the present environment that takes place when that marriage is consummated, that is to say: what matters is not the particulars of any given situation but the *life* that those particulars make possible. It is context over substance, process over product.

> The great Captain loved the ever-hill Catawba
> And therefore married Bawda, whom he found there,
> And Bawda loved the captain as she loved the sun.
>
> They married well because the marriage-place
> Was what they loved. It was neither heaven nor hell.
> They were love's characters come face to face.

As Bloom astutely notes, however, this perfection of integration is in this instance a kind of metaphorical fantasy, pointing us toward an ultimately ideal but unattainable perfection of experience, seemingly in conflict with Stevens' earlier statement "that we live in a place/ That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves." Indeed, this consummation, as I have already shown, is just one of many temporary consummations in "Notes," the very structure of which is itself a kind of continual ebb and flow of conflict and resolution. The marriage of captain and Bawda is but one more example of this structure, so it should come as no surprise that even the lessons of this perfect marriage are subject to revision and further refinement and complication, since there is never, and could never be, a permanent resolution in any of Stevens' work: "it can never be satisfied, the mind, never." Indeed, as Stevens and Dewey both knew, it is precisely this dissatisfaction that drives life.

In this spirit Stevens does not end the section with this perfect union but pushes on, exploring and cultivating further tensions. The next three cantos offer yet another tripartite argument in the anecdote of the Canon Aspirin, which provides a detailed and explicit meditation upon the value and complications of sensual, animal experience. When we first meet the obviously worldly and educated Canon Aspirin, it is clear that he is already himself in the moment of greatest tension, working out the complications of his dissatisfactions. Despite the elaborate dinner of "Mersault" and "Lobster Bombay with mango/ Chutney" the Canon seems pre-occupied with thoughts of his more sensible sister and her more simple domestic ecstasies.

> Then the Canon aspirin declaimed
> Of his sister, in what a sensible ecstasy
>
> She lived in here house. She had two daughters, one
> Of four, and one of seven whom she dressed
> The way a painter of pauvred colors paints.

Like he does in canto V of "It must Change," Stevens once again conflates ordinary experience and aesthetic experience in the metaphor of the painter, except that here it is the Canon's sister who is transformed into a domestic artist, a mother-painter of sorts in contrast to the planter-painter of the previous section. The difference, however, is clear: in the previous section the emphasis was upon the need for transformative change through aesthetic creation, while here the emphasis is upon the simple pleasure of the aesthetic as part of ordinary experience. Despite her deep connection with the simple world she has made, the Canon's sister is, nonetheless still found lacking. There is a certain resignation in the domestic simplicity described here, and because of this the children are never transformed or changed but are instead painted "appropriate to their poverty," with nothing of the unreal for "she hid them under simple names. She held/ them closelier to her by rejecting dreams."

The Canon respects and admires his sister's simple, ordered, seemingly more natural relationship to the world, which she has so carefully cultivated. Indeed, his thoughts about his sister eventually become the outline of "a fugue of praise;" but just as in cantos II and IV there is something missing here. The Canon is, as Thomas Jensen Hines says "a connoisseur of opposites," and therefore is not content to dwell only among his sister's austere interpretation of reality, but longs for something more sophisticated.[85] The domestic scene he describes it turns out is haunted by an absence. At night, the speaker explains, "When the children slept, his sister herself/ Demanded of sleep, in the excitements of silence/ Only the unmuddled self of sleep, for them." The image of this house without dreams, where sleep is merely the absence of sensation, raises again the specter of absence that haunts all of Stevens' philosophy, from "The Snow Man," to "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." The question becomes: what do we do when

[85] Hines, Thomas J.. *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger*. NJ: Associated University Presses, 1976. (203).

we are faced with this "profound absentia," what do we do when the "normal things [have] yawned themselves away," and the nothingness becomes "a point beyond which fact [can] not progress as fact." For Stevens, as for Dewey, this is a false dilemma, of course, and the problem lies precisely in the "unmuddled," dichotomous, and too utterly reasonable nature of the conception of this absence. As Stevens says in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "Reality is the beginning not the end," it is merely the silence, which invites music, and it is the integration of this music and life, "this amassing harmony," that the Canon finally recognizes at the end of Canto VI.

While the Canon's sensual sister lives as if reality was an uncomplicated thing to be closely adhered to, he still longs for something more. His contemplations of his sister's sensible world have brought him not only to the end of fact, but to the end of imagination as well, or that is, to a realization at last of their mutual dependence and interrelatedness, for as Stevens makes clear in the *Adagia* "to be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of the imagination, it is to be at the end of both." This is more clearly expressed in a letter Stevens wrote in response to a series of questions from Hi Simons:

> For all that, it gives him [The Canon Aspirin] in the long run, a sense of nothingness, of nakedness, of the finality and limitation of fact; and lying on his bed, he returns once more to night's pale illuminations. He identifies himself with them. He returns to the side of the children's bed, with every sense of human dependence. But there is a supreme effort which it is inevitable that he should make. If he is to elude human pathos, and fact, he must go straight to the utmost crown of night; find his way through the imagination or perhaps to the imagination. He might escape from fact but he would only arrive at another nothingness, another nakedness, the limitation of thought. It is not, then, a matter of eluding human pathos, human dependence. Thought is part of these, the imagination is part of these, and they are part of thought and imagination. In short, a man with a taste for Meursault, and Lobster Bombay, who has a sensible sister and who, for himself, thinks to the very material of his mind, doesn't have much choice about yielding to "the complicate, amassing harmony."[86]

[86] LWS (445).

In other words, both fact and the imagination have their end, their limitations, and neither is independent of our animal nature or our "human pathos, human dependence." For the Canon, as for us "it was not a choice/ Between excluding things. It was not a choice/ Between, but of. He chose to include the things/ That in each other are included." The Canon, has in essence, as Stevens urges us to do, made a "place dependent upon [himself]," he has realized, at least temporarily, the inherent interrelatedness between human pathos, animal feeling, pleasure, fact, sensation, and imagination.

In the following canto, however, Stevens gives us yet another version of this progress from the imposition of "the utmost crown of night" to the finding of "the complicate, the amassing harmony," and the first three lines show exactly how much this progress is grounded in the tensions and resistances of animal life. As Stevens says, the Canon "imposes orders as he thinks of them,/ as the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair." This is an interesting terecet for several reasons, not the least being Stevens' use of the word "think" here to describe the actions of the fox and the snake, once again conflating human and animal. However, what starts as a "brave affair," what begins as a natural response to the environment as it is encountered on a daily level, becomes in time a static imposition, taking the form of "statues of reasonable men,/ Who surpassed the most literate owl, the most erudite/ Of elephants." I have already discussed what Stevens thought of statues. Almost always the statue represents the calcification of what was once good and noble but has become dead and useless. In his attempt to move beyond the limitations of animal life, the creature comforts of his sister's sensible experience, the Canon founds only capitols of lifeless, bloodless reason.

To impose orders as "he thinks of them," as he encounters resistances (such as the absence at the end of reality) is a brave and necessary endeavor, but unlike the snake and the fox,

the Canon goes further—being human, in fact it is inevitable that he will. As Dewey said of animal life:

> What is distinctive in man makes it possible for him to sink below the level of the beasts. It also makes it possible for him to carry to new and unprecedented heights that unity of sense and impulse, of brain and eye and ear, that is exemplified in animal life, saturating it with the conscious meanings derived from communication and deliberate expression.[87]

This "unity of sense and impulse, of brain and eye and ear," taken to new heights is precisely the state of aesthetic satisfaction that exemplifies the imagination in its most powerful manifestation, that is, as the "supreme fiction" of life, as the irrational made rational. The Canon, however, seeking as he does to build capitols and to establish in their corridors statues of rational, reasonable men that in their descriptions transcend animal experience, misses the fact that the object is not to transcend animal life, not to transcend the irrational, but to build upon it naturally, without the physical violence that is inherent in it.

This fallacious clash between the "irrational" animal and the "rational" angel leads finally to the almost breathless, sudden, and excited realization that "to impose is not/ To discover." Again, as Dewey says "order is not imposed from without but is made out of the relations of harmonious interactions that energies bear to one another."[88] This realization is only possible however because of the confrontation described earlier. Because of this, Stevens argues "it must/ Be possible" that "in time/ The real will from its crude compounding come,/ Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,/ Warmed by a desperate milk." As in so much of Stevens work, the final consummation, the aesthetic moment of greatest integration, of greatest compounding, is likened to the experience of the animal. In addition to recalling the language of Dewey, this particular passage also recalls Yeats "rough beast," slouching "toward Bethlehem to be born," except that here the birth of this creature is a more welcome event. While in the previous canto the Canon

[87] AE (28).
[88] AE (20).

chose to "include the things/ That in each other are included," here he realizes the value instead of *finding* what Stevens elsewhere described as "what will suffice," that is what is most fundamental; the least upon which we can live. The Canon, only after great resistance, recognizes in the end that reality is not something that we impose nor is it something already complete to be mimicked and mirrored, but is instead a thing crudely compounded, to be nurtured through aesthetic transformation, like a young animal warmed by the "desperate milk" of longing. This, and not the music of the angels, is the true and "luminous melody of proper sound."

Having come to this realization, the Canon's lesson is complete and in the final cantos Stevens turns from the Canon to the poet speaker, who asks, rather suddenly, "What am I to believe?" The speaker it seems, is still unconvinced, still unsure that the realizations of the previous cantos are sufficient goods upon which to build a life. The angel of the previous canto (the impulse toward idealization) has been temporarily silenced, but has not disappeared; the speaker, like the woman of "Sunday Morning" still longs for some "imperishable," or in this case, some "expressible" bliss. Although Bloom insists the emphasis in this first line should be upon the word "I," I would argue that the word "am" is equally important, for the dilemma in these final cantos is between the satisfaction and pleasure of a free and untethered imagination and the tensions and resistances inherent in our conceptions of the world of fact and reason. The real question here becomes "what *can* I believe?" After having stripped bare everything that is false what is left? The answer to this question again is not a new one for Stevens. It is precisely the same answer that he gave in 1914, when he first published "Sunday Morning," and which he would repeat in various forms throughout his career.

In one final attempt to assert the dominance of the imagination, to find for it a place beyond the reach of reason, beyond doubt and fact, Stevens describes in great detail the blissful

descent of an angel from out of the abyss, who, like the pigeons of "Sunday Morning" also sinks "downward to darkness on extended wings." Indeed, it is no accident here that the movement in this vision is "downward through evening's revelations," for the necessary angel is an angel of earth, not one of the sky; it is the impulse towards the aesthetic as part and parcel of lived experience, and not the ideal. No sooner has Stevens imagined this angel, than it is drawn downward and toward the ground of sensual, corporeal experience, for it is in his descent only that the angel "grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight." Indeed, as the angel descends it becomes the speaker himself, for Stevens realizes quickly that this angel is merely an expression of need, one of any number of images, any number of ideas, with which to protect ourselves against the ravishments of time. For as the angel descends Stevens realizes, in a moment of typical sublime transfiguration, that it is not the angel who experiences any of this, but it is Stevens himself and the entire canto hinges on this sudden revelation.

> Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
> Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have
>
> No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
> Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
> And if there is an hour there is a day,
>
> There is a month, a year, there is a time
> In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
> I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

The power of this pleasure of pure being, though quickly qualified as merely "the escapades of death," and "Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof," is revelatory, for it resoundingly and ironically places the aesthetic back in the place of corporeal animal experience to which the next canto returns us. It is indeed, from within, Stevens finally argues that this impulse comes, not form on high, but out of our interactions with the soil, which is our intelligence.

In the following canto, as he so often does, Stevens returns us to the moment of greatest tension and resistance in order to see how that resistance has itself been transformed by the poem. The repetitions of *It Must Change*, and the "Red in red repetitions" of Canto III are here transformed into the "cock bugler" and the "robin" whose song, though still mere repetition, exists now in an entirely different context, which changes dramatically the way the speaker responds to them. Both the repetitions of tradition and those of nature, both the abstract and the concrete of the first two sections, are re-contextualized, becoming "an occupation, an exercise, a work/ A thing final in itself and, therefore, good."

Having come to ground in the previous canto, the speaker realizes "I can/ Do all that angels can. I enjoy like them,/ Like men besides, like men in light secluded/ Enjoying angels." Indeed, the speaker realizes that he is a part of what he imagines as well as what he sees and feels; that his experience is composed of the imagination as well as the natural world around him and *vis versa*. More accurately, he realizes that each is a vital part of the other and are as inextricable as they are similar in kind. Indeed, it is precisely the call of the "too weedy wren," which begins the canto, that is, not surprisingly, the impetus for this realization. Like the wren, the speaker's imaginings are part of the process of "merely going round/ Until merely going round is a final good." This is an explicitly pragmatist argument, of course, for it suggests that there is no final destination, no ground upon which to establish ourselves, and no sacred truth independent of our experience of it. There is only this going round, where going round means the continual engagement with the tensions and resistances we encounter in our environment. The possible poet that Stevens describes in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," is as Stevens says here "not the exceptional monster," not merely the angel of heaven, or only the lion whose roar reddens the desert sands, but is instead what he would later call "the necessary angel of

earth:" "he that of repetition is most master," where repetition is the very source of adaptation and adjustment to our environment.[89]

This adjustment and adaptation, this transformation, however, is always, and must always be, incomplete. No end is final and no consummation is a state of permanent bliss, but is always merely the impetus for further beginnings. Just as the speaker in canto IX invites the "cock bugler" to "whistle and bugle and *stop just short*," the speaker of this final canto describes the world of experience as a

> Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
> How is it I find you in difference, see you there
> In a moving contour, *a change not quite completed*?

You are familiar yet an aberration. (Italics Mine).

It is precisely the fact that she is incomplete that makes her such a potent figure, for it is only in our attempts to name and to check the "evasions" of this terrestrial world (to make abstract), that we have any reason for being. The world is perpetually incomplete and must be and must remain so. Nonetheless, there is always pleasure there, for out of this struggle there is always temporary consummation and the result of that consummation is precisely "the more than rational distortion,/ The fiction that results from feeling," for each new consummation is itself a kind of expression in one form or another.

It is because of this, Stevens argues that the "the irrational is rational," that this fiction that results from feeling is as much, if not more a part of the world than any of the rational systems built upon it. In a long discussion of Keats concept of "negative capability," Dewey describes this same idea, arguing that indeed the irrational is rational. There he says "'reason' at its height cannot attain complete grasp and a self-contained assurance. It must fall back upon imagination—upon the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense." In other words,

[89] The phrase "The necessary angel of earth," is from Stevens' poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," CP (423).

there is no rational separate from the irrational, the emotional, or the animal; they are of a kind and that kind is inseparable from the very feelings that drive life.

V "MY GREEN, MY FLUENT MUNDO"

"An Aesthetic experience, the work of art in its actuality, is *perception*.[90]
—John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

In her book *The Violence Within the Violence Without* Jacqueline Vaught Brogan explores what she calls Stevens' "revolutionary poetics," playing upon a phrase from Adrienne Rich, for whom Stevens was an intensely important early influence.[91] This poetics of revolution is intimately linked with Dewey's notion of the value and importance of resistance and tension as sources of creative power. Drawing upon many of the same source texts, including "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Brogan argues that her work "traces in detail how what Stevens called the "violence within" came to wrestle with a growing "violence without" that culminated in a genuine "revolutionary poetics" that remains important to us today.[92] Although Brogan is largely interested, as is Alan Filreis, in how Stevens was engaged with and resisting "actual" political realities on the ground, her work and the spirit of her work raises important questions about the influence of Stevens' implicitly Deweyan aesthetics, and how poets of the following generation came to interpret and adapt those ideas in their own work. Much has already been said about the influence of this aesthetic upon the work of Adrienne Rich.

In the following chapter, however, I would like to explore two other contemporary figures whose work, inspired largely by the poetry of Stevens as well as Moore and Bishop, captures Dewey's idea of transformative experience, of the poem as a source and means of

[90] AE (167).
[91] The original phrase from Rich appears in *What is Found There* (194).
[92] Brogan, Jacqueline Vaught. *The Violence Within the Violence Without: Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*. Athens: Georgia UP, 2003.

continual organization of the environment from out of the chaos and rigid order that lie at either pole of the aesthetic. While Stevens and Moore were operating under great stress and resistance to the shifting cultural and political realities of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and while their work captures the important facts of environment and resistance that are so central to Dewey's aesthetic, John Ashbery and A.R. Ammons, were responding to a very different world, where popular culture, media, and advertising were rapidly becoming a part of the very environment of our lives, a world not dominated by the brute force of reality, as Stevens saw it in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," but one dominated by the chaos of imaginative overproduction and rhetorical homogenization. In the face of this new world, this new form of life, both Ammons and Ashbery developed a compositional poetics of transformation and integration that was not expressly political, but which, more fundamentally, sought to organize and continually reinvigorate their environment through the potential of reconstructive aesthetic experience, making out of the flux and chaos of postmodern life, a "green [and] fluent mundo" in which to live

4
"THE INTENSITY OF MINOR ACTS:" TRANSFORMATION IN JOHN ASHBERY AND A.R. AMMONS

The esthetic experience—in its limited sense—is thus seen to be inherently connected with the experience of making
—John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

I TRANSFORMING COMPOSITIONS

The garbage heap of used-up language is thrown at the feet of poets, and it is their job to make or revamp a language that will fly again.[1]
—A.R. Ammons

It's fun to scratch around
And maybe come up with something. But for the tender blur
Of the setting to mean something, words must be ejected
bodily…[2]
—John Ashbery, "A Wave"

While all the poets who are the subject of this dissertation are in one way or another using poetry as a form of aesthetic transformation, few are as representative of this process as John Ashbery and A.R. Ammons, both of whom offer a vision of the composition of poetry as a continual and active response to an environment of often cultivated resistance and tension. In fact the poetry of Ashbery and Ammons is exemplary of Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic experience. Not only does it address many of the same philosophical and aesthetic ideas as Dewey's work, but its shape and structure provide an effective model for the kind of transformative aesthetic experience that he describes in *Art as Experience*. Unlike much of the poetry we have looked at, which the reader encounters as a seemingly finished work of art, the poetry of Ashbery and Ammons (especially their long-form poetry) exemplifies instead the flow of experience and, in contrast, feels as if it is coming together—being composed—in the very moment of its reading.

[1] *Paris Review*; Summer 96, Vol. 38 Issue 139, p62-91.
[2] JACP (789).

In the case of Ashbery at least, this sense of becoming is no accident. For Ashbery "the process of writing poetry becomes the poem." The poem is its own subject and represents its own "coming into being."[3] This intense self-reflexivity and attention to the process of composition as part and parcel of experience provides the reader with a representative vision of the way that ordinary life too, like writing, is always the product of an unending process of adjustment, of doing and undergoing, and that the flow of that process is as important and meaningful as any of its constituent elements. In this sense Ashbery and Ammons are exemplary poets of experience. But their work is also representative of the inherently constructive and transformative nature of the aesthetic: how it continually creates and changes our relationship to the larger field of relations in which we act, how it connects to what Dewey called that "qualitative 'background' which is defined and made definitely conscious in particular objects and specific moments."[4]

Indeed, in both Ashbery and Ammons we see an attention to the construction of a constantly shifting background as the active form of ongoing aesthetic life. Moving beyond the dichotomy of sense and intellect that divides form from matter, Ashbery and Ammons focus instead on the inherently interdependent nature of the two *in action*, on what Dewey called "the perceptual whole constituted by [its] related parts."[5] These relations, as Dewey notes, are not limited only to observed objects such as buildings or trees, but also include, among other things, memories and expectations of past and future experiences. Indeed, such relations are central to the construction of aesthetic experience. "In order to perceive esthetically," says Dewey, the artist "must remake his past experiences so that they can enter integrally into a new pattern."[6] "Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being

[3] "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery." Philip L. Gerber, Ed. Michigan Quarterly Review 20.3 (Summer 1981): 232-55.
[4] AE (197)
[5] AE (140)
[6] AE (143)

wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive. Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reenforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is."[7]

In Ashbery and Ammons this quickening takes the shape of a form of poetry that often integrates or implicates, in the very moment of its composition, several unexpected and emotionally-charged connotations, memories, and expectations, so that a scene beheld or imagined may recall or even be mixed up with the remembered experiences of a painting or a novel, a poem (such as Wordsworth's *Prelude* or Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*), a pop song—the rhythm of which may itself become a vital and formative part of present experience—and anticipations of what is to come of oneself or of one's art. This observation helps us to understand that Ashbery and Ammons are not merely describing or deconstructing experience as it transpires, that they are not trying to capture experience (which in Deweyan terms is oxymoronic, since experience is never fixed) but that they are instead actively engaged in a continual process of transforming their experience as a form of composition.

Central to this transformative engagement is Dewey's concept of "doing and undergoing." For Dewey, all action results in a change both within the subject and within its environment, creating a constantly shifting field of experience in which new relations must be continually made and remade. The establishment of such relations may be chaotic (where the subject is merely the unwitting receiver of some intense sensation) or alternately mechanical (where every outcome is easily anticipated in advance) in which case the experience will be alternately one of frustration or of boredom. Such an unbalance, says Dewey, "blurs the perception of relations and leaves the experience partial and distorted, with scant or false

[7] AE (24)

meaning."[8] But when "an experience" takes shape it is always as the re-founding or reconstruction of a meaningful relation between what one has suffered and what one has done. The establishment of such an equilibrium marks a re-integration of the self and the world and is often followed by a sense of consummation or completeness. This equilibrium, however, as Dewey makes clear, is not mere stasis; it is not an end but a beginning, part of a much larger flow of experience that demands continual attention.

> Fulfilling, consummating, are continuous functions, not mere ends, located at one place only. An engraver, painter, or writer is in process of completing at every stage of his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come.[9]

The composing poet and the process of composition itself, then, are apt metaphors for the experience of active life when it is most appreciatively and meaningfully perceived and understood. In fact the distance between artistic creation and esthetic apprehension in a work of art, Dewey argues, is never as great as we might suppose. The experience of the artist, that is the artistic process of composition and aesthetic construction, is not vastly different from that of that of the perceiver who must also compose the work of art as it is encountered, for just as the artist is always perceiving as he makes the perceiver always making as he perceives. As Dewey says, "the artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works," and the process of doing and undergoing, in Deweyan terms, is as much a part of artistic creation as it is of esthetic apprehension.

> As we manipulate, we touch and feel; as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear. The hand moves with etching needle or with brush. The eye attends and reports the consequence of what is done. Because of this intimate connection, subsequent doing is cumulative and not a matter of caprice nor yet of routine. In an emphatic artistic-esthetic experience, the relation is so close that it controls simultaneously both the doing and the perception.[10]

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[8] AE (51)
[9] AE (63)
[10] AE (56)

Thus a work of art encountered is not only "An experience," but a kind of instruction manual for living.

II "FOR ALL THE WORLD LIKE A POET"

"All art is a process of making the world a different place in which to live, and involves a phase of protest and of compensatory response." [11]

—John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*

"There were new people watching and waiting, conjugating in this way the distance and emptiness, transforming the scarcely noticeable bleakness into something both intimate and noble." [12]

—John Ashbery, "The Recital"

"My poems are about the experience of experience," said Ashbery. "The particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through to me."[13] Though we should be wary of placing too much value upon what poets say about their own work, such a statement as this, which emphasizes the importance of the way that experience is formed and takes shape, such an attention to the feeling of its becoming—as it is filtered through to him—reveals a lot about how to approach and how not to approach an Ashbery poem. This self-avowed attention to experience, however, is more than merely a rejection of subject matter or a retreat into mere language games. Ashbery's notorious difficulty, about which critics have made much noise, is not the result of an active rejection of meaning, but is instead the byproduct of a poetry that is deeply attentive to the reconstructive potential of art as a quality of experience. As such, Ashbery's work provides a remarkable example of the aesthetic potential present in even the most mundane moments of life.

[11] EN (363)
[12] JACP (318)
[13] "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery." Philip L. Gerber, Ed. Michigan Quarterly Review 20.3 (Summer 1981): 232-55.

Such an argument, however, flies in the face of much popular Ashbery criticism, which has, for several decades, tended to focus on the way that his work actively evades or disrupts meaning, creating the image of a poet who revels in a kind of deconstructive aporia.[14] Perloff's close reading—if we can call it that—of "These Lacustrine Cities," for instance is one good example of the way that critics have overplayed the antagonistic or disruptive nature of Ashbery's poetry. "'These Lacustrine Cities,' is framed as a series of synechdoches, but Ashbery's are not, in the words of Wallace Stevens' title 'Parts of a World.' For there seems to be no world, no whole to which these parts may be said to belong."[15] Although her reading offers a welcome antidote to critics who insisted on reading Ashbery from a purely symbolic perspective, her ironically formalist assumptions inadvertently render the work entirely irrelevant except as a piece of anti-modernist polemic. While many of Ashbery's critics have praised and condemned in equal measures this supposed embrace of surface and absence, few have recognized that what often appears to be a rejection or deconstruction of meaning in Ashbery is in fact merely the by-product of a largely reconstructive method of composition that is the logical extension of modernist practices inherited in part from Moore, Stevens, and Bishop. Ashbery may begin in aporia, he may start from a position of tension, confusion, or absence, but the thrust of his work is not merely to celebrate such moments but to actively remake them into an experience that is more satisfying and finally meaningful.

Martin Kevorkian is another critic who also seems to praise Ashbery's active avoidance of meaning, arguing that his work, especially *Flow Chart*, is intentionally and self-consciously

[14] Two prominent examples: Marjorie Perloff and Charles Bernstein have both, in different ways, focused only on those aspects of Ashbery's work that are most in line with the principles of "indeterminacy" or "language poetry," while ignoring or even actively rejecting—as politically or aesthetically suspect (or conservative)—those more cogent moments of his work which might be characterized as modernist, symbolist, or academic. Perloff's well known, and in my estimation, flawed, division of American poetry into symbolist and non-symbolist traditions in *The poetics of Indeterminacy* is one good example of this Manichean approach to Ashbery's work.

[15] *Poetics of Indeterminacy* (10).

difficult and that the poet actually goes out of his way to lay traps for his future critics ensuring a kind of inexhaustibility that encourages further critical attention.[16] While this line of reasoning does indeed help us to understand some of the fundamental problems of Ashbery criticism—especially the way that he has been received and often abused by poststructuralist critics eager to apply the latest theory to his work—it strikes me as perhaps a too convenient and easy method of explaining away Ashbery's difficulty. Worse, it seems to suggest a kind of narrow intentionality that negates the recursive, organic nature of aesthetic experience, that is, the way that the artist must continually adjust his or her expectations and interests as the work takes shape. If the intricacy and complexity of Ashbery's work is indeed simply the product of an intentionally manufactured linguistic surface, whose only purpose is to entice and then reject any kind of critical interpretation, then what is left for the reader, or for that matter, for Ashbery? And more importantly, how do we account for the inevitable and frequent moments of consummation and resolution in his work that suggest in contrast an abiding attraction to the ongoing pleasures of meaning and aesthetic integration however fleeting and temporary they might be?

Ashbery may indeed be wary of being pinned down by any one critic—what poet isn't—but that is because his poetry manifests Dewey's faith in the value of transition, reconstruction, and transformation as not only inevitable and necessary, but as an inherently useful part of the ongoing rhythm of meaningful experience. Ashbery tackles this very issue in his 1957 essay "The Impossible." Speaking at once about the poetry of Gertrude Stein and the prose of Henry James, Ashbery says—in language remarkably reminiscent of Dewey's *Art as Experience*—that "Just as life is being constantly altered by each breath one draws, just as each second of life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of elaboration which

[16]Kevorkian, Martin. "John Ashbery's *Flow Chart:* John Ashbery and the Theorists on John Ashbery Against the Critics Against John Ashbery." *New Literary History*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring, 1994 (459-76).

gives the work of these two writers a texture of bewildering luxuriance—that of a tropical rain-forest of ideas—seems to obey some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening."[17] Although not usually a term applied to Stein, James, or Ashbery, this passage is inherently "naturalist" in its attention to the biological rhythms of lived experience and its description of language as a lush rain forest. "Other persons may prefer some other word than 'naturalistic' to express escape from convention to perception." Says Dewey, "But whatever word is used, it must, if it is to be true to refreshment of esthetic form, emphasize sensitivity to natural rhythm."[18] Ashbery's difficulty then, like many modern and contemporary poets and writers (including Gertrude Stein and the later Henry James), is not the product of an intellectual device conceived before the work of art has begun, but is the result of a compositional method that is in constant engagement with the multiplicity of daily life in all of its many manifestations. It is an attention to the fact that "underneath the rhythm of…every work of art there lies, as a substratum in the depths of the subconsciousness, the basic pattern of the relations of the live creature to his environment."[19]

Like Ammons's poetics of inclusion, Ashbery's trademark generosity of spirit—his attempt to include every new perception and relation in his work no matter how small or seemingly insignificant—is in some respects the result of a Deweyan engagement with the larger world of experience of which the poem itself is always an important and contributing part. As Bonnie Costello aptly notes: "reading is as much Ashbery's subject as writing is, and it is through his idea of reading that his self-reflexiveness escapes banal solipsism and opens onto larger questions of communication."[20] Indeed it is precisely the failure to recognize the inherent interrelatedness between reading and writing, between the poem as object and the poem as

[17] Ashbery, John. "The Impossible." *Poetry*. July, 1957. (250-254)
[18] AE (158)
[19] AE (155)
[20] Costello, Bonnie. "John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader." Contemporary Literature, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 493-514. Costello later adds: "the poet's experience of the text becomes his vantage point for considering all experience, and the condition of textuality is for him characteristic of the condition of all consciousness."

experience, that has created so much confusion among Ashbery critics. In Ashbery's work there is an implicit recognition that making is always a process of perceiving and that the poem is both an expression of the complexity of experience, as well as a source of future experience for both the writer and the reader. If this experience feels at times rather messy or, as Kevorkian suggests, intentionally difficult, that is because for Ashbery the poem is always primarily a process and not a product. Like an expressionist (or abstract expressionist) painter, Ashbery is unafraid to show us his brushstrokes. Indeed, he invites the reader, encourages them, to imaginatively participate in the construction of the work.

This attention to the rhythmic process of experience as at once doing and undergoing, making and perceiving, is exemplified well in Ashbery's "Soonest Mended."

The poem is ostensibly a meditation on the aesthetic efficacy of perpetual youthfulness, "For time is an emulsion, and probably thinking not to/ grow up/ Is the brightest kind of maturity." But the poem also offers an excellent expression of life as a kind of "fence-sitting/ Raised" as he says, "to the level of an esthetic ideal." Such fence-sitting is not merely apoliticalicism, however, but represents instead the striking of an equilibrium and an openness to the potentiality of perpetual aesthetic transformation. "We are all talkers," Ashbery says:

> It is true, but underneath the talk lies
> The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose
> Meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor

This loose meaning, below the level of language, is seemingly scattered out like grains or stalks of wheat on a threshing floor. It is at once the product and vital material (the food) of the impulses and resistances of "moving and wanting not to be moved." It is presented here as literally the aesthetic ground of experience, "untidy," and "loose," but full of potential, driving life and talk and poetry.

This close attention to the process of aesthetic transformation as poetic composition is best seen, however, in Ashbery's longer works including "A Wave," "Litany," and the book length *Flow Chart*. While all of these poems, especially *Flow Chart*, are highly representative of Ashbery's transformational aesthetic, they are also prohibitively unwieldy to sufficiently discuss in a single chapter. To do them justice would require much more space than is available in this dissertation. Indeed, *Flow Chart* is in many respects deserving of its own entire monograph. Therefore with respect to the value of close reading, and in an attempt to avoid recourse to heavy amounts of generalization and summary, I have chosen instead to focus my discussion of Ashbery's compositional aesthetic on a more manageable and yet still highly representative poem of aesthetic transformation: "The Skaters."

* * *

"The Skaters" has been popular among Ashbery critics, partly because, in contrast to much of his other early work, it provides a cogent set of images and a seemingly discernible set of embedded narratives that develop over the course of the poem. This cogency, however, has also been the source of much debate, especially among those who want to save Ashbery from the impositions of his critics. Brian McHale, for instance, has argued that the critical reception of "The Skaters" offers a kind of case study in "How (Not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems," and his analysis of previous critics' responses provides a useful warning. For McHale, like Kevorkian, Ashbery is a kind of trickster poet who actively "anticipates and preempts [the] interpretive moves" of his readers, "appearing to cater to [their readings] only in order to entrap and outflank" them.[21] According to McHale, critics and readers of Ashbery's "The Skaters" have overlooked the poem's manufactured indeterminacy, selecting instead "'key' lines or

[21] McHale, Brian. "How (Not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery's 'The Skaters'" *Poetics Today* Fall 2000 21(3): 561-590

passages, treating these as interpretive centers or 'nodes' around which to organize the heterogeneous materials of the poem." As a consequence "other materials come to be subordinated in various ways…to these 'key' passages or are simply passed over in silence, so that the poem is reduced to a skeletal structure of points that yield most readily to a particular interpretive orientation." These interpretive "keys" include "(1) descriptive (world oriented) statements; (2) autobiographical (or speaker-oriented, expressive) statements; and (3) ars-poetic (or text-oriented, textually self-reflexive) statements."

While McHale is absolutely right to point out the problems inherent in any reading that would seek to limit the poem to any one of these three important interpretive keys, he says nothing of the viability or possibility of a reading that actively takes all of them into account simultaneously; and indeed, this is the only way to understand Ashbery. As Ashbery himself said in an interview with the New York School poet Kenneth Koch "when statements occur in poetry they are merely a part of the combined refractions of everything else."[22] In this sense Ashbery's poetic engagement with his world is not limited to any one of these "interpretive nodes," but invokes, and in the process transforms, all of them simultaneously, exploring the ways in which they inform one another to contribute to the experience of the poem as it progresses over time. In this sense "The Skaters," like so much of Ashbery's work, captures the very moment of composition as a form of aesthetic experience and, conversely, of experience as a form of composition or world-making. Ashbery's difficulty comes then not from a conscious desire to entrap or out-maneuver his critics or readers, but on the contrary, from his attempt to share with them the varied, often mundane, aspects of his experience in the moment of poetic composition, drawing equally upon present experience, memory, autobiography, literature, and world-oriented observations all at once.

[22] Quoted in Helen Vendler's *The Music of what Happens*. Cambridge Harvard UP, 1988.

In Ashbery's "The Skaters" we find a remarkable level of this kind of integration between the self, the world, and the poem. Each new element that is introduced is often questioned or interrogated, but ultimately through this questioning, finds its place, like the pieces of a puzzle, among the rest of the poet's and the poem's experience. The title of the poem offers some insight into this process of integration, since the seeming impetus for composition, the image and idea of these "skaters," evokes, all at once, several categories of experience, including autobiography and memory, observation, and literary and artistic allusion. As other critics have noted, the title and the initial descriptions of these skaters may refer to the speaker's real or imagined memories of his childhood in Rochester, but the title is also resonant with enormous literary and artistic significance. Many, for instance, have noted that the title is likely a reference to the skating scene in Wordsworth's *Prelude,* but it also calls to mind several other literary, artistic, and musical allusions that Ashbery would have been intensely familiar with at the time of the poem's composition, including Max Beckmann's *The Skaters*, Brueghel's *Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap*, Giacomo Meyerbeer's Opera *Le Prophéte*, Emerson's argument in "Experience," that "we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them," and, as critic David Herd argues, even Thoreau's descriptions of "skating" water bugs in Walden. [23]

In this sense, the poet's remembered or even his imagined memories of ice skating are invariably and inescapably enmeshed with and informed by these poetic and artistic experiences, so that real life, imagined life, the life of others, and the life of art (visual, literary, and musical) are all integrated together within the larger experience of contemplation that the poem enacts. Indeed, in several ways, this poem, like almost all of Ashbery's work, is primarily a record of the

[23] "The title, as critics have observed, recalls the skaters passage in *The Prelude*. There are, however, skaters in Walden also, Thoreau (himself alluding to Wordsworth, perhaps) giving extended attention to the minute operations of those water insects which inhabit the surface of his pond." (109). Herd, David. *John Ashbery and American Poetry*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

process of contemplation at work. As David Herd notes, Ashbery's poem, unlike Wordsworth's *Prelude*, "observes not the growth of a mind over a period of time, but the operations of mind in the time of their happening."[24] In this sense the poem reveals how each observation, each experience, even the experience of something read or imagined, is loaded with a nearly inexhaustible level of meaning, so much so, in fact, that the question is not how does one "put it all down," but always what does one "leave out," or, more specifically, what does one choose to leave out. As Ashbery says in "The New Spirit," "It is you who made this, therefore you are true. But the truth has passed on/ to divide all."[25] Indeed, just as we saw in Stevens, Moore, and Bishop, every construction, every artifice, every arrangement offered here is little more than what Frost called a "momentary stay against confusion," a moment of resolution that is itself always the source of further tensions and resistance. Thus the skaters as they glide, like the falling snow that "is a portion of the subject of this poem" leave only a temporary imprint upon the ice, "forgotten as the words fly briskly across, each time/ Bringing down meaning as snow from a low sky." In this sense the poem's compositional moment and its putative subject are integrated. Writing is a kind of skating, and must, as Stevens says in "Of Modern Poetry," "Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may/Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman combing." (219).

It is no accident, I believe, that Stevens and Ashbery both choose the image of skaters to help explain or, in Ashbery's case, to jump-start the act of poetic composition, likening it to a common, physical activity. Both poets are likely drawing upon the several images of ice-skating in Emerson's essays, and just as Emerson argued in "Poetry and Imagination" that "every writer is a skater, and must go partly where he would, and partly where the skates carry him," Ashbery

[24] Ibid. (109).
[25] JACP (247).

understands that "all writing," no matter how contemplative or how idiosyncratic, "must be in a degree exoteric," a part of the changing and changeable world of common experience, "written to a human *should* or *would*, instead of to the fatal *is*."[26] "Talent amuses," Emerson says, "but if your verse has not a necessary and autobiographic basis, though under whatever gay poetic veils, it shall not waste my time;" and indeed Ashbery's poem, though it may or may not be about a real experience of ice-skating, is still nonetheless the record of an immediate and often intimate engagement with a complex world, making a life out of the fluid motion of one's own continual reconstructions of experience. Its composition is the record of the poet's very "autobiographic" integration and subsequent transformation of self and environment. What begin as seemingly disparate categories of experience (world-based observations, artistic recollection and literary allusion, memory, and anticipations of the future), become integrated in the poet's experience.

And this is precisely where we find ourselves in the first lines of "The Skaters," which opens, like Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" with an aesthetic transformation of contemplated sound into a form of embodied feeling.

> These decibels
> Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound
> Into which being enters, and is apart.

Where these decibels, these measurements of sound, are coming from and how the speaker hears them remains entirely unexplained; but Ashbery has, since the poem's publication, provided his critics with several important clues. If we proceed, as nearly every earlier critic has, from the title of the poem, we can safely argue that 'these decibels" are the real or imagined sound of an ice-skater's blades as they cut across the ice, and indeed, on one level of meaning, they are. But, as John Shoptaw explains, these decibels may also be a reference to the heard or remembered music

[26] From "Poetry and Imagination." Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Letters and Social Aims.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010.

of Giacomo Meyerbeer. As Shoptaw says "Ashbery titled 'The Skaters' after 'Les Patineurs,' a medley by constant Lambert of the skaters' ballet from Ciacomo Meyerbeer's opera, *Le Prophéte*," so it is entirely possible that the poem begins as a response not only to the sound of ice-skaters, but also as a kind of meditative ekphrasis of Meyerbeer's music.[27] Whatever the case, these sounds, this music, the words of the poem itself, are in these opening lines instantaneously transformed into a kind of feeling, which then simultaneously takes on the shape and form of animal life. Playing upon both meanings of the word flagellate, Ashbery transforms these decibels into a form of penitence (flagellation) and a simple animal organism, a flagellate (or "entity of sound") which enters wholly new into the world. As we so often see in the work of Stevens, Moore, and Bishop, the moment of aesthetic transformation, even in a poet as seemingly esoteric as Ashbery, is here clothed in the accoutrements of the most basic form of biological life. This heard music, which is also the music of the poem, has become embodied, and as Dewey said of the finished work of art, "as much a part of the objective world as is a locomotive or a dynamo."

As the speaker proceeds to describe the scene of these "skaters" it is this sense of the difficulty of always becoming that dominates much of the emotional tone of the first section.

> Their colors on a warm February day
> Make for masses of inertia, and hips
> Prod out of the violet-seeming into a new kind
> Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new
> In the sense of the next one in an infinite series
> But, as it were, pre-existing or pre-seeming in
> Such a way as to contrast funnily with the unexpectedness
> And somehow push us all into perdition.

As with so much of Ashbery's work, these lines appear intentionally complex and abstruse, but manage to capture, in the connotations of the language, the physical, sensual desire and visceral

[27] Shoptaw, John. *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994. (92).

need that underlies the aesthetic impulse. The resistances, the inertial relations between the sounds, images, and colors of these "decibels" invoke a "new kind of demand," one that is entirely unexpected but unusually natural, as if it had always been; and the sudden realization of this new demand, which is really quite old, pushes us, as the speaker says, "into perdition." This feeling of perdition is a kind of realization that the world of our experience is not complete, but is always of our making, continually driven by an engagement with our own novel perceptions and desires. As Ashbery concludes just two lines later, "the answer is that it is novelty/ That guides these swift blades o'er the ice," and it is in part the cultivation of this novelty that drives the poem and life.

Although "The Skaters" addresses the difficulties of becoming, this is only part of a larger concern for the act of composition as a method of bringing together and balancing all of the seemingly disparate categories of experience, making of them "an experience," in the most Deweyan sense of the word. But this is a difficult ambition and, although the poem itself is an obvious testament to the success of Ashbery's compositional method, it also provides a record of the difficulties, tensions, and continual readjustments inherent to it. Several pages later, after describing the orchestral cacophony of the "storm fiend" and the speaker's seeming inability to reconcile in dialogue his past childhood and inevitable old age, worried about going from "not interesting" to "old and uninteresting," he says:

> So much has passed through my mind this morning
> That I can give you but a dim account of it:
> It is already after lunch, the men are returning to their
> positions around the cement mixer
> And I try to sort out what has happened to me."[28]

The flow of thought, the rhythm of the previous lines, has been violently interrupted (by the sound of the cement mixer no doubt) and the speaker is reduced to dull, unadorned statements of

[28] JACP (149-150)

mere fact: "I try to sort out what has happened to me." These lines however, as prosaic as they appear to be, are actually crucial, for that is exactly what the speaker has been doing all along, sorting out and organizing his disparate experience, arranging what has passed and is passing through his mind into some kind of coherent and meaningful whole, choosing and choosing not to choose, that which interests him.

Despite this interruption, or perhaps because of it, the poet returns again, after another short digression that seems to include images of both past and present experience, to the central theme of the skaters, introducing the image of the figure eight as a symbol for a kind of aesthetic reconstruction based on "the intensity of minor acts."

> As skaters
> elaborate their distances,
> Taking a separate line to its end. Returning to the mass, they
> join each other
> Blotted in an incredible mess of dark colors, and again
> reappearing to take the theme
> Some little distance, like fishing boats developing from the
> land different parabolas,
> Taking the exquisite theme far, into farness, to Land's End
> To the ends of the earth!

These last lines may seem at first glance like a bit of poetic fancy, but they actually anticipate and foreshadow the long voyage and island solitude of sections two and three. What is really important in this passage, however, is not necessarily the images themselves, but the implications of their movements, suggesting the way that both poetry and experience are constructed—like the tack of a ship, or the motion of an ice-skater— through a continual engagement and re-engagement with the larger physical and intellectual environment of which it is part. Indeed, this figure eight will become a central trope for Ashbery, representing experience as a continual back and forth between a desire for heaven and earth, the abstract and the positive, and the past, present, and future. In fact few images better capture the recurrent structure of "doing and

undergoing" than the description of the intersection of this figure eight, where, like the structure of the poem itself, past experience and expectation are continually explored and reconciled in the present moment, developing organically in relation to its own transformations. Likewise the organically aesthetic shape of the parabolas of these fishing boats, constantly responding to the shoreline, captures well the constructive vitality of encountered environmental resistances, calling to mind, Emerson's argument that "the voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks."[29]

This very act of arranging, of navigating back and forth between memory and present need, text and worldly observations, is complicated by the speaker's choices and his own contributions to his environment. His responses and interests become, as soon as they are manifest, products of his lived environment and it is this tension, this feeling of never fully being at an end, of never fully grasping the totality of all of these "discarded objects that ought to be described," that drives the poem forward. "But can one ever be sure of which ones?" Every choice is also a leaving out and it is this "leaving out business" that intrigues and tantalizes the speaker for "On it hinges the very importance of what's novel," or, as the speaker goes on to say, what is "autocratic, or dense or silly." [30] This is a strange passage and one that has no doubt confused many readers, for the seemingly arbitrary and absurd language of "autocratic, or dense or silly" tends to undermine the more heady philosophical gesture that precedes it. But far from undermining or rejecting meaning, Ashbery is actually describing its very construction through the process of experience. Indeed, as these last lines imply, meaning itself hinges upon this idea of leaving out, since it is only by choosing from out of the whole rush of experience those thoughts, feelings, objects, and ideas that engage one's interest that the world of experience takes

[29] From "Self Reliance." Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays First Series*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979.
[30] JACP (152)

shape, only in that way that things can ever be felt and thus named or named and thus felt as "autocratic, or dense or silly." Without some kind of interest or choice there is no meaning, but only flux. In the same way, Ashbery also seems to be describing the experience of the reader, and the critic, too, both of whom must always choose to limit to some degree, the wave upon wave of images and allusions they encounter in order to ever make any coherent sense of a poem like "The Skaters."

Despite having just raised the subject for his readers, Ashbery refuses to comment upon the question of "this leaving-out business," except to say that "the carnivorous way of these lines is to devour their own nature." Every choice, every limit, every line in essence, is a way of feeding upon the world that temporarily annihilates all but what is chosen, so that every choice is a kind of loss, leaving "nothing but a bitter impression of absence." For Ashbery, the very construction of meaning generates always a kind of simultaneous longing, or what Dewey would call *need*, for what has been left out, what has, in the process, been missed. But this nostalgia for what has been left out is itself a product of the poet's continual construction of experience, a process whereby the poet must navigate between the chaos and danger of including everything, and the rigidity and fixity of total absence, "which as we know, involves presence, but still." What Ashbery is describing here, and what he makes plain just a few lines later, is the value and importance of the rhythm of transformative aesthetic experience itself, of simultaneously *doing* and *undergoing*. "Hence," as Ashbery says, comparing the poem to falling snow:

> Neither the importance of the individual flake,
> Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm, if
> It has any, is what it is,
> But the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps, from abstract
> into positive and back to a slightly less diluted abstract. (153)

In other words, it is the rhythm of experience, the rhythm of these choices (which is also the rhythm of the poem), that is important. Each concrete individual observation is indeed always

part of a larger abstract experience, but what really matters is neither the individual observations nor the bigger experience of being of which they are a part, but the recognition and attention paid to the continual movement back and forth from one to the other as a form of aesthetic reconstruction. This back and forth mirrors perfectly Dewey's concept of the rhythmic development of experience, where, if aesthetic integrity is to be preserved, each individual part, each experience, must always be readjusted to the larger developing whole. "The form of the whole," Dewey says,

> is therefore present in every member. Fulfilling, consummating, are continuous functions, not mere ends, located at one place only. An engraver, painter, or writer is in process of completing at every stage of his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come. Otherwise there is no consistency and no security in his successive acts. (AE 63)

What really matters is the change that takes place as a result of this rhythm, the constant movement toward a more fully integrated experience. To move from the abstract to the positive, and then back to "a slightly less diluted abstract," is to note the very process of aesthetic transformation as it happens on the level of ordinary day to day life, where raw experience becomes "*an* experience" that can be noted, and then shared with others.

Despite this moment of near epiphany, in which the speaker becomes suddenly aware of his own method, he immediately begins again to doubt himself, falling back into a world of narrower anaesethtic experience dominated by what he calls an uncomplicated "old-fashioned cause-and-effect." But this extremely self-referential, almost embarrassed sense of resignation and doubt, as we also saw in Stevens and Bishop, is the normal by-product of all consummatory experience, which can only sustain itself for a short period before encountering further resistances that frustrate and interrupt the satisfaction of the moment. In this case the resistance comes to Ashbery in the form of an embarrassed sense of self-doubt or intellectual transgression that must be addressed and overcome, integrated into the poem as a meaningful part of its form.

Rather than editing out the natural uncertainties, doubts, and anxieties that influence any compositional process, Ashbery, as he so often does, chooses instead to incorporate them as a method, at least in part, of "going/ Further in and correcting the whole mismanaged mess." This post-consummatory moment, which immediately precedes the end of the first section, marks yet another shift in the overall movement of "The Skaters," and just as Ashbery proceeds into the second, third, and fourth sections, the poet (and the reader it seems) is "Placed squarely in front of his dilemma, on all fours before the lamentable spectacle of the unknown," armed it seems only with a small candle to light the way.

Leaping off from this explicitly animal (and perhaps sexual) image of facing the unknown "on all fours," the poem opens up unexpectedly into an imaginative, perhaps metaphorical, but also perhaps read or remembered voyage in search of what the poet David Lehman calls "a suitable desert isle somewhere between heaven and no place…an epic metaphor for the false starts and unknown destinations of the embattled imagination, with its struggles for escape and transcendence."[31] As with so much of Ashbery's work, it is impossible to know precisely what this second section is meant to describe. What is clear, however, is that these descriptions are a continuation of, and not a departure from the compositional experiences described in the first section. Just as the poem begins in response to the sound of the skaters, this voyage is just another transformation of the speaker's environment of disparate experience. Although Lehman is an astute reader of Ashbery, his brief reading of "The Skaters" tends to overemphasize the importance of this imaginative voyage at the expense of the larger poem, missing in the process the value and centrality of the compositional moment as it is established in the first section. For Lehman this journey is, simply put, a metaphor for the imagination's

[31] Lehman David "The Shield of a Greeting" *Beyond Amazement New Essays on John Ashbery*. Ed. Lehman, David. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.

struggle to escape or transcend reality, but for Ashbery, the imagination is always less the means of an escape than it is a method of change and adaptation, and this imaginative voyage is less an attempt to get away from life, (to somehow find some other place outside of our daily struggle) than to go deeper into it, infusing it with greater meaning and significance.

The speaker begins this second section by offering up for consideration yet another way to manage or organize his present experience. Drawing upon the conversational nature of Frank O'Hara's "Personism," Ashbery drifts into the second person asserting that "This should be a letter/ Throwing you a minute to one side." And indeed, much of what follows seems to take the rhetorical shape of a letter or a conversation in the typical style of the New York School, which places the poem "squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style." The value, importance, and difficulty of the personal are made evident in the next stanza, however, when the poet begins to lament the loss of a personal aesthetic:

> But there's no personal involvement:
> These sudden bursts of hot and cold
> Are wreathed in shadowless intensity
> Whose moment saps them of all characteristics

The speaker's experience seems like little more than a series of hot and cold, a kind of falling in and out of sync without any real connection to his daily life, or the experience of the "small and appreciable" sadnesses described earlier. Just as Dewey was wary of the alienating effects of the aesthetic when removed from ordinary experience, Ashbery also laments the loss of a personal, engaged aesthetic grounded in daily human experience. This concern is directly addressed in the lines that follow, where images of seeming cultural or intellectual permanence: "the island," "the rock" and the "old Fort," become like museums amid the wreckage of wars. The aesthetic in the contemporary world has not only been relegated to these besieged museums, as Dewey might have argued, but seems to lie amid ruins of indifference, devoid of any personal connection to

lived experience. It is for this that the speaker in exasperation vulgarly asserts that he would "like to bugger you all up," and "deliberately falsify all your old suck-ass notions." This desire literally to insert himself into the culture and thereby somehow infuse it with some new vitality echoes—in an explicitly Whitmanic way—the transformative image of the "entity of sound" in section one. But this transformation, as the poet has made clear must remain a part of the personal, the ordinary, and the everyday.

"Even the most patient scholar, now/ Could hardly reconstruct the old fort exactly as it was," and looking above, "to peruse certain stars over the bay," the "old heavens…lying there above the old, but not ruined, fort," the speaker asks "Can you hear, there, what I am saying?/ For it is you I am parodying." Like Stevens parody of "The Rock," Ashbery's parody of the heavens here reveals the intensely temporary and contingent nature of national and cultural institutions, the old fort and the museum. And yet, despite the transitional nature of this heaven, which tweaks above us, the speaker does not merely reject or ridicule this heavenly image of the logos, but insists, instead, that its existence is grounded not in some distant, perfect realm, but in the shifting contingencies of earthly experience, how even the constellations, which seem fixed upon the night sky are still the product of a human vantage point. These heavens though are cold and inaccessible, they are not personal, and, like the mermaids of Eliot's "Love Song…" "singing each to each,"[32] they will not answer the speaker, who, though "condemned to drum [his] fingers/ On the closed lid of this piano, this tedious planet, earth," nonetheless prefers the atmospheric motions of the storm to this "endless light," and "these summer nights that go on forever."

[32] Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1963.

This parody or critique of foundations, is abruptly cut short, however, giving way to what Shapiro appropriately calls "L'Invitation au voyage" already underway. And indeed, much of what follows is itself a kind of friendly parody of or homage to—it's difficult to tell which—Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* and its core images of oceans, ships, and sea travel.[33] The entire section that follows seems to be at least on one level an account of the poet's daily reading, presented here as fragments of a remembered or possibly imagined travel narrative. Indeed, I would argue that this section is in fact all of these things at once, combining poetic imagery drawn from Baudelaire, remembered fragments of past travels, imaginative fancy, and borrowed memories from literature and children's books.

The voyage presented to the reader here is in sharp contrast to the image of heaven described previously and is offered as a kind of remedy to the endless light and shadowless intensity of the aesthetic when it is merely abstract and devoid of personal involvement. Continually employing the second person throughout these voyage passages, Ashbery manages a poetics that is at once abstract but intensely autobiographical, one which can incorporate all of the poet's environment, his most intimate and immediate desires and experience into an imaginative whole. It is no accident, then, that this voyage begins, not with the image of a "*bateau*" (or boat-plane) taking off from the ground, transcending the earth, but instead of one descending down to ground, landing off the Moorish coast, returning to an earth that is no longer humdrum or "tedious," but one that is now full of life and experience, leaving behind the ho-hum life of "office desks" and "radiators."

[33] In "L'Invitation au voyage" we find at least one possible inspiration for such moments in Ashbery's poem: "Vois sur ces canaux/ Dormir ces vaisseaux/ Dont l'humeur est vagabonde;/ C'est pour assouvir/ Ton moindre désir/ Qu'ils viennent du bout du monde."*** "See how the ships asleep—/ They who would ply the deep!—/ Line the canals: to satisfy/ your merest whim they come/ from far flung heathendom/ and skim the seven seas." Translated by Norman Shapiro. *Selected Poems from Les Fleurs du mal: a Bilingual Edition*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998.

"No more dullness," says the speaker, only the ordinary and everyday pleasures and experiences of "movies and love and laughter, sex and/ fun." Turning again from the stars and back to the earth, moving from the "abstract into positive," we see yet another moment of consummation as the speaker finds himself suddenly in the possession of a kind of Emersonian ecstasy.

> This is just right for me. I am cozily ensconced in the balcony
> of my face
>
> Looking out over the whole darn countryside, a beacon of
> satisfaction
> I am. I'll not trade places with a king. Here I am then,
> continuing but ever beginning
> My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hope and
> flowers
> The way the coasts glide past you. I shall never forget this
> moment
>
> Because it consists of purest ecstasy. I am happier now than I
> ever dared believe
> Anyone could be. And we finger down the dog-eared
> coasts…

Just as Emerson, who upon crossing a bare commons felt as if he were a "transparent eyeball," this speaker similarly feels himself "cozily ensconced" in the balcony of his face, "looking out over the whole darn countryside, a beacon of/ satisfaction." He is all vision and apprehension and he looks out upon the world with a feeling of complete satisfaction. The speaker is happier now than he ever thought possible, and as the boat moves on, we begin to realize that all of this is not merely imagined ecstasy, but might very well be a poetic rendering of the speaker's own transformed emotion, as his fingers move across a "dog-eared" copy of *Fleurs du Mal* or some other book of ocean voyages only hinted at. This happiness, then, is not the result of mere imaginative reverie; it is not, as Lehman argues, an "escape and transcendence," but is the product of the speaker's ability to merge the several seemingly disparate and disconnected

aspects of his experience, including anticipations of his readers' experience, into *an experience*. In this sense the poem can be thought of more accurately as a transformation of life, of which reading and writing are a vital and contributing part, rather than an escape.

No moment of consummation, however would be complete without its opposite, and no sooner do we begin to register this happiness than we apprehend the underlying tensions and encountered resistances that invariably follow such moments. "Certain kernels remain," and as the clouds begin to gather again, it becomes clear "We shan't be putting out/ today." The voyage has been cancelled, and the "old stove" is full of smoke and rain. This is a temporary setback, however, and after only a few stanzas of dejected musings upon the "alligator-infested swamp" and the "junks packed with refugees," the sun is out again, and the speaker is rushing to catch the ship before it departs "into the unknown, the unknown that loves us, the great/ unknown!" The exclamatory nature of these last lines is, as Shapiro has noted, almost parodistic. They seem to mock the conventions of what he calls "orthodox symbolism." And yet, their joyous quality also represents a sincere faith in the value of poetic and intellectual exploration, and just as these happy people head off into the "vaporous night," the poem again shifts gears, and this imaginative voyage gives way to a series of self-conscious poetic musings.

> So man nightly
> Sparingly descends
> The birches and the hay all of him
> Pruned, erect for vital contact. As the separate mists of day
> Slip
> Uncomplainingly into the atmosphere.

Several critics have noted the influence of Whitman upon this particular poem, and indeed "erect for vital contact" sounds like it was lifted directly out of "Song of Myself." No one, as far as I know, however, has noted the seemingly obvious reference here to Frost's "Birches," a reference that only contributes to the argument that, like "Notes Toward a Supreme

Fiction," "The Skaters" is a poem not about transcending experience, but about descending deeper into the unknown of earthly aesthetic potentiality. "Pruned" and "erect for vital contact" the speaker descends the birches, much like Frost's young protagonist, returning to an earth that is "the right place for love."[34] And indeed, it is to the question of love, of "loving you?" ("*hypocrite lecteur*") that the speaker turns next, explaining how love is always wrapped up in "that mazy business," of writing and reading, becoming always a part of the "surface of that enormous/ affair," that "concert of dissatisfaction." But this dissatisfaction is also a vital force, and returning again to the image of skating and the generative motion of the figure-eight the speaker explains that it is only "in remaining close to the limitations imposed" that we can ever hope "to escape" ourselves and our "prevarications." Just as we saw in Stevens' "Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" the imagination has value only when it is grounded in or relevant to our daily experience. And thus this figure-eight, in its continual weaving (draw a figure eight with your fingers on the page to get the sense of what I mean) represents the poet's integration of the various elements of the poem (which "clamber to join in the awakening") into a coherent and thus more real and more complete experience, getting rid of "the valueless shapes…whom no one (that is their weakness) can ever get to like."

Nothing is ever permanent in the flow of Ashbery's thought, however, and after a series of imagined settings, exploring in the abstract the human experiences of death and poverty, the speaker's thoughts turn again to visions of childhood adventure and exploration, explaining how to construct a "fire fountain" out of "sulphuiric acid," and how to make invisible ink from a "saturated/ solution of nitrate of potash." These playful activities, however, as John Shoptaw convincingly explains, are in all likelihood probably not recollections drawn from the poet's own childhood, but are textual borrowings from a book titled *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy*

[34] From "Birches." Frost, Robert. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. New York: Holt, 2002.

Can Do. For Shoptaw, Ashbery's borrowings are part of a larger poetics of "misrepresentation," whereby the poet uses this text and others as a substitute for his own experience.[35] Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether or not Ashbery intended this text as representative or, as Shoptaw argues, "misrepresentative" of his own childhood experiences growing up in Rochester, the book itself, its content and meaning, its power to evoke emotion and nostalgia in the poet and the reader, is still nonetheless a part of the central compositional experience that underlies the poem's progress; and just as Meyerbeer's opera and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* have become important parts of both the poet's aesthetic life and the life of the poem, the metaphoric potential and nostalgic force of *Three Hundred Things* is also an important part of the poet's experience as it is explored and constructed in the moment of composition. Once read, it becomes a part of the speaker's environment, which must itself be arranged within or somehow obliterated from the flow of memory and experience.

This "flame fountain," is, of course more than merely an example of a childhood game or experiment, though; it is also a potent metaphor for the transformative (almost alchemical) potential of aesthetic experience when approached as a form of composition. Having cleared away the seemingly true, but "valueless shapes" that intrude upon each moment, the speaker explains that "There are moving parts to be got out of order,/ However, in the flame fountain." This is a wonderful line, since the phrase "got out of order" seems simultaneously to imply failure and success, a warning and an invitation, recognizing the generative and recursive tensions between order and disorder. Like the physical reaction between the various chemical

[35] In *On the Outside Looking Out* Shoptaw argues: "The thesis of this book is that Ashbery's poetry is not so much representative as 'misrepresentative.' We may think of an Ashbery poem as an assembly of unruly, irresponsible, factional, long-winded, strange, and outspoken members. Its particulars…are often vague, unexpected, abstracted, conflicting, misplaced, or missing; its argument or narrative is insufficiently supported, inconsistent, incomplete, and fragmented; its discourses, genres, and forms are strangely mixed or misapplied; its grammar and syntax are twisted, disconnected or elongated; and its autobiographical subject is withheld or covertly generalized, resulting in an abstract expressionism which unsettles and contorts all other subject matters by removing their frame of reference." Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.

agents of this fountain, experience, too, when thoughtfully constructed can "become luminous, and/ fire balls, with jets of fire,/…dart from the bottom, through the fluid with great/ rapidity…" This "luminous fountain" is then almost immediately contrasted with and compared to the act of writing in invisible ink made of flammable "nitrate of potash," which, like the fountain, is presented as a kind of luminous activity, where invisible language is ignited into flame.

Having already begun to draw connections between the luminous nature of aesthetic perception and the act of writing, Ashbery then, appropriately enough, collapses them altogether in the next stanza:

> Meanwhile the fire fountain is still smoldering and welling
> Casting off a hellish stink and wild fumes of pitch
> Acrid as jealousy. And it might be
> That the flame writing might be visible right there, in the gaps in
> the smoke
> Without going through the bother of the solution-writing.
> A word here and there—"promise" or "beware."

In another explicitly Emersonian gesture, Ashbery sees in the world of aesthetic experience a kind of text to be read, warning of the dangers and promise of life, of getting things "out of order." Experience and writing, the speaker seems to suggest, are the same kind of activity and each is involved in a constant construction of meaning. What is interesting, however, is that this process moves not from experience to language, as we might naturally expect, but from language to experience, complicating the nature of experience, suggesting that life itself might be a kind of linguistic composition. This is all pretty heady stuff, of course, conflating writing and experience, and, as a kind of antidote to the philosophical abstractness of these lines, Ashbery quickly returns to the ordinary, showing how even this seemingly "insane activity" is just a part of everyday life, "a kind of drawing/ On April sidewalks, and young trees bursting into timid leaf/ and dogs sniffing hydrants, the fury of spring beginning to/ back up along their veins."

This ironic and comical suburban idyll or "puzzle scene" as Ashbery puts it, progresses over the next dozen or so lines, detailing the promise and dangers of ordinary life—the postman plagued by the thought of "the hideous bull dog" and the generic "chap" distracted by the stockings of a beautiful young woman—before again returning to the fire-fountain, explaining that all of this is:

> A scene worthy of the poet's pen, yet it is the fire demon
> Who has created it, throwing it up on the dubious surface of
> a phosphorescent fountain
> For all the world like a poet. But love can appreciate it,
> Use or misuse it for its own ends. Love is stronger than fire.
>
> The proof of this is that already the heaving, sucking fountain
> is paling away
> Yet the fire-lines of the lovers remain fixed…

The fire fountain it seems has stirred the poet's memories of childhood. The poet's life and the life of the luminous fire-fountain of aesthetic experience are equated here and "all the world [becomes] like a poet," whose lines remain "permanently,/ on the air of the lab" because they are loved. And yet even these lines, which just a second ago seemed so permanent, must also, as with everything else in the poem, eventually return to earth "giving, as they pass away, the impression of a bluff,/ Its craggy headlands outlined in sparks, its top crowned with/ a zigzag/ Of grass and shrubs…" until, as the second section comes to a close, even "this vision…fades/ slowly away."

"The Skaters," as I have already argued, proceeds through a series of continual movements back and forth between a desire for some kind of heavenly ecstasy or consummation outside of the mundane contingencies of random experience, and a simultaneous celebration of our earthly bodies as they navigate and make sense of that randomness. Therefore it is no surprise that it is explicitly to a contemplation of the body, the province of the "live creature," that Ashbery returns as the third section opens.

Now you must shield with your body if necessary (you
Remind me of some lummox I used to know) the secret your
body is.
Yes, you are a secret and you must NEVER tell it—the vapor
Of the stars would quickly freeze you to death, like a tear-
stiffened handkerchief
Held in liquid air. No, but this secret is in some way the
fuel of
Your living apart. A hearth fire picked up in the glow of
polished
Wooden furniture and picture frames, something to turn
away from and move back to—
Understand? This is all a part of you and the only part of you.

The body, as Dewey knew, and as Ashbery makes plain here, is something we continuously "turn away from and move back to." It is the center of our experience, that from which our need and desire arises and thus that to which we must always return if we are to find those desires satisfied. As Dewey argues, every need and every "demand" is "a reaching out into the environment to make good the lack and to restore adjustment by building at least a temporary equilibrium," and Just as Dewey recognized the animal body as the center of that experience, Ashbery understands, too, that even the most contemplative activities are still intimately connected to our physical selves, which are like the hearth fires within our metaphorical studies. This is an especially interesting metaphor, I think, for where one would expect, in a lesser poet, the hearth-fire to stand as a metaphor for a reasoning, homunculus-driven mind at the center of experience, Ashbery avoids such a dichotomy by presenting here an image instead of the body-mind composed of its experience, which is "all a part of you and the only part of you." Experience and the body are one. Everything encountered, Ashbery argues here, becomes a part of us, a part of our body-minds, and thus, because we are flesh and not spirit, it is, inevitably, to the fear of death that the poem turns next.

Man, Ashbery says, is certain to fall. "Only one thing exists: the fear of death;" and just as "widows are/ a prey to loan sharks/ And cape Hatteras to hurricanoes, so man to the fear of

dying." If, as other critics have noted, the poem's sections do indeed correlate to the seasons of life, then section three seems to offer an especially Keatsian coming to terms with death in the autumn of one's progress. The speaker wishes for no recourse to magical thinking, but instead faces death and the fear of death as an inevitable and ironically (almost romantically) generative part of life and life's experience. Returning again to the book: *Three hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do*, Ashbery presents an image of the perspective lines' vanishing point, as a metaphor for death. "'Objects, as they/ recede, appear to become smaller/ And all horizontal receding lines have their vanishing/ point upon the line of sight.'" Just as death is an end of sight, however, it is precisely our "volition to see," our recourse to sensual aesthetic experience, that "condition[s] these phenomena," making death slightly less intolerable. The twilight of the speaker's life may, as a consequence of such musings, become stained, perhaps, "a slightly/ unerathlier periwinkle blue," but Ashbery is clear that despite these minor compensations, "no dramatic arguments for survival" should be offered, and "please, no/ magic justifications of results." Death is an end, the speaker seems to say, and "No hope is to be authorized except in exceptional/ cases/ to be decided on by me."

This rather pessimistic but also comic statement is preceded, however, by an exceptional description of the poem's own sense of comic irony as an animal-like defensive strategy against the violence of that reality of death. In a passage that is reminiscent of Moore's own descriptions of animal life, the poem it seems, the very one still under construction, is described as possessing an "oval armor" which

> Protects it then, and the poisonous filaments hanging
> down
> Are armor as well, or are they the creature itself,
> Screaming
> To protect itself? An aggressive weapon, as well as a
> Plan of defense?

These descriptions sound a lot like a jelly fish or cephalopod of some kind, but there is something not quite right about these unidentified images of primal aquatic life. Ultimately they are too abstract and, unlike Moore's "Paper Nautilus," for instance, seem to be more evocative than actual, more an incorporation of Moore's own notions of animal defensiveness than an actual description of reality. This lack of correspondence with reality, however, is less important than the way that these lines return the poet and the reader, as we saw in Moore and Bishop, to a consideration of "animal life below the human scale," capturing the way that active experience, aesthetic experience, like poetry, is always at once a reaching out into the world and a "plan of defense" against the resistances and pressures found there, a form of accommodation and adaptation where both the organism and its environment are transformed.[36]

The true power and evocative potential of animal life is explored in even greater detail a couple of stanzas later when, after a long meditative and romantic contemplation of the natural, which borrows strongly from the language of Keats and Shelley, Ashbery states:

> Now that the homecoming geese unfurl in waves on
> the west wind
> And cock covers hen, the farmhouse dog slavers over
> his bitch, and horse and mare go screwing
> through the meadow!
> A pure scream of things arises from these various
> sights and smells
> As steam from a wet shingle, and I am happy once
> again.
> Walking among these phenomena that seem familiar to
> me from my earliest childhood.

[36] In *Pragmatic Naturalism*, S. Morris Eames explains the important difference between the terms "accommodation," and "adaptation." "Sometimes these terms are taken to be synonymous, but for the pragmatic naturalists each of these terms has a different meaning, and these meanings must be clearly discriminated. Dewey writes: 'There are conditions we meet that cannot be changed. If they are particular and limited, we modify our own particular attitudes in accordance with them. Thus we *accommodate* ourselves to change in weather, to alterations in income when we have no other recourse." Adaptation however is very different, and there are also moments when, "As Dewey says: 'We re-act against conditions and endeavor to change them to meet our wants and demands….Instead of accommodating ourselves to conditions, we modify conditions so that they will be accommodated to our wants and purposes. This process may be called *adaptation*.'" [p. 10-11; italics mine.] Eames, S. Morris. *Pragmatic Naturalism: An Introduction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1977.

Just as he did in the final lines of section one, Ashbery conflates the sensual, the sexual, and the animal out of which arises what he calls a "pure scream of things." Shapiro describes these lines as "an earthly paradise of memory," and indeed the intensely evocative "sights and smells" of animal being lead the speaker not only back to the idea childhood—as the fire fountain did—but lead again to a state of consummate happiness and joy. These memories—or dreams perhaps—of childhood summers and wet roof shingles steaming in the sun, offer the image of a return to a state of primal experience that seems to offer at least a temporary reprieve from the abstract impositions of mortality described earlier. If we must die, the poem seems to suggest, than we should at least take pleasure in our mortal bodies and the experiences they provide.

This intensely physical, intensely sensual moment of consummation is followed by a long, highly imaginative interlude, in which the speaker suddenly finds himself shipwrecked and stranded alone upon a "puny little shoal" surrounded by "gray wastes of water." The voyager of section two, it seems has finally found the unknown he was travelling toward, and like the passages of voyage in that section, the descriptions of this island offer up a series of always postponed resolutions. For almost two full pages, the poem is transformed into what many other critics have described as a kind of Robinson Crusoe narrative of desert isolation. In the same way as the poet composer, the speaker of this section is attempting to make sense of his environment, always on the lookout for some kind of aesthetic satisfaction. Climbing the one solitary mountain on the island, the speaker describes how he would scan "the distance "in hopes of an unusual sight, such as a school of dolphins at play,/ A whale spouting, or a cormorant bearing down on its prey." As we saw in Stevens, Moore, and Bishop, the moment of aesthetic contemplation or arrangement, the moment of the poem's composition, is again conflated with animal life and especially the act of predation. The speaker, in fact, is both predator and prey and, like Bishop's Crusoe is absolutely surrounded by animal life here, as if to suggest that on his own, man

becomes just another animal within the natural environment, communicating nonetheless with the sympathetic vultures and the fussy eagles that "always seem to manage to turn their backs to you."

This whole interlude, however, as with the earlier voyage passage, dissolves as suddenly as it began, and the reader is reminded again of the compositional moment of the poem, how all of this, imagined or remembered, is all a vital and intimate part of the poet's private experience. Just as Crusoe felt upon his return to England, the poet speaker is still, in effect, shipwrecked, detached from the life of the world outside of the poem's composition: "In reality of course:"

> …the middle-class apartment I live in is
> nothing like a desert island.
> Cozy and warm, it is, with a good library and record
> collection.
> Yet I feel cut off from the life in the streets.

This middle class apartment is the ostensible site of the poem's composition and these books and records are the material of experience out of which the poem is constructed. And yet, despite the comforts of this apartment setting, the outside world still remains a mystery of sorts. Contemplating his own desert solitude, the speaker encounters yet another resistance: his own loneliness and disconnection from the larger world of experience outside his "middle-class apartment."

Just as Stevens tried to find a place for human action and resistance among the enormous violences of history and war in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Ashbery, too, is looking for some kind of reconciliation of the personal and the political, or what Shoptaw calls "the parallel lines of private and public life."[37] Walking the streets and sitting in the cafes of this still unidentified city (which may or may not be Paris) the speaker finds a kind of satisfaction in

[37] *On The Outside Looking Out*. (98)

his own exile. The world outside of the self, the world outside of the cafés, however, insists upon being part of the poem, too. And so it is that

> …the
> headlines offer you
> News that is so new you can't realize it yet. A revolution in
> Argentina! Think of it! Bullets flying through the air,
> men on the move;
> Great passions inciting to massive expenditures of energy,
> changing the lives of many individuals.

These headlines are like an encountered and insistent violence external to our daily lives. The events they describe are abstract, distant from the speaker's experience, and yet they are tantalizing in their own way, yet another kind of literary text, promising a temporary transformation of his loneliness and ennui—"men on the move" and "great passions" stirred to action. But these passions are not genuine, at least not for the speaker, who has no vested interest in the outcome of such revolutions, and who, even if he did, still remains ultimately unaffected by them being so distant from the places where they occur.

The violence of the reality of these events, as Stevens also noted, nonetheless makes its way into our experience. Reality is insistent— "offered as 'today's news,' as if we somehow had a right to it, as though it were a part of our lives/ That we'd be silly to refuse. Here, have another—crime or revolution? Take your pick." Although this spectacle of revolution and crime "offers no charms whatsoever," the speaker still feels its influence upon him and is moved.

> And yet—and yet I feel myself caught up in its coils—
> Its defectuous movement is that of my reasoning powers—
> The main point has already changed, but the masses continue
> to tread the water
> Of backward opinion, living out their mandate as though
> nothing had happened.
> We step out into the street, not realizing that the street is
> different,
> And so it shall be all our lives; only, from this moment on,
> nothing will ever be the same again.

Though he originally feigns indifference, it becomes clear as we continue to read—especially in the reiteration of "and yet"—that even the daily news, perused listlessly, and the petty indifferences of café exiles like himself, passing the sugar to each other, must all be integrated into the speaker's experience, bringing about in the process an enormous and continual change. The feeling of reading and thinking about the news, contrasted with the insouciance of the other café customers has brought about a change "so complete as to be invisible." And out of this recognition, this new found "passion," as he puts it, the speaker's room when he returns (if he ever left) has been transformed: "the room, now, for instance, is all black and white instead of blue."

Night has descended on the apartment and the poem, and as the section progresses towards its conclusion the speaker returns—after a series of startlingly disjunctive, almost parodistic asides—to a worried contemplation of his poetic method. "You have chosen the customary images of youth, old age and death/ To keep harping on this traditional imagery. The reader/ Will not have been taken in./ He will have managed to find out all about it, the way people do." Afraid of losing his readers' interest, afraid that his work is a mere parody of traditional poetic subjects, the personae of the poet-speaker wishes to throw "the whole business into the flames: books, notes, pencil diagrams, everything." Wanting to start over, "to be out of these dusty cells once and for all," the speaker feels the incredible burden and difficulty of the project he has set for himself, the difficulty of finding one's place among the interminable flow of experience, "the curious force of the invasion."

> It is as though
> workmen in blue overalls
> We're constantly bringing on new props and taking others
> away: that is how you feel the drama going past you
> powerless to act in it.
> To have it all be over! To wake suddenly on a hillside

With a valley far below—the clouds—

Like the revolutions described earlier, the experience of life itself now feels distant and abstract, as if it were a play to which the speaker was merely a spectator. The immediate desire is to "wake suddenly on a hillside," and escape to a romantic Wordsworthian valley. The solution, however, as always in Ashbery, is not transcendence or escape, but transformation; and it is only through a reconstruction of the speaker's experience, only through the work and "penance" of what he wonderfully calls "living toward a definition" that the speaker can find any real satisfaction.

"January, March, February…" the months that follow are out of sequence. However, just as the constellations at the end of "The Skaters" will rise in "perfect," but unorthodox order, "Taurus, Leo, Gemini," the non-linear presentation of time here captures well the very essence of Deweyan experience, which is always a continual incorporation and grounding of past and future interests and expectations in the present. In the most basic sense, to get to February, one must first consider March—one must first reconcile one's own immediate interests and needs with the expectations of future outcomes in order ever to achieve any kind of meaningful experience. Although it is enticing to read this disjunction as just another example of Ashbery's desire to "bugger you all up" And "deliberately falsify all your old suck ass notions," consciously deceiving and confusing his readers, this moment is not a rejection of order but an active and transformative engagement with it. Even as these winter months proleptically inflect and inform one another across the limits of linear time, the seasons too seem out of order or out of time.

> You felt the months keep coming up
> And it is December again,
> The snow outside. Or is it June, full of sun
> And the prudent benefits of sun, but still the postman comes.
> The true meaning of some of his letters is slight—
>
> Another time I thought I could see myself.

> This too proved illusion, but I could deal with the way
> I keep returning on myself like a plank
> Like a small boat blown away from the wind.

The speaker here is unsure whether it is winter or summer, for in the play of his memory, there are important days both full of sun and snow. Incorporating those experiences into the present is the challenge, and just like "a small boat" that keeps coming back to shore, "blown away from the wind," his experience is continually informed through this pattern of always launching out and returning. This simple simile, however, "ends in a smile," and the speaker quickly reminds the reader that there are, indeed, still "notes to be taken on all this." The poem is both the experience and the record of the experience, and as the section comes to a close the night in which the speaker finds himself becomes "the continuation of your ecstasy and apprehension."

The final section, evocative of both Keats "To Autumn" and Stevens' "Sunday Morning" explores the "ecstasy and apprehension" of mortality culminating—connotatively at least—in a kind of celebration of eternal recurrence, where death truly is "the mother of beauty," and where every fallen leaf or seed pod shaken from the "maple," "birch" or "eucalyptus," is the end and beginning of a life. Returning again to a kind of island solitude, the speaker we encounter at the beginning of this final section refers to himself now only as the "governor of C province,"—a nod, no doubt, to Stevens' poetic personae Crispin from "the Comedian as the Letter C"—who muses briefly upon his mortality and how little his "white hair" and "wrinkled forehead" are, despite the years, "a sign of wisdom." Through a series of meditations and recollections we realize, as the poem self-critically explains to us, that "[a] tiresome old man is telling us his life story." But who is this tiresome old man? Like Stevens' comedian, the governor is also a veiled representation of the poet himself, whose own memories and musings inevitably make their way into the narrative he is trying to construct. And indeed, despite the great number of speakers and perspectives presented, the entire poem has been a record of the poet's own construction of

experience, including his attempts to understand precisely where one person ends and another begins, of how much the lives of others become a part of our own.

In addition to the recollections and thoughts of the governor, this final section, as other critics have noted, also presents a polyphony of voices, whose often mundane observations become an integral part of the emotional tenor of the poem's conclusion. Stanza after stanza, the poem moves deceptively, almost imperceptibly, from one speaker to another in a series of observations and meditations upon memory, loss, and the problems of daily life: "The day was gloves," "The screen door bangs in the wind, one of the hinges is loose," "Seventeen years in the capital of Foo-Yung province," and "I have spent the afternoon blowing soap bubbles," hinting always at the possibility and necessity of some kind of transformation:

> The sands are frantic
> In the hourglass. But there is time
> To change, to utterly destroy
> That too-familiar image
> Lurking in the glass
> Each morning, at the edge of the mirror.
>
> The train is still in the station
> You only dreamed it was in motion.

These frantic sands, like the poem, are moving always back and forth across time, suggesting the always present possibility of the transformation of experience, of how time, considered from the present moment, can be changed, adapted, and reconfigured. No mirror image is ever permanent, and the train is never gone, but always waiting to take us somewhere else.

The poem ends, then, not surprisingly, with a final pragmatist rejection of both permanent order and the idea of spiritual transcendence, of both vulgar sensationalism and rigid idealism, "that marvelous thing [pragmatism, perhaps] you haven't learned yet." In these final lines, it is "the square hive," no doubt a symbol of easy conformity to established earthly principles, that is "refused," but so is the individual transcendence of that conformity. Instead of proposing an

escape from the contingencies of the world and its seemingly arbitrary orders of tradition, the speaker advises instead that we "postpone the highest" and returns the reader immediately to an earthly paradise reminiscent of the final lines of Stevens' "Sunday Morning" of tinted apples "In cool light of autumn," which is the season of both abundance and death. It is only after this return to a state of pure negative capability that the constellations can rise in an order that defies order itself, and yet still be perfect for it, Ashbery's own sign of Leo, transposed among the three, so that it is in the center and not the end of the constellations that rise in the western night.

III "AN ORDER HELD IN CONSTANT CHANGE"

"Why test the mind on the reality stone:
nothing will be determined but that
mind, too, terribly flows and stalls, holds
and gives way…"[38]
—A.R. Ammons "The Ridge Farm"

"Mind is primarily a verb"[39]
—John Dewey *Art as Experience*

If life really is "in the transitions,"[40] as William James famously declared, one can think of few poets better qualified to express that core pragmatic sentiment than Ashbery and Ammons. In both poets we see a dedicated engagement with the complexity of lived experience as a continual process of adaptation and change to a "world of pure experience." And in both we see a deep awareness of the value of integration and consummation as the material of such transitions. Every new relation, each new connection made between the diverse elements of our environment, is a step forward into a new world and an invitation for further integration. In this

[38] The Ridge Farm (7)
[39] AE (268)
[40] James, William. "A World of Pure Experience." *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. 1, No. 20 (Sep. 29, 1904).

sense, both poets help the reader to see the value of aesthetic experience as not merely satisfying or pleasurable, but as inherently transformative and world changing.

Although both poets seem to be exploring the same intellectual territory, the experience of actually reading their poetry is surprisingly different. Ammons's work, for instance, is noticeably clearer, more direct and less indeterminate, as it were, than Ashbery's. While Ashbery is happy to lose himself in the very language of the poem, the presence of Ammons as the contemplating subject (or seer, or guide) is only occasionally eclipsed. Seemingly untroubled by the poetic in-fighting over structuralism and post-structuralism, the supposed death of the author and the birth of the reader, Ammons unabashedly maintains throughout his career a certain lyric voice that is unmistakably his own. Where Ashbery's poetry self-consciously tests the fluid boundaries of the self, weaving often from one narrator to another, Ammons seems content, happy even, to continue to operate within the tradition of lyric self-expression. One excellent and often noted example of this lyric voice can be seen in the poem that opens Ammons's Selected Poems: "so I said I am Ezra."

Although ostensibly speaking in the voice of another (the Hebrew elder, Ezra, who re-established the temple in Jerusalem and provided for the public reading of the Torah) the poem nonetheless conforms well to the structure of the romantic lyric as it was described by M.H. Abrams nearly fourteen years after the poem's publication in *Ommateum*.[41]

[41] M. H. Abrams notes in "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric": the romantic lyric presents "a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely intervolved with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation." "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric" in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, eds. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 535.

Turning to the sea I said
I am Ezra
but there were no echoes from the waves
The words were swallowed up
in the voice of the surf
or leaping over the swells
lost themselves oceanward[42]

What is most interesting about this poem, however, as with many romantic lyrics, is that the speaker asserts his being even as he describes its dissolution, becoming here, by the end of the poem "like a drift of sand…among the windy oats." Indeed, just as Whitman happily merged his ego with everything, Ammons deeply identifies with the substance of the world he encounters—whether mountain ridge, shrub, squirrel, or gull—and his work, and Ashbery's for that matter, is expansive and inclusive, bringing together in the moment of aesthetic experience many seemingly disparate observations and ideas. This desire to bring all of the elements of experience into play has been described by Alice Fulton as Ammons's "aesthetic of inclusion." Just as Ashbery sought to weave together the innumerable strains of his daily experience, Ammons is trying to include as much of the world as possible in his poems, and no observation or fleeting thought is too small or trivial to be given serious and sustained consideration. One of the hallmarks of Ammons's work, in fact, is his ability to take the seemingly unimportant, overlooked elements of our experience and work them together into something meaningful and evocative, to bring the life around him into a rhythmic harmony, however temporary.

In an interview with David Lehman, Ammons provides an excellent example of one such transformational and influential moment early in his life. "One day, when I was nineteen," said Ammons:

> I was sitting on the bow of the ship anchored in a bay in the South Pacific. As I looked at the land, heard the roosters crowing, saw the thatched huts, et cetera, I thought down to the water level and then to the immediately changed and strange world below the

[42] Selected Poems (1)

> waterline. But it was the line inscribed across the variable landmass, determining where people would or would not live, where palm trees would or could not grow, that hypnotized me. The whole world changed as a result of an interior illumination: the water level was not what it was because of a single command by a higher power but because of an average result of a host of actions — runoff, wind currents, melting glaciers. I began to apprehend things in the dynamics of themselves —motions and bodies —the full account of how we came to be a mystery with still plenty of room for religion, though, in my case, a religion of what we don't yet know rather than what we are certain of. I was de-denominated[43]

Unnamed ("de-denominated") and seemingly untethered, set free in this moment of realization and transformative "illumination," the poet suddenly apprehends all at once the intense intricacy of his observations: how the conceptual and natural boundaries we encounter in the world are not fixed, but are always part of a larger field of experience, coming into being and going out in relation to each other. Indeed, the emphasis here upon the natural world ("the roosters crowing," "the thatched huts," and "the world below the waterline") is not merely coincidental. This world of nature and animal life offers a shifting space of potential revision and readjustment, a temporary reprieve from the conformities of rigid habit and established knowledge. For Ammons that means a new relationship to the environment and a new attention to the complex and "dynamic" motions of the natural world in which we act. Much as the line drawn between the animal and the human, or that between the self and its environment, this line "inscribed across the variable landmass determining where people would or would not live" is not fixed, but is always in a fluid state of transition, subject, like life, to revision and reconstruction.

This anecdote, however, does more than recount "an experience," but it is itself a species of transformative engagement. As Ammons said about the "eventful" nature of his poetry, "Not only is the poem about an event, but the making of it is an event as well…There's a certain undefined anxiety before the poet recognizes that two or three things come together in the mind

[43] *Paris Review*; Summer 96, Vol. 38 Issue 139, p62-91.

that create an unexpected conjunction which is integrated and expressive at the same time."[44] In its telling, then, this anecdote, a kind of poetry of the event, also mimics and reproduces the very experience it is trying to describe, becoming simultaneously a lived observation and an expression. This is precisely what Dewey described as an "expressive object." "Expression as personal act and as objective result are organically connected with each other," says Dewey, and as with all aesthetic engagements, it proceeds with a unifying, however often undefined, underlying quality, which is the very substance of art. In a statement remarkably similar to Ammons's own Dewey says that:

> The undefined, pervasive quality of an experience is that which binds together all the defined elements, the objects of which we are focally aware, making them a whole. The best evidence that such is the case is our constant sense of things as belonging or not belonging, of relevancy, a sense which is immediate.[45]

Ammons's descriptions of this moment, recounted to David Lehman, provide therefore an exceptional example of what the Dewey scholar Thomas Alexander calls "the realization of life as aesthetic project." Similar to Wordsworth's childhood encounters with the sublime, or Emerson's ecstatic transformation in "Nature," this moment of apprehension functions as a "spot of time," a key "renovating" moment in the poet's imaginative life that informs and sums up in miniature his entire poetic career, connecting the experience of the young and attentive sailor-scientist to that of the elder poet through the unifying quality of aesthetic life that pervades and gives meaning to them both. This moment then, expresses, as does so much of Ammons's poetry, the deep-seated, almost religious longing to be completely integrated with the environment, to feel what Dewey called "that expansion of ourselves," "that sense of an

[44] Richard Jackson's *Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets*. Alabama: Alabama UP, 1983.
[45] AE (198)

enveloping, undefined whole that accompanies every normal experience," but which is accentuated and made consciously manifest most often in works of art.[46]

Just as Ashbery seeks to situate himself within the shifting field of his various experiences, literary and otherwise, Ammons also seeks to find a space (usually—in contrast to Ashbery—a natural space) from which to observe and simultaneously participate in the field of experience beyond his immediate sense perceptions. "A work of art," as Dewey says:

> elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. This fact, I think, is the explanation of that feeling of exquisite intelligibility and clarity we have in the presence of an object that is experienced with esthetic intensity. It explains also the religious feeling that accompanies intense esthetic perception. We are, as it were, introduced into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences.[47]

This deeper sense of reality is precisely what Ammons means when he speaks of that religious feeling "of what we don't yet know rather than what we are certain of," a phrase that captures well the aesthetically driven nature of truth and scientific knowledge as it is represented by pragmatism. Instead of speaking only of what is already certain, the poet is much more concerned here with the future world of "that which we do not *yet* know," but which we are, it seems almost certain to make sense of so long as we continue to pay attention to the aesthetic impulses that underlie such making. (Emphasis mine).

This intuitive fascination with the shifting field of aesthetic experience is explored in almost all of Ammons's work including his several long or book-length poems: *Tape for the Turn of the Year*; *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*; and *Garbage*, all of which seek to situate the speaker and his experience within a natural world much larger than himself. While these works provide an excellent example of Ammons's transformative compositional method, they are far

[46] AE (199)
[47] AE (199)

too large and far too ambitious to be explored in any detail in a single chapter. Therefore, instead of taking moments out of context from these larger poems, a critical move that I think undermines and belittles their expansive qualities, I will focus instead upon two much shorter but still substantive works from two distinct periods of Ammons's life: "Corson's Inlet," one of Ammons's early major poems, originally published in 1965, and "The Ridge Farm," published in 1987, 14 years before Ammons's death in 2001. In looking at these works I hope to show how, following Dewey, Ammons articulates and employs an aesthetic of compositional transformation that is deeply grounded in an awareness of the vitality and renovative possibility of nature and animal life.

Longer than most of his shorter lyrics, and much shorter than any of his major long-form poems, "Corson's Inlet" occupies a place of relative distinction within Ammons's larger body of work. As a consequence it has also become one of the poet's most widely read and surely one of his best received and most exemplary poems. Indeed, according to Guy Rotella "Corson's Inlet" is "a testament by which much of his other work may be read."[48] In the same way as the longer *Tape for the Turn of the Year* and *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, "Corson's Inlet" is a poem about composition as transformative aesthetic experience. Embracing the animal impulse "to keep life" as a form of continual experimentation, Ammons exploits the ambiguities of perception in order to stake out a space for renovation, revision, and reconstruction. Unlike his longer works, however, which span large distances of time and space—incorporating an almost galactic perspective in *Sphere*, for instance—"Corson's Inlet" is much more geographically and temporally focused, recounting the experience of one solitary and representative walk along a very modest piece of New Jersey coastline.

[48] Rotella, Guy. "'Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds: A.R. Ammons's 'Corson's Inlet.'" *Concerning Poetry* 10 (Fall 1977), 25.

I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning
to the sea,
then turned right along
the surf
rounded a naked headland
and returned
along the inlet shore:

As with much of Ammons's work, the language here is incredibly accessible and—except for the way that the lines on the page capture the very shape of an inlet—are almost anti-poetic. Though invited to imagine the totality of the walk—going out "over the dunes" and then back "along the surf" and 'the inlet shore"—the reader is given almost no hint of what this experience is like. This could be any walk, any day, almost any place and this is in part the point. One does not need to cross the Alps to experience the liberating force of the aesthetic. We quickly discover, however, that, though this could be a walk like any other, it is nonetheless, for the poet-speaker, still an important and representative one.

Released "from the perpendiculars," the "straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds/ of thought," the speaker enters instead into a world of "shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends of sight." The movement here from the chains of rational thought—the binds of habit and fixed principle—to the liberating spectacle (vision) and possibility of indeterminate nature is classic Ammons. "An 'event'" says Ammons, "has the capacity to criticize given mental forms, conventional thinking, any kind of narrowness, any kind of insistence on the truth of a particular point of view."[49] These lines are also, not surprisingly, classically pragmatist, suggesting a world of action where truth and experience are in constant flux. This transition, however, is not the end of the story, for this state of perfect "transparent" vision cannot be maintained but for a few brief exalted seconds. No, the important transition, and the one that most closely mirrors Dewey's

[49] *Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary American Poets*.

philosophy, and pragmatism more broadly, is the one from "sight" to "meaning," "significance," "action," "motion," and finally, "organization."

> I allow myself eddies of *meaning*:
> yield to a direction of *significance*
> running
> like a stream through the geography of my work:
> you can find
> in my sayings
> swerves of *action*
> like the inlet's cutting edge:
> there are dunes of *motion*,
> *organization*s of grass, white sandy paths of remembrance
> in the overall wandering of mirroring mind: (italics mine).[50]

This description captures well the circuit of Deweyan aesthetic experience: from the impulse to transcend (through descent) rigid rationalism and fixed habit, to an animal state of vitality and possibility, to a new sense of meaning and relation that is the readjustment to and reorganization of those changed conditions. It also emphasizes the innate Emersonian interconnections between vision, meaning, and action. Yielding to a "direction of significance," Ammons emphasizes, as he will throughout the poem, the way that meaning—rather than being suddenly discovered in nature or conversely constructed in the rational mind—always develops in the flow of doing and undergoing that is experience. The metaphor expressed in these lines that meaningful experience is like eddies or a running stream, explains how life is always building upon itself. It also closely echoes Dewey's descriptions of "having an experience" in *Art as Experience*, a description that, in turn, echoes William James's concept of the "stream of thought."

> In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogenous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part

[50] AASP (43)

> leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors.[51]

Not surprisingly, it is precisely at this moment of yielding to the aesthetic impulse that Ammons also actively conflates the textual and the worldly, the compositional and the experiential, moving fluidly from descriptions of meaning in experience (his walk along Corson's inlet), to the meaning embedded in the "geography" of his work, which is described as being "like the inlet's cutting edge." This "cutting edge" is an interesting play upon words, suggesting, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, a certain confidence in the inventiveness of his poetry. Indeed, the speaker here—for all intents and purposes, Ammons himself—makes clear that this walk is not only the record of an experience, but is itself part of a larger "body of work," which includes the poet's physical body as well as his poetry.

It is precisely to the idea of the "enduring whole" described by Dewey, that Ammons turns to next, noting how in nature no account of the total whole is ever possible because it is always becoming. Ammons admits that the "Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events/ I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting/ beyond the account." Just as he had observed the shifting waterline, sitting on the bow of that ship in the South Pacific, Ammons apprehends the incredible "dynamics" of nature, how what we experience is always part of a larger process that is in a constant state of transition and change that cannot be drawn or denominated. Having already been released from the "binds of thought" the speaker refuses to re-inscribe any rigid lines upon his experience, insisting that:

> I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,
> shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
> from outside: I have
> drawn no lines

[51] AE (43)

Instead the speaker agrees to go along and to accept this process of becoming, admiring the fluidity of his experience, how:

> by transitions the land falls from grassy dunes to creek
> to undercreek: but there are no lines, though
> change in that transition is clear
> as any sharpness: but "sharpness" spread out,
> allowed to occur over a wider range
> than mental lines can keep:

Once again, these lines closely echo the poet's "sudden illumination" in the South Pacific, where the constantly shifting waterline was connected to the larger field of experience that made it possible. Our ordinary experience is no different, Ammons seems to say, and though we may temporarily differentiate between the lines of primrose and the lines of bayberry, between the rows of dunes and the reedy swamp, there is no definite separation between these natural occurrences. Their shape and contour are always the temporary result of our engagement with them. Although the sharpness of these differences may be "spread out" over a "wider range" than we are ever capable of delineating, the changes we experience are nonetheless still significant, a part of our always developing relationship with our environment. "Facts have truth," Ammons says in "An Essay on Poetics," "when touched, given configuration by transforming, informing fiction."[52] And it is the speaker's encounter with these always shifting lines of nature that gives them form, however temporarily and however limited.

It is no surprise, then, that it is at this very moment that Ammons turns his attention back to the constantly evolving world of animal life and predation as an example of the consequences and significance of such transformations. Observing the creatures that live along the always "inexact" waterline, the poet, like a deep ecologist, notes the incredible intricacy and dynamics of action necessary to sustain such complex life.

[52] Ammons, A.R. "Essay on Poetics." *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Autumn, 1970), pp. 425-448.

> the moon was full last night: today, low tide was low:
> black shoals of mussels exposed to the risk
> of air
> and, earlier, of sun,
> waved in and out with the waterline, waterline inexact,
> caught always in the event of change:
> a young mottled gull stood free on the shoals
> and ate
> to vomiting: another gull, squawking possession, cracked a crab,
> picked out the entrails, swallowed the soft-shelled legs, a ruddy
> turnstone running in to snatch leftover bits:
>
> risk is full: every living thing in
> siege: the demand is life, to keep life: the small
> white black legged egret, how beautiful, quietly stalks and spears
> the shallows, darts to shore
> to stab—what? I couldn't
> see against the black mudflats—a frightened
> fiddler crab?

For Harold Bloom, this passage—"kin to a darker tradition than Ammons's own"—marks the "center" of "Corson's Inlet;" and indeed, the lines here are neatly situated near the middle of the four page poem.[53] However, although central, this passage, as Bloom implies, is as emotionally disruptive as it is representative. The sudden violent images of struggle and risk break the flowing ease of the preceding lines and are at once disgusting and beautiful, culminating in the poet's declaration that every living thing is "in siege," and that the demand, whether we realize it or not, is always "to keep life." This explicitly naturalist (Darwinian) observation applies as much to the life of literary engagement as it does to the life of the animal, for the mind must also "keep life." It too must maintain vitality in the face of the overwhelming flux of experience that threatens always to annihilate sense. This risk, this "demand" for life, is "beautiful" when executed well. The "blacklegged egret,"—kin perhaps to Bishop's sandpiper—that stalks and "spears the shallows," is beautiful, and like the speaker, seeks to find within the rush of the

[53] Bloom, Harold. "A.R. Ammons 'When you Consider the Radiance.'" *"Considering the Radiance": Essays on the Poetry of A.R. Ammons*. Eds. David Burak and Roger Gilbert. New York: Norton, 2005. (p. 68).

waves, some nourishment. In this sense, these lines are also central to the overall experience of the poem's progression, operating as a kind of momentary crystallization of the dynamics of animal life as a prelude to aesthetic consummation.

No sooner is the poet finished describing this picture of animal life than he is in fact granted a vision, again in animal form, of the aesthetic fulfillment of action in experience. The seemingly inchoate and sometimes terrible sensations of the natural world as it is encountered by the live creature are here transformed into "an experience" of a memorable and psychologically renovative walk filled with insight and emotion.

> The news to my left over the dunes and
> Reeds and bayberry clumps was
> Fall: thousands of tree swallows
> Gathering for flight:
> An order held
> In constant change: a congregation
> Rich with entropy: nevertheless, separable, noticeable
> As one event,
> Not chaos: preparations for
> Flight from winter,
> Cheet, cheet, cheet, cheet, wings rifling the green clumps,
> Beaks
> At the bayberries
> A perception full of wind, flight, curve,
> Sound:
> The possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness:
> The "field" of action
> With moving, incalculable center (45).

As Ammons no doubt intended to imply, this "news" as it comes to him over the dunes, is, as Ezra Pound said: "news that stays news." It is the kind of aesthetic insight, which, as William Carlos Williams later argued, "men die miserably every day for lack of." But these lines also provide a near-perfect example of Dewey's concept of experience as an "enduring whole" composed of many "successive portions." It should come as no surprise, then, that Ammons chooses not only to embody this idea, but to embody it in the form of active animal life. These

swallows offer an excellent metaphor for the way that seemingly inchoate experience is shaped and coheres through responses to the environment. Both doing and undergoing, each of these birds is simultaneously affecting and being affected by the movements of all the others--part of the enduring whole and still wholly themselves. In this sense, Ammons too is an intimate part of the environment he inhabits, wholly himself and yet wholly integrated with what he observes.

As with all aesthetic experience, however, the sense of order felt is not one of predictable or intentional arrangement—it is not something imposed upon an inert environment. The poet does not merely make "a form of formlessness," as he says. There is "no arranged terror: no forcing of image, plan, or thought." Instead, these temporary orders seen and experienced, felt and intuited, are the unpredictable "outcomes of actions," which are themselves forms of intelligence. "Experience is not enslaved to empirical conditions," as Dewey argues in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, but "carries principles of connection and organization within itself." "The true stuff of experience is recognized to be adaptive courses of action, habits, active functions, connections of doing and undergoing."[54] In this sense, it is Ammons, and not Ashbery, who is our most Hericletan of poets, interested always in the action that results in form, and rarely, if at all in the actual form itself, which is always a temporary manifestation. And in this observation, this realization of the "serenity," not the terror, of the always unfinished nature of experience, Ammons captures the very structure of consciousness as action, what Dewey called "the consciousness of meanings or having ideas" [348]. As Dewey says in *Experience and Nature*, "unless there were something problematic, undecided, still going-on and as yet unfinished and indeterminate, in nature, there could be no such events as perceptions."

[54] *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (91)

> It were, conceivably, "better" that nature should be finished through and through, a closed mechanical or closed teleological structure, such as philosophic schools have fancied. But in that case the flickering candle of consciousness would go out.[55]

Ammons in his own way comes to the same conclusions in "Corson's Inlet." Rather than attempt (impossibly) to impose some kind of permanent order upon the flux of the world he encounters, Ammons instead celebrates the diversity of possibility inherent in the many, often unpredictable, orders that may arise through active engagement. There is "no propaganda," "no humbling of reality to precept," except as it temporarily manifests itself as idea, seen as "narrow orders," and "limited tightness." But, as Ammons makes clear, he "will not run to that narrow victory," preferring instead a "widening scope," fastening into order "enlarging grasps of disorder." Ammons knows, as did Dewey, that ideas and meaning take shape and become perceptible only in the process of active engagement.

> Adjustments of the slow moving changes of nature to its sudden starts and trepidations, such as gives some degree of order to the latter and as re-adapts the motions of the sluggish and inert core to the volatile surface of hasty movements, makes necessary a conversion of static orders into stable meanings, while it also renders them perceptible, or ideas, as they answer to the flux of things.[56]

The difference, perhaps, is that for Ammons, even more than Dewey, these "stable meanings" are always incomplete and transitory and the poet must finally admit, and in some sense embrace the fact that "there is no finality of vision," and that he has "perceived nothing completely." "Tomorrow a new walk is a new walk," and nothing, it seems, could be more comforting than this knowledge.

Ammons's poem, then, both accepts and celebrates the impermanence of order and the aesthetic possibility inherent in that impermanence. It also celebrates the transformational potential of aesthetic perception as composition, its ability to organize and make navigable, and

[55] EN (349)
[56] EN (351)

ultimately meaningful, the world of inchoate motion, through active engagement. "Corson's Inlet" also illustrates quite well the degree to which this meaning making is always temporary, emphasizing the necessity of continual aesthetic transformation through the construction of new experiences. How that transformation is achieved, the process of finding that aesthetic balance is exemplified in another one of Ammons's longer works: "The Ridge Farm," which we will examine next.

IV "THE CURVATURE OF THE GOING"

"The final measure of balance or symmetry is the capacity of the whole to hold together within itself the greatest variety and scope of opposed elements." [57]

—John Dewey *Art as Experience*

" …the grandest
clustering of aggregates permits the finest definition: so out
of that bind, I proceed a little way into similarity and
withdraw a bit into differentiae." [58]

—A.R. Ammons "An Essay on Poetics"

As we saw in Ashbery's "The Skaters," Ammons's "Ridge Farm" is a poem that attempts to articulate and, in turn, to give structure and meaning to the world of diverse experience it describes. From the natural world of weather and animal predation to the mundane conversations and musings of social life, Ammons is seeking, like he did in "Corson's Inlet," to break and then build up again (reconstruct) the world of his experience. For Ammons this reconstruction is dependent upon the dynamic tension between what he calls "recalcitrance" and "fluidity," or what Dewy would have called simply "doing and undergoing." Finding a satisfactory (and satisfying) balance between those forces, is at the heart of the aesthetic process and is central to Ammons's long poem.

[57] AE (184)
[58] Ammons, A.R. "Essay on Poetics." *Hudson Review*. Vol. 23, No. 3, Autumn, 1970. (431)

"The Ridge Farm," not surprisingly, then, begins with an image of snow covered trees that exhibits the inherently generative tension between the natural forces of "recalcitrance" and "fluidity." The cedars are "hung-over," says the speaker, and "vexed" by the wind. The snow is "packed in," "puffed solid," and the hemlocks are weighed down in "long strings" of grackles "trying to sit still." Though beautiful, these descriptions are filled with tension, and everything is under stress and out of synch. Even the sun, melting the snow from the branches on the "sunset side of trees," leaves them overbalanced with snow on the "lee side," and their branches are bent down to mingle with the shrubs beneath. This scene, however, is only part of a larger opening sequence which very subtly equates this tension with the act of poetic composition, presenting to the reader a world of pragmatic and organic transformation which rejects fixed ends, embracing instead and working with the contingencies of what is.

This conflation of the literary and the natural is inaugurated several lines later when the poet veers wildly from the intensely descriptive scenes of winter life that open the poem to the plainly anecdotal story of an anxious young poet in need. The poet in question, a student of Ammons's, is seeking to find, as he puts it, "his true voice." Handing over one of his poems he says: "this is not my true voice, only a/ line or so." The apprentice poet seems to hope that Ammons will be able somehow to help him find and cultivate that voice. But Ammons is incredulous, and the rest of the section explores the implications and limits of such an idealistic desire, wondering out loud to his reader:

> but is his true
> voice more interesting
> than the one in the poem and, anyway
> isn't the one in the poem, if untrue,
> truly untrue:

Just as the trees in section one are burdened with the weight of snow and ice, the poet described here is burdened with his own limited expectations of what his poetry should or can be. Wishing

to impose a "perceived" voice upon the world he misses the degree to which such forms of expression, habit, and intelligence are not formed in isolation but are instead developed organically in the processes of living. In an Emersonian gesture that sounds like it could have come straight out of "Self-Reliance," Ammons replies to his student saying:

> That is not the way, the way
> is to say what you have to say
> and let the voice find itself
> assimilated from the many tones and sources, its
> predominant and subsidiary motions
> not cut away from the gatherings:

The world described by Ammons here is one driven by aesthetic interest and built from out of the ground of ordinary impulse and experience, not one of mere problem solving, as critics of Dewey have too often suggested. Like writing, experience is born out of engagement and action not hermetic contemplation, which is the province of the metaphysician. "It is passive/ to do the bidding of the voice you have/ imagined formed," says Ammons, adding that "freedom engages what in the world is/ to be engaged." This explicitly anti-idealist gesture, engaging what is to be engaged, rather than imagining for one's self, some preexisting end, is a radically pragmatist gesture, and one that Ammons will continue to explore throughout the rest of the poem. Indeed, this line, properly understood, is one of several central organizing premises around which much of the rest of the poem revolves, and by extension evolves, as it comes into being. Engaging what is to be engaged, accepting what is before him as the medium of his experience, the poet leads the reader for the rest of the poem through a series of observations and anecdotes, building in the process, a unified and expressive experience out of the seemingly disconnected moments of ordinary life on "The Ridge Farm." In this sense Ammons poem, like "The Skaters," provides us with a classic example of a life aesthetically composed.

This turn toward the literary in section three is not accidental, however. It sets the structural groundwork for the rest of the poem, which moves effortlessly through its forty-one pages back and forth between composition and observation, weaving together images of natural and animal life with the poet's own day to day experience. For Ammons, composition—literary and otherwise—is always a process of engagement and transformation, of simultaneously doing and undergoing, which applies as much to the world of ordinary experience as to the realm of literary production. It is no surprise then that the following section leads us from the literary (the "MFA program" or "pogrom," as Ammons later says) back into the natural world. Just as we should not write to the voice we have imagined for ourselves, but should instead let the voice find itself, we do not go into nature expecting to find ready-made some expression of truth. Nature, as Ammons argues, "has nothing to say." It has no voice but the one we lend to it through our engagement with its many "predominant and subsidiary motions." Expression and meaning are always part of an interaction, and as such require patience and attention. "Progression will find progressive gears," says Ammons, and "even now backsteppings are being wound/ forward," life taking shape in its perceptions.

> Knowledge, perception, this action
> Is so endless it might well be
> Avoided, as one does not care to take
> Down, just because it happens what happens, the play
> Of light on an inlet, bay, sea

As Ammons makes clear by powerfully breaking this first line where he does, knowledge and perception are not static concepts but are a combined form of action. Furthermore, these many "minor actions" as Ashbery might have called them, are naturally so abundant that it is impossible to gather them all together, to ever account for their fullness and significance. With every new perception comes new relations, which must themselves be accounted for and so it becomes impossible to always "take down…what happens." And yet "worked so far in,"

integrated by sense and that animal feeling of belonging that defines all aesthetic experience, "knowledge mingles with its source,"

> So as to give up reefs, shoals, shores
> Of resistance, to unwind
> The embracing curvatures of line,
> Shelf, lagoon

The source here is, of course, the natural world, and rather than divide knowledge and sense, experience and nature, Ammons chooses to show how they are mutually dependent. This passage in fact resembles Ashbery's recursive figure eight; always testing the boundaries of experience, always going out and coming back to a new-found transformation of life, this interchange, this "mingling," makes manifest the very world of experience as an interchange between the organism (with all of its previous experience) and its environment. An interchange that is at once an engagement with resistance and its undoing, the unwinding of "the embracing curvatures of line," the underlying quality that gives meaning and form to life. This process requires a kind of continual balancing act between "recalcitrance" and "fluidity," doing and undergoing, and it is to an understanding of this necessary process that Ammons leads us in the next stanza, explaining, for the first time, the central tenets of his aesthetic mode.

> recalcitrance, fluency: these:
> too far with one and the density
> darkens, the mix slows, and bound
> up with hindrance, unyielding, stops:
> too far with the other and the bright
> spiel of light spins substanceless
> descriptions of motion.

This struggle to maintain a balance between the fluid and the recalcitrant, the determinate and the indeterminate is one of the central aesthetic problems explored in "The Ridge Farm." It is also, as I have already mentioned in previous chapters, a problem that is central to Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic for Dewey is precisely the continual

achievement of this balance, the exploitation of encountered resistance, of order and chaos respectively. Not surprisingly, Ammons's ideas here also seem to mimic Wallace Stevens' sentiments in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," when he describes the popular German painter Ludwig Richter as a "turbulent Schlemiel," who "has lost the whole in which he was contained."[59] Chaos, for Stevens and Ammons is found as surely in the rigidity of accepted forms as it is in formlessness, it is as much a problem of habit as it is of the unconstructed unknown. Any sense of connection to this lost whole then can be achieved only through the vigilant composition of experience, always, as Ammons says: "testing the middle mix,/ the rigid line of the free and easy."

Ammons returns to this central theme again in section seventeen. Here, after many forays into the flowing world of nature, "sap, brook, glacier, spirit," the poet offers a meditation on the value of the reconstructive imagination.

> we assemble the variable materials until
> balance begins
> defining out, then we explore the
> validity of the balance, collecting and
> testing in cooperation with it, then
> its fullness approaching satisfactory
> disposition, we test it down to see if
> it can give or crack: if it holds we
> come into a high consideration
> of the balance, the branches and
> embranchments so fine, the recalcitrant
> solidity of the mass or number and
> justice begins to appear

This is an extraordinary passage, not only for the way that it captures the nature of aesthetic experience as the construction of a balance of "variable materials," but also in the way that it ascribes to that condition of aesthetic life the normally abstract concept of justice. Justice, in this passage, however, takes on a new sense of materiality, becoming a part of the world of

[59] WSCPP (311)

experience. It is literally the product of a "high consideration" of the fluid world of motion and life, and not something imposed upon life from the outside. Just as a poem or a play, a piece of music or dance manifests its own value, justice, too—the feeling of rightness and equity—comes into being as a process of satisfactory relations, becoming finally almost synonymous with the aesthetic.

The vision of aesthetic equilibrium described in this passage, therefore, is much more than a metaphor for natural conservation or some abstract idea of the right balance of natural forces, but describes instead the construction of connections, not only between the natural and social worlds, but among all encountered experience. It is about the construction of life as it is encountered, continually making connections that matter and testing them down to see if they hold. These "branches and embranchments," like the swarming branch-like synapses in the brain, are the endless divergences of relations that break off from each new experience. Keeping track of every such connection, however, building each one back into the experience of life as it occurs is, of course, impossible; so much of life slips away from us. Both Ashbery and Ammons know that responding to the underlying quality of any experience eventually requires a leap of faith, surrender to the aesthetic moment as at least temporarily complete.

This aesthetic achievement is eloquently explored by Ammons in section Seven. With masterful brevity, he captures the innate animal nature of this drive for balance, of the impulse to connect, as a transcendental experience at once dangerous but absolutely necessary:

some branches, the
birch's, end bushy
but the squirrel,
no aerial rail to catch, will
leap into the vague
net and, bounding, find
route to hard wood.

Few metaphors are as subtle and simultaneously exact as this "vague net," which operates on several different levels all at once. Surely the net, which both captures and saves, is used here to describe the courage and animal faith of the squirrel (wholly aware of its physical self in relation to its environment), but it also operates as a perfect metaphor for the constructed nature of ordinary experience; a fallen trapeze artist, we are captured and held aloft only by the "vague net" of connections that we make, saved only by this meaning making from the abyss of chaos below. Like Stevens' pigeons which "sink,/ Downward to darkness, on extended wings," Ammons suggests that we too seem to move above the darkness, not on wings, but on branches of relation.[60]

Returning to section seventeen, we find that this sense of aesthetic justice is also intimately related to animal life. The appearance of justice, Ammons makes clear, is like:

> …the distance
> that lets the wolf run and kill and the
> caribou mosey on: starved crows
> showing up for hide shreds: the wolverine
> cagey, careful, capable on the
> periphery of astonishing kills:
> snow eaten for blood salt: so
> many things to consider, undoing so
> unlikely, assent follows, the wide band
> of the mind shifting to acceptance,
> finding the staying place amid
> horror, lust, need, necessity, that
> which is, a small
> place to walk in a system of others

The vision we are given here is both beautiful and horrible, and just as we saw in "Corson's Inlet," the speaker's own "humanity" is simultaneously conflated and contrasted with the world

[60] Not surprisingly, perhaps, Stanley Cavell uses the exact same metaphor in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* to describe the insecurity of our foundations of knowledge and language. "We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations—*a thin net over an abyss*" (my emphasis).The difference, here perhaps is that Cavell's skepticism still longs for some more concrete foundation, while Ammons, Stevens, and indeed Emerson, are much more content to skate upon surfaces. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. (178).

of animal predation and the demand "to keep life." The distance between the predator and its prey is a necessary distance, a field of possibility in which consummations may arise, a tension without which there is no victory, no "fulfillment to our dreams and our desires."[61] But it is also an aesthetic distance. The horror and the violence of this scene require a certain level of abstraction in order to be understood and integrated into the speaker's life. And it is, ironically, precisely this distance which allows him to recognize himself in this "system of others," to assent to and accept his place among the world of "horror, lust, need," and "necessity" that defines biological existence.

This same experience is also recounted in the very opening lines of Ammons's book length poem: *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*. There, Ammons describes, in remarkably similar language, the predatory nature of aesthetic experience as thought seeking out form, or what Stevens referred to, in similar terms, as "form gulping after formlessness."[62]

> …camouflagy thought flushed
>
> out of the bush, seen vaguely as potential form, and
> pursued, pursued and perceived, declared: the savored
> form, the known possession, knowledge, carnal knowledge:
>
> the seizure, the satiation: the heavy jaguar takes the
> burro down for a foreleg or so…"

The satisfaction of such a kill, the immediate connection between need and fulfillment, and the resolution of experience is presented to the reader here as part of even the most primal level of animal life. Despite the violence depicted here, however, the speaker still finds a certain freedom and sense of possibility in the natural world that is sometimes confounded in human experience. "I go to/ nature," says Ammons, "because man is scary,/ his mercilessness not like/ the jaguar's which can be evaded/ but like one's own mercilessness, inescapable as one's own intellect." But

[61] WSCPP (55)
[62] WSCPP (355)

Ammons is not content merely to flee the human world and to rest within some idea of perfected nature. He proposes no mere rejection of reason but argues instead for a greater integration of the human and the animal. Rather than escape completely into the world of nature, he suggests that we should instead bring natural expression back into human experience.

> I wouldn't give up a hair of
> the beautiful
> high suasions of language,
> celestial swales, hungering the
> earth up into heaven, no,
> I would just implicate
> the language with barklike beeps,
> floppy turf
> of songsound, I would lift up so much
> of the whatnot
> it would pull the heavens down
> commingling with things and us.

Just as Stevens' "Sunday Morning" describes a world transformed by the birth of Christ, in which our blood is commingled with the blood of heaven, Ammons imagines heaven here as an integration (using "implicate" in its archaic sense of twisting or folding together) of the celestial and the earthly, the human and the animal. Ammons is no mere primitivist, however. He does not wish to give up either language or the idea of heaven, but wants instead to reinvigorate them with the intensity of "animal life below the human scale." Choosing neither one nor the other Ammons instead wishes to integrate in an explicitly consummatory gesture, these "barklike beeps," and "songsound" back into human life, bringing heaven down to earth and the human back into the realm of animal life.

Indeed, this important and necessary integration between the human and the animal is actually built into the very structure of "The Ridge Farm," which weaves, throughout its fifty-one irregular sections, a series of mutually informing anecdotes of animal and literary life so that by the end of the poem the reader has the sense of being fully situated and at home within a

shifting world of human-animal experience. Moving back and forth from the natural to the literary Ammons narrates a series of ordinary experiences, almost all of which are informed in their own way by a close interaction with the aesthetic potential of animal life as the source of a composing mind fully integrated with its environment. From the frozen mole drowned in the watering can to the dead squirrel on the highway's edge "his legs spraddled stiff into space," "The Ridge Farm," like so much of Ammons's poetry, implicates the reader in this ongoing cycle of life and death, placing us squarely within the biological world, inviting us to consider and question our own deep affinities with the other animals around us. Mixed in with these engagements with animal life are a series of literary observations, discussions of poetic form and voice, the effect of which is to create a further sense of integration between aesthetic composition and the experience of animal life.

One such series of observations is found near the center of the poem where over the course of several sections Ammons weaves together a vast collection of disparate experiences into "an experience." In one of the most memorable and certainly most conversational moments of the poem, Ammons describes how he stumbled upon a dead mole in his watering can. Wanting to water the struggling strawberry plants he had all but given up for dead, the poet fetches the plastic watering can "that has/ been sitting all winter under the outside/ faucet catching, since thaw, drops: leaks." Watering the strawberries he smells a strange odor and upending the can soon finds out what it is.

> I poured some rich brown
> juice into the jar and then upended
> the can to let the leaves fall out and
> out plunked this animal clothed in
> leaves so I couldn't tell what he was
> except his thick tail looked thicker
> than a rat's: mercy: I'd just had
> lunch: squooshy ice cream: I nearly
> unhad it.

Despite Ammons's near-perfect use of blank verse, these lines have an incredibly colloquial and conversational tone. Flat, repetitive, and plain, they sound as if they had been taken straight out of the speaker's diary or journal. This perfectly ordinary moment, captured in this perfectly ordinary language is nonetheless filled with significance and meaning, for it is not long before the speaker, having overcome his shock—and retained his lunch!—feels the pull of empathy, imagining the horror and loneliness of this blind creature's final moments.

> I can see how
> Something blind could get into my
> Wateringcan: but with those feet!
> I can hear him scratching up the side:
> To get in, or out: but also I can hear him
> Sloshing, the blind water darkened by
> Night, till nobody came.

The empathic and clearly anthropomorphic force of this final line—"till nobody came,"—disrupts the more objective lines that precede it. Indeed, the gesture here is similar to Bishop's "The Fish:" which also moves effortlessly and organically from casual observation to visionary empathy. At first the speaker imagines what it must have been like to hear the creature scratching up the sides of the can or sloshing the water, but by the final lines it becomes clear that the speaker is also imagining this experience from the inside out. The "blind" water and the expectation of salvation implied in the final line: "till nobody came," mark a kind of empathetic integration of the human and the animal.

This sudden moment of empathy and integration is followed by what can only be described as a transformative moment of consummation. Having made the connection between himself and this creature, so radically different ("with those feet!), the speaker is changed and bursts suddenly into a kind of revelatory verse in sharp contrast to the prosaic nature of the previous section.

> There is something about
> A redbird flying down
> Into
> The brook bed, the stone-deep ditch,
> And lighting on a washed out root,
> The brook meanwhile throwing mirrors
> Everywhere—light, mirror, bird, stone

This passage is at once an expression and experience of the very feeling of empathy created in the previous section. Not only does it make manifest (like "The Fish") a sense of aesthetic consummation—the brook, like the oil-stained rainbow water of Bishop's poem, "throwing mirrors everywhere"—but it exemplifies the very feeling of integration that aesthetic experience makes possible: "light, mirror, bird, stone" all reflected in each other.

Having described this animal sense of wholeness and integration, having found its objective correlative in this mirrored "brook bed," the speaker returns again (much like Ashbery's skater, coming back to the pivot point of his figure eight) to the central aesthetic argument as a reiteration of an *ars poetica* that values the aesthetic force of "maximum implication."

> I like, as I have said before,
> maximum implication and
>
> registration of fact and tension before
> integration catches on as to how
>
> it is to work and the point it
> catches on to the finish what a war
>
> between what will not be
> captured by design, bent to a larger
>
> rule, made to serve, expand, elaborate:
> it is not right until the design
>
> at once insists on itself and accommodates
> itself to the material all the way out
>
> to the tricky coincidental!

Celebrating the productive tension of encountered resistance and the unaccountable plurality of experience as a bulwark against a too perfect integration, Ammons embraces again the central tension between fluidity and recalcitrance. Just as Dewey argued that all experience is a process of doing and undergoing, where the subject both changes and is changed by his environment, Ammons argues that any design worth the bother must also continually find accommodation with the world of flowing experience even as it "insists on itself." No order, Ammons suggests is ever perfectly in balance, precisely because such perfection represents the very end of experience, "for if/ the central, controlling design will/ not submit to the chippy alteration of/ the surprising appearance, the fortuitous/ bit, its control will be perfect, a/ nonplace, emptiness."

Instead of wasting our effort seeking out this perfect design, Ammons proposes instead an active, explicitly experimentalist form of continual "integration:" one that always "tests itself, adjusting, sorting, out to the limit." Such a continual reaching after perfection recalls Emerson's description of the "flying perfect" in "Circles," and any sense of perpetual integration continually evades our grasp, because it changes, and thus avoids what Ammons calls the "garrisons and amassing of questioning" that inevitably and always overturn the so-called perfect. Dewey—following Emerson perhaps—also insists, much like Ammons, that the perfect is in a constant state of becoming in experience, not a destination to be achieved outside of it. "The world in which we could get enlightenment and instruction about the direction in which we are moving only from a vague conception of an unattainable perfection would be totally unlike our present world."[63] Only by remaining open to experience, to what Ammons calls the "tricky

[63] Dewey, John. *Human Nature and Conduct*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922, (282). For an insightful, extended, and thorough comparison of Emerson's and Dewey's concept of the "perfect" and "moral perfectionism" see: Saito, Naoko. *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.

coincidental," "the surprising appearance" and "the fortuitous bit," however, can we learn to sustain "maximum implication:" continual transformation and integration.

Unable, or perhaps just unwilling, to sustain such a thoroughgoing intellectualism for very long, Ammons returns briefly to a more conversational mode of expression, offering yet another colloquial expostulation upon the art of poetry. Conflating again the natural and the compositional, the animal and the aesthetic, Ammons asserts almost casually that:

> it doesn't matter to me if issues
> overload a line:
> or if real poetry shrugs shucking
> bugs of small intentions
> off the shoulders of its purer
> streams—what the fuck—everybody
> has to eat, nature overfilling
> everything to fill it:
> yesterday was one day, today is
> another, tomorrow still one more:

Poetry, like nature, Ammons seems to suggest here, is super-abundant, providing more than enough experience to fill our days. This superfluity, however, is also the guarantee of a sufficiency without which life would be impossible or intolerable. The idea of superfluity as such is not original to Ammons or Dewey, of course. As Richard Poirier explains in great detail in *Poetry and Pragmatism*, superfluity is an essential aspect of the works of both Emerson and William James. According to Poirier superfluity is for Emerson "an effort to refloat the world, to make it less stationary and more transitional, to make descriptions of it correspondingly looser, less technical, more uncertain."[64] This is also true for Ammons and Dewey; however for both of them this superfluity represents not only a method of transition, but also a greater expanse of possible aesthetic connections: what Dewey called the "variety and scope of opposed elements" out of which life may be made and remade with each new day. In this sense, superfluity is not

[64] Poirier, Richard. *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. (40)

merely an abundance of physical, natural, literary or intellectual life, but represents the overabundance of perception itself, a perception which promises always to overwhelm our sense of meaning even as it makes that sense of meaning possible. Finding as large and expansive a space as possible within this abundance is the aesthetic imperative. As Ammons says, it is "the grandest clustering of aggregates" that "permits the finest definition," and, as such, the greatest sense of aesthetic satisfaction in life.

Returning to language Ammons explains the poetically productive nature of such linguistic abundance just two sections later. In a passage remarkably similar to the parable of the sower—itself an explicit parable of superfluity—Ammons likens his own words to sand, trash, and chaff, tossed into the air "to see if light/ will pick anything out in them."

> though I cast up true
>
> words as far as I know
> (words that truly
> occur) I cannot be
>
> held wrong when I range
> into winnowing chaff,
> truly chaff: I am
> seeing: I am looking to make
> arrangements

Comparing this process "of looking to make arrangements" to a kind of winnowing, this chaff "truly chaff" becomes as important as any metaphorical grain, for though these words themselves are not "the truth" they have still

> caught the swerve, they
>
> revealed the glint: the
> mind opens—it is so
> delightful, glaring—many
>
> times before it finds a
> room worth finding:
> but chaff will show

you "which way the wind blows"

They have revealed at last what Ammons calls the "curvature of the going," and it is this curvature, this motion that matters.

I speak to show not
the substance but
the curvature of the going

the substance may change often
but the curvature has a glacial
pace, seeming, to tell the truth

This "curvature" is remarkably similar to Stevens' concept of a wave in "The Nobel Rider and the Sound of Words." There Stevens writes that just "as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same." For Stevens, this nobility was famously a "violence from within" that protected us from a "violence without." Similarly, in "The Ridge Farm" this "curvature," like Stevens' wave represents the underlying rhythm of aesthetic experience as the driving force of life, "the integration/ that tests itself," always "adjusting" and "sorting" (winnowing) "out to the limit." In this sense, superfluity for Ammons represents not so much a way of creating uncertainty so much as it is a method for the establishment of connections and relations between himself and his environment, opening the mind to the delight that manifests itself in integration.

Even the vague form represented by this underlying curvature, however, must itself be occasionally set aside in order "to make/ room for the truth," or what Ammons later calls "the great vacancy visible." Ammons regularly seeks out such vacancies, much as Stevens did, as spaces of inevitable reconstruction. Getting to this truth, this vacancy, however, requires a continual process of aesthetic destruction, a rejection of all form as a kind of *via negativa*. "The truth/ is none of my business:" says Ammons:

I don't care if
I tell a little: my business is to make
room for the truth, to bust the couplet,
warp the quatrain, explode the sonnet,
tear down the curvatures of the lengthy:
the truth is commodious, abundant: we
must make a rooms sufficient it will
include till nothing will be left
over for walls, merely the thinning away
to the numb, great vacancy visible.

What begins as an almost Whitmanic celebration of freedom and abundance—unscrewing "the doors themselves from their jambs!"—ends only in nothingness. This "numb" vacancy is tantamount to the too perfect integration described earlier and represents one of the two poles of Deweyan experience: the terrifying nothingness of perfect order (for Ammons, "the one") in contrast to the chaos ("the many") of unordered experience. The truth is commodious indeed, but so much so that no room, no sonnet, no form can ever make it manifest. Thus the truth complete, the fullest integration, becomes merely a vacancy, an annihilation, a formlessness without change. This perfect integration, though longed for, would be as intolerable as any chaos and as such is ultimately rejected in the next stanza, in favor of more "common" experience.

in the small walks & chasms
of despair one seeks to find and
pretends to build enledgments to
plateaus of staying and view but
these unfound, pretended become high
lake surfaces of chagrin, false, of
course, in themselves but,
worse, too brilliant for common use

Absence it seems, is for Ammons its own kind of spectacle, its own sublime but inevitably pretended presence. Such a presence becomes, in these lines, an embarrassing over reaching of the imagination: mere "lake surfaces of chagrin," whose existence is not only false, but, worse, useless in its brilliance. In contrast to this manufactured sublimity, this embarrassing and useless spectacle of absence, Ammons returns the reader instead to the natural world of

common animal life. "One needs stanzas to take/ sharp interest in," says Ammons, and "one interests the stanza/ down the road to wilderness." (28). And indeed, much of the rest of the poem is spent building bridges back to this small world of common use, weaving together, as before, the natural and the literary into a cohesive lived experience.

In the very next section Ammons returns the reader to the natural world of resistance, tension, and consummation. It is spring and the trees, now full of new leaf and blossom are again weighed down with the weight of snow: "the bent bent, the bush crushed,/ a great ground flower." The "desert/ mouse twitches under the rule of the/ rattler flash," and the cycle of predation goes on. Meanwhile the poet, content again to dwell in the natural world of small pleasures can "hardly believe" that he does not "have to teach this morning: the first/ Monday off."

This critique of false abstraction and this renewed attention to the value of the small and the ordinary is reiterated and expanded upon near the end of the poem. Distancing himself yet again from the impossible idea of the truth as nothing but a great vacancy, an unachievable perfect integration of the "All," Ammons rejects the empty usages of culture in favor of smaller, leaner truths. In a passage that echoes quite well the central argument of *Art as Experience*, Ammons says: "culture, hardened to shellac's empty/usage, defines in definitions/ hoaxdoms of remove from true life."

> which
> is smaller, leaner than a brook, no
> louder, variable as, to the true rain:
> the true life feels about its small
> shoulders the traces and burdens of
> death and turns for relief to berries,
> bushes bent in abundance

Not only do these lines express well Dewey's central argument that art (and culture) is always associated with the materials and aims of every form of "human effort, undergoing and

achievement," it also perfectly elaborates Dewey's description of "animal life below the human scale" as the "true life." Seeking relief from berries and bushes bent in abundance, the poet-creature finds in this smaller, leaner form a renewed connection to life as aesthetic process.

Not surprisingly this passage is followed by several sections that explicitly and, in some ways empathically explore the small world of animal life. From the oriole, "emitting scarves of music," in between her struggles to find a few worms, to the dusk rabbits munching on dandelions and quince leaves, the movement is toward the earth, bringing the reader—like the fog that brings the pollen down to ground—back to a consideration of the human as aesthetic animal. These images of animal life lead finally to the last two sections of the poem, which provide an extraordinary meditation and elaboration upon what Emerson in "Self-Reliance" described as "the gleam of light which flashes across [the] mind from within." For Ammons that light is not necessarily self-generated, but instead involves a Deweyan interactive process of doing and undergoing, or what he calls "human concern working with what is."

Returning to the images of light, superfluity, and experimentation of section thirty, Ammons writes:

> A light catches somewhere, finds human
> Spirit to burn on, shows its magic's
> Glint lines, attracts, grows, rolls,
> Back space and dark, stands dominant.
>
> …Slowly the light,
> Its veracity unshaken, dies but moves
> To find a place to break out elsewhere:
> This light, tendance, neglect
> Is human concern working with
> What is: one thing is hardly better
> Or worse than another: the
> Split hair of possible betterment makes
> Dedication reasonable and heroic.

This light catches onto the human spirit much as "integration catches on," and represents yet another way that "an experience" grows and takes shape, "stands dominant" and invites tension or consummation, its brilliance outshining even the light of reason. However spiritual and transcendental, however much this light may seem to be a source of ideal beauty, it is still, in Ammons's descriptions, entirely pragmatist. "Working with what is," instead of what should be, Ammons embraces the Deweyan fact that consummatory ends are not final, but are always the material of future action. This light may die, but it will always "find a place to break out elsewhere." And such dedication to aesthetic means is, finally, both "reasonable and heroic," full of potential like a butterfly "the wind takes/ ten thousand miles."

Having come full circle back to the ground of consummatory, transformative aesthetic experience, having recorded his experiences both profound and mundane, having weaved back together the literary and the natural, Ammons ends his poem, not surprisingly, with a final image of active animal life: a catbird bathing in the brook by the highway "dipping into and breaking the reflective surfaces with mishmashes of tinkling circlets." "Working with what is," disturbing and breaking up the "reflective surfaces" of experience and culture, this small bird is a perfect representation of the generative and transformative power and pleasure of aesthetic experience as a vital aspect of ordinary animal life.

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