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THE VARIETIES OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE  
IN AMERICAN MODERNIST LITERATURE

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Varieties of Aesthetic Experience in American Modernist Literature

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My dissertation focuses on three American Modernists—Henry James, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens—whose major works portray the sacralization of art as a problematic aspiration. All three are known for essays, journals, or letters which argue that literature can be seen either as a secular replacement for religion (James, Stevens), or a secular conduit for rumination on divine grace (Moore). However, the dominant tendency in their literary writing is to depict these projects as unaccomplished and perhaps unaccomplishable. In their fiction and poetry, James, Moore, and Stevens suggest that when aesthetic experience is spiritualized, the writing that results will be solipsistic, imprecise, and ontologically implausible. I examine these writers' descriptions of the limitations and inconsistencies of imagining literature as a source of spiritual experience, and I demonstrate that the sacralization of art in American Modernism was not a dead metaphor but an ongoing problem.

James, Moore, and Stevens conceived the parameters of this problem with language drawn from contemporary debates about religious experience. My methodology therefore seeks to contextualize these writers by examining their responses to particular aesthetic and theological issues—James on the afterlife, Moore on Neo-Orthodox doctrines of original sin, Stevens on mystic conceptions of “pure poetry.” I suggest a more general context in my introductory chapter, where I argue that all three of these writers define the spiritual dimensions of art in ways that are closely tied to the

intellectual legacy of American Protestantism. Unlike Matthew Arnold, who envisioned a civic religion of art with a redemptive, public mission, the writers I examine imagine that the spiritual work of literature is conducted in isolation, and does not allow the writer to heal the world but to escape it. James, Moore, and Stevens follow writers like Emerson, William James, and Reinhold Niebuhr in imagining individualism to be essential to spirituality, but they also criticize this individualist model, as can be seen when they worry that devotion to art leads to loneliness, greed, and withdrawal from life. This uneasy continuity between Protestantism and Modernism exemplifies the complex and incomplete ways that secularization occurred in American intellectual culture.

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## Introduction

In 1900, George Santayana argued in the preface to his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* “that religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry” (v). It becomes clear as the book unfolds that Santayana feels that the plausibility of religion has been undermined by this revelation that “religion is the poetry in which we believe” (26). In his chapter on the Homeric Hymns, Santayana begins:

We of this generation look back upon a variety of religious conceptions and forms of worship, and a certain unsatisfied hunger in our own souls attaches our attention to the spectacle. We observe how literally fables and other mysteries were once accepted which can have for us now only a thin and symbolic meaning. Judging other minds and other ages by our own, we are tempted to ask if there ever was any fundamental difference between religion and poetry. Both seem to consist in what the imagination adds to science, to history, to morals. Men looked attentively on the face of Nature: their close struggle with her compelled them to do so: but before making statistics of her movements they made dramatizations of her life. The imagination enveloped the material world, as yet imperfectly studied, and produced the cosmos and mythology.

Thus the religion of the Greeks was, we might say, nothing but poetry. (24)

Santayana’s identification of poetry with religion thus becomes the linchpin for a secularization narrative. In his account, once a religious mythology is defined as literary, or, to put it differently, once it is defined as a product of the imagination, it loses its power to move us as a factual explanation of the world. If the identification of poetry with religion has dire consequences for religious beliefs, however, it has more beneficent consequences for the status of poetry. Religion, as Santayana points out throughout his book, has been a powerful force for both good and ill: “faith brings us not only peace, not only the contemplation of ideal harmonies, but labour and the sword” (26). Religions



provide codes of conduct, ritual prescriptions, epiphanic experiences, and explanations of natural phenomena, and if, in the modern age, religion has become less plausible, the idea that religion was actually just literature all along suggests that the literary imagination now has the opportunity to take center stage and receive full credit for its ability to mold our perceptions and actions.

The argument that poets and novelists are uniquely positioned to fill the void left by religion as it recedes from modern life was vital to justifications of the value of literature from Romanticism to Modernism. When Santayana wrote in 1900, he was following powerful Nineteenth Century forebears, from Shelley to Whitman to Arnold, who had sought to justify the ways of literature to man. Moreover, he was surrounded by contemporaries, including William and Henry James, who shared his interest in the sacralization of art, and his ideas would soon influence a generation of Modernist writers, most notably his friend and student Wallace Stevens.<sup>1</sup> American Modernism was beginning to take shape at the moment Santayana was writing, and he provides a useful jumping-off point because he shares with all three of the writers in my dissertation a belief that, in a modern, secularizing world, literature has a key spiritual role to play. More significantly, Santayana is similar to these three writers because his aesthetic sensibility is born of a pragmatist's belief in the ability of consciousness to mold reality, a conception of true spiritual experience as inherently subjective, and a Modernist impatience with sentimentality and received forms. Henry James, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens are in many ways a disparate set of artists. They are all white, relatively affluent Americans, but beyond that, there is no common link between all three in genre, location, occupation, gender, or religious belief. What they share, however, is a desire to understand the ineffable experiences literature can both represent and produce. For Stevens, this project is part of a triumphant secularism, which boldly announces that

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<sup>1</sup>Given his connections to Stevens and the James family, it would be a tidy bit of dissertation symmetry if Santayana had also been an influence on Moore, but alas, her letters suggest that she did not care for his work (1997, 220, 395, 518)

poets will be the prophets of the modern age. For James, the sacralization of literature is tied to his career-spanning fascination with artistic consciousness. Moore's interest in the sacralization of art stems from her vexation as a religious believer who attempts to make the aesthetic grace of this world speak to and honor the divine grace of another world. All three emerge from the intellectual culture of American Protestantism, and all three share a belief that art must be a vital part of modern spirituality, in whatever form it takes.

But this is not precisely what my dissertation is about. For these writers also share a set of doubts about the sacralization of art. Specifically, all three are ambivalent about the inward-looking nature of their own models of literary spirituality. The aesthetic impact of their best work relies on depictions of enclosed subjective experience, and indeed, because their literary texts echo an American Protestant conception of religious experience, this inwardness is practically inevitable. American religious thought from Edwards to Emerson to William James is a history of rumination on individual experiences of the divine. James, Moore, and Stevens write in ways that would be unthinkable without this particular intellectual background, but they also display a keen awareness that the resultant, deeply individualist conception of aesthetic experience comes with real costs: an ethically troubling withdrawal from life into an invented paradise of the imagination; a commitment to ontologically implausible or theologically troublesome redefinitions of religious experience; and the haunting possibility that an artist too far gone from the objective world will produce irrelevant or uninspiring art. Santayana describes the opportunities and dangers of the religion of art in the following passage, which echoes James' insistence on attention to reality, anticipates Moore's concern that poetry can devolve into meaningless self-satisfaction, and directly influences Stevens' writing on the role of the imagination:

[The] plastic moment of the mind, when we become aware of the artificiality and inadequacy of what common sense perceives, is the true moment of poetic

opportunity—an opportunity, we may hasten to confess, which is generally missed. The strain of attention, the concentration and focusing of thought on the unfamiliar immediacy of things, usually brings about nothing but confusion. We are dazed, we are filled with a sense of unutterable things, luminous yet indistinguishable, many yet one. Instead of rising to imagination, we sink into mysticism.

To accomplish a mystical disintegration is not the function of any art...The great function of poetry, which we have not yet directly mentioned, is precisely this: to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. (269-70)

Santayana argues that the artist who “sink[s] into mysticism” merely wallows in a pool of dazzling subjective experience, and therefore fails to use the capacity of the imagination to mold experience into newer, “truer” structures that will speak both to “the soul” and to “the reality of sensation.” James, Moore, and Stevens do not speak in precisely the same terms as Santayana, but they have a similar sense of the difficulties that result from defining literature as a secular correlative to religious experience. In many of their most important works, all three of these writers question and test their own beliefs about the sacralization of literature. James, Moore, and Stevens thus exemplify the ways that, even as American Modernism was bound to its Protestant cultural inheritance, it was also deeply skeptical about the religion of art and the valorization of subjective spiritual experience. In the chapters to follow, I analyze the fiction and poetry which best exemplifies this skepticism, and I contextualize these writers by examining their engagement with the theology, sociology, and literary theory of the Modernist era. Before I get to those chapters, however, I want to say more about the religion of art, and then introduce a few key methodological concepts.

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In the last two centuries, theories which hold that literature can and should perform a

spiritual role in a secular culture have based their arguments around three basic conceptions of how literature can function in a manner similar to religion: ethically, experientially, and as a revelator. Literature is said to resemble religion *ethically* when it provides some sort of moral guidance or social benefit. Matthew Arnold's argument in *Culture and Anarchy* that culture can help to drive "the moral and social passion for doing good" is the best-known claim for the ethical significance of literature, but it is certainly not the only one (410). Carlyle felt that novels could provide "doctrine", "edification", and "guidance" for "the heroic that is in all men" (Qualls 1-2), and Shelley similarly argues that "the great instrument of moral good is the imagination, and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause" (1954, 283). Indeed, for two centuries after Shelley, the idea that art is a pathway to personal and social improvement tends to crop up whenever someone wants to justify the value of the humanities. Just this year, for instance, Christopher Hitchens claims in *God is Not Great* that "serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books. Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and—since there is no other metaphor—also the soul" (5).

Arguments that literature is *experientially* similar to religion are based around descriptions of rare moments when the reading or writing of literary texts can produce shattering epiphanies and feelings of awe and wonder. This is the strand of the religion of art that has been written about most frequently and most bombastically, and, as we shall see in the pages and chapters to come, it is the subjective, epiphanic conceptions of the literary imagination that most tantalized, troubled, and beguiled American modernists. The idea that art is a secular version of religious experience—in particular, a secular version of the experience of God's transforming grace—is shot through Romanticism, from the Kantian sublime to Wordsworthian "spots of time" to M.H. Abrams' reading of *The Prelude* as a reworking of Augustine. Shelley, contrasting art to reason, argues that "poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges

the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thoughts” (282). Poetry, he goes on to say, “redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man” (295). But sacralized aesthetic experience is by no means the sole province of the Romantics. We find it in Walter Pater’s late-Nineteenth Century celebration of the Renaissance as a period during which “the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling and sensation and thought, not opposed to but only beyond and independent of the spiritual system then actually realised” (4). We also see secular epiphanies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when Stephen Dedalus observes a girl gazing at the sea and feels that “Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped to the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate out of life!” (186) In American literature, this kind of rhetoric is visible in Emerson, who writes that when he begins to read a poem, “my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live—opaque, though they seem transparent—and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations” (186). Several decades later, Santayana argues that poetry is not simply “verbal expression,” but “that subtle fire and inward light which seems at times to shine through the world and to touch the images in our minds with ineffable beauty” (289). One could argue that it is merely a figure of speech when we borrow terminology from religion to describe our intense reactions to a work of art, but during the Nineteenth Century and well into the Modernist period, this language was pervasive and varied enough to constitute a discourse rather than a commonplace. The writers I cite in this paragraph are obviously a loose, inchoate group that ranges from atheists to lapsed Catholics to Unitarians, but they share in common a belief that literature is a—and perhaps *the*—vital discourse for both recording and producing spiritual experience.

Arguments that literature has a *revelatory* function which is similar to religion point to various ways that works of art can create new concepts and theories which will re-

order our perceptions and assumptions, and thus help us to make sense of or explain the world. Where the writers quoted in the previous paragraph describe epiphanic experiences that disorder the senses, the following examples are more concerned with literature as an inventor of clarity and order. In the closing lines of “Song of Myself”, Whitman invites us to search for him beneath our bootsoles, knowing that he “stops somewhere waiting” for us. If we have read in the manner Whitman invites, the world we enter after reading the poem will differ from the world we knew before. In the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman conceives of the poet as a figure akin to Blake’s portrait of a light-wielding God, as he writes that, “High up out of reach [the poet] stands turning a concentrated light...he turns the pivot with his finger” (9, ellipses in original). The poet, in Whitman’s image, illuminates the world, and our sense of the world’s form and order derives from the things he carefully reveals. Shelley too argues that poetry serves a world-creating and world-ordering function, as he writes that poets “are the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion” (279). The revelatory strand of the sacralization of literature is particularly strong in the American long-poem tradition that begins with Whitman, and then runs through many poets in the Twentieth Century who seek to define or discover a principle of aesthetic order that will allow for a clearer comprehension of a chaotic world. This is especially apparent in the longer works of Stevens, Hart Crane, and James Merrill, or, with slightly different motivations, in the myth-inspired or ritualistic portions of the work of Eliot, Pound, H.D., Allen Ginsberg, and Jay Wright. Stevens, like Whitman, thinks of the poet as a bringer of light:

Poetry is the scholar’s art. The acute intelligence of the imagination, the illimitable resources of its memory, its power to possess the moment it perceives—if we were speaking of light itself, and thinking of the relationship between objects and light, no further illustration would be necessary. Like light,

it adds nothing, except itself. What light requires a day to do, and by day I mean a kind of Biblical revolution of time, the imagination does in the twinkling of an eye. (1951, 61-2)

A poet, like a god, is a creator, and for Stevens this creative capacity makes poetry the natural substitute for religion, as the poet's intricately crafted "supreme fiction" replaces religions and mythologies as a means of helping us to understand the world.

What should be clear, then, from the examples I have cited in all three of these categories, is that American Modernists were writing for a culture which had teemed with justifications for the religion of art for at least a century. I realize that my catalogue of examples elides substantial differences between many of these writers, but the elision is willful, in that my point is that during the years that encompass my dissertation (roughly 1890 to 1945), as Modernism and the academic institutionalization of literary studies were simultaneously taking shape, the idea that art could be, in and of itself, a variety of spiritual experience was at the center of a venerable and powerful literary discourse. James, Moore, and Stevens contributed to this discourse, and they understood the appeal of the sacralization of literature, but they also repeatedly describe the troubling aesthetic, ethical, and ontological consequences of defining literature in spiritual terms. In James, literature is imagined as the gateway to the transcendent experience of what he calls the "luminous paradise of art," but his short stories are filled with characters whose obsession with aesthetic epiphanies reveals the ethical shortcomings of a religion of artistic experience. For Moore, poetry is a secular medium that has the potential to function in the service of her religious beliefs, specifically in its ability to produce experiences that mimic God's grace, and in its capacity to provide ethical instruction. However, she also has a healthy Protestant distrust of artifice, and a strong sense of the inevitability of original sin, and these lead her to question just how effectively poetry can function as a register of religious experience or a guidebook for ethics. Stevens repeatedly claims that poetry can re-imagine the epistemological and cosmological order of a post-religious world, and he is clearly drawn to Romantic models of ecstatic literary experience. But

this secularizing project is called into question at various points in his career, especially in his lyric poetry of the thirties, which expresses a clear discomfort with the solitude and self-enclosure that enable a poetics of rapt individual experience, and later in his long poem “*Esthétique du Mal*”, which wonders whether the religion of art is an ontologically and ethically plausible response to the existence of pain and evil.

The point is not that these writers were self-contradictory or mired in an ill-considered ambivalence, but rather that the sacralization of literature was so essential to their own literary projects, and to the cultural imagination of Modernism more broadly, that the topic occasioned a wide range of questions and hesitations. Just as religious writing can describe crisis rather than comfort (think, for instance, of Augustine or Hopkins), the fiction and poetry of James, Moore, and Stevens is filled with doubts about literature’s adequacy to the transformative tasks assigned to it by writers like Arnold or Shelley. The Modernist religion of art, then, was not an uninterrogated leftover from the Victorians or Transcendentalists, but a live and open question. In the texts I examine, these writers worry that the desire for a literature of ethical instruction will lead to writing that is arrogant, self-righteous, or dull, as when Moore suggests in “*Virginia Britannia*” that “not one of us,/ in taking what we/ pleased...has been a synonym for mercy,” or when Stevens insists in “*The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*” that the poet has no social obligation. On the other hand, all three of these writers suggest that there is something inherently irresponsible and unethical in a devotion to art for art’s sake that leads to a complete surrender to aesthetic experience at the expense of interpersonal relationships or social responsibilities: James in the moment when George Stransom wishes his friends would die so that they could be transformed into candles on his altar; Moore in the *Bower of Bliss* she builds from catalogues of curios in “*The Jerboa*”; Stevens in his terror in the face of his own internality in “*Autumn Refrain*”. Finally, all of these writers describe the sheer implausibility of literature’s claims for itself as the creator or revelator of order: James in the ridiculous excesses to which the narrator of



“The Figure of Carpet” is driven in search of aesthetic insight; Moore in her deeply Protestant admission in “The Pangolin” that the true nature of grace cannot be revealed by an instrument so flawed as a poet; Stevens in the moments when he presses his poetry to its theodical limits in “Esthétique du Mal”.

My dissertation, then, deals at length with all three of the conceptions of the religion of art I describe above. Different conceptions are more important to certain writers, (James is particularly concerned with aesthetic experience; Moore delves the deepest into the ethics of aesthetics; Stevens is the most devoted to an aesthetic ordering of the world), but these three major ideas flow through all of my chapters. Nevertheless, the most significant conception of the religion of art throughout the dissertation is the idea that literature can produce experiences that are only describable in language derived from religion. Across the differences in their literary genres and religious beliefs, what links these writers is their desire to describe ineffable aesthetic experiences, and their concern that an excessive fascination with these experiences can carry dire ethical, social, and artistic consequences.

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James, Moore, and Stevens can all be usefully understood as “secular,” although different meanings of the word have to be invoked to make the concept apply to their respective works. For Stevens, God is dead and the role of the poet is to provide a secular alternative. For James, organized religion holds an appeal that is aesthetic rather than theological, and the “consecrated workshop” of the artist is his preferred space for imagining a secular equivalent to spiritual experience. Moore was a practicing Presbyterian, but for her, the world is secular in the sense that it is inexorably divided from the sacred, and the value of poetry is that it can provide rare flashes of insight during which the gap between fallen world and divine truth can momentarily be closed.

Secularity, then, is a complicated, multi-valenced concept even when applied to a relatively similar group of canonical Modernists. For this reason, I want to take a moment to explain how my project fits into the larger scholarly conversation about theories of secularization.

José Casanova argues in *Public Religions in the Modern World* that, since Max Weber, scholars of religion (particularly sociologists) have posited three distinct “theses” of secularization (19-20). To Casanova’s three definitions, I will add a fourth that has been especially prevalent in the field of literary studies, but first I want to look at his three-part breakdown of the field of secularization studies. The most intuitive definition of secularization is what Casanova terms the “decline of religion thesis” (25). He writes that social scientists from the late-Nineteenth Century until the 1960’s generally held an “assumption, often stated but mostly unstated, that religion in the modern world was declining and would likely continue to decline until its eventual disappearance” (25).<sup>2</sup> This belief was particularly prevalent amongst sociologists in Western Europe, where there is relatively strong evidence of a decline of religious belief that parallels economic development (26-7). In the past two decades, however, this thesis has been attacked repeatedly—indeed, it has been attacked far more often than it was ever explicitly defended.<sup>3</sup> In studies of religion both in America and worldwide, scholars have noted that, rather than dying out, religion at the turn of the new century seems, if anything, more central to public life than it was in decades past.<sup>4</sup> The decline of religion thesis has become less important to sociological studies of secularization, and it was never

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<sup>2</sup>The underpinnings of this thesis are best expressed by Freud, who argues in *The Future of an Illusion* that as scientific knowledge spreads, and “the greater the number of men to whom the treasures of knowledge become accessible, the more widespread is the falling-away from religious belief—at first only from its obsolete and objectionable trappings, but later from its fundamental postulates as well” (49).

<sup>3</sup>Casanova is right to call the thesis an “assumption.” Weber, the obvious forefather of secularization studies, never claimed that religion would disappear. David A. Martin’s 1979 *A General Theory of Secularization* gathers data from many different countries in order to enumerate the variables that indicate a likely decline of religious adherence, but Martin stops far short of claiming that there is any inevitable cultural evolution toward secularism.

<sup>4</sup>For an argument about the persistence of religion in America, see Finke and Stark’s *The Churching of America*; for the world case, see Berger et. al., *The Desecularization of the World*.

particularly significant to literary studies of secularization, which have generally been more invested in assumptions about the persistence of religious symbolism and psychology.

The second definition of secularization Casanova outlines is the theory that modernization entails a “differentiation” of society into various specialized “spheres.” In this view, secularization is a “process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres—primarily the state, the economy, and science—from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion with its own newly found religious sphere” (19). Casanova attributes the origin of this theory to Max Weber, although his is not the only differentiation argument. Marcel Gauchet’s lengthy analysis of the emergence of the state as the key engine in cordoning off the power of religion is a more contemporary differentiation theory (9-15), and even scholars who attack the “decline” thesis tend to assume certain key aspects of the differentiation thesis, inasmuch as writers like Finke and Stark contend that the separation of church and state has actually increased the vitality of American religious communities.

The third version of the secularization argument is what Casanova calls the “privatization of religion thesis.” This argument holds that “traditional religious institutions were becoming increasingly irrelevant and marginal to the functioning of the modern world,” while at the same time “the modern quest for salvation and personal meaning had withdrawn to the private space of the self” (36). Casanova points to Thomas Luckmann’s *The Invisible Religion* as the key text outlining this version of secularization theory. Luckmann describes modern religiosity as a sort of marketplace, in which “the individual is more likely to confront the culture and sacred cosmos as a ‘buyer.’ Once religion is defined as a ‘private affair’ the individual may choose from the assortment of ‘ultimate’ meanings as he sees fit” (99). The key point here is that, once religion is defined as a purely private affair, “the primary ‘public’ institutions (state, economy) no longer need or are interested in maintaining a sacred cosmos or a public

religious worldview” (Casanova 37). Many critics, including Peter Berger, Sacvan Bercovitch, and, more recently, Charles Taylor have elaborated the privatization thesis by suggesting that Christianity, and especially Protestantism, set loose forces that eventually led to the removal of religion from public life and the widespread belief that authentic spirituality must of necessity be private. As Taylor points out, “at the time of the early American republic, a separation of church and state was brought about, mainly to give space for, and avoid the contamination of, personal religion, which itself had been given a further impetus through the Great Awakening” (14). The historical irony, then, is that “the drive to personal religion has itself been part of the impetus toward different facets of secularization” (Taylor 13-4). This version of secularization theory is vital to my dissertation, for the writers I study, from the atheist Stevens to the Presbyterian Moore, are united in their assumption that any legitimate “ultimate meaning” must be experienced subjectively.

To Casanova’s three definitions of secularization, I would add a fourth: theories of the mutation of religion into related secular forms. These are theories which trace the transformation of religious ideas, tropes, or symbols into subsequent secular discourses or texts which bear the imprint of their religious precursors. In literary theory, a substantial portion of secularization arguments are mutation arguments which read the modern cultural artifact as a secular recurrence of an earlier cultural practice. Scholars such as M.H. Abrams, Richard Poirier, Vincent Pecora, and Barry Qualls have mined literature for phenomena including secular epiphanies, secular pilgrims, and secular evangelism. This version of secularization theory holds obvious appeal for scholars in aesthetically-oriented fields, who are trained to look for formal echoes and ironies, but ideas of mutation have a larger life in secularization studies. Weber’s analysis of entrepreneurial psychology in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is dependent on his reading of the uncanny afterlife of Calvinism, while Jackson Lears’ *Fables of Abundance* looks to the rhetoric of American advertising as a secular harnessing of the hunger for

divine grace. Hans Blumenberg has attacked mutational theories of secularism as attempts to “delegitimize” modernity, with a particularly large dose of venom reserved for his responses to arguments which identify the Enlightenment as mere secular eschatology (13-25). In literary studies, however, the re-invention of an old idea is often seen as the very thing that legitimates a text’s aesthetic value. For Abrams, Wordsworth is a great poet precisely because he is inventive both within and against a venerable religious tradition. Or, as Pecora argues, secular works of art often seek to “resist the radical secularization that attended modernity” by using the aesthetic as a means to re-enchant a demystified world (18). For the most part, then, literary scholars who concern themselves with secularism tend not to be concerned with the disappearance of religion, but with its continued psychological and tropological existence in non-religious writers, texts, and contexts.

I have little interest in adjudicating which of these theses of secularization is “correct,” primarily because I think each version has been used to produce valuable work. The two versions of secularization theory that are most significant to this dissertation, however, are the last two. The mutation thesis is important primarily because James, Moore, and Stevens all use figurative language as their primary vehicle for describing the experience of reading and writing literature, and the metaphors they use are often based on language drawn from religious discourses and traditions. These three writers are all better critical readers than the characters James describes in “The Figure in the Carpet”, but like those characters, the writers I study search for a language to describe aesthetic experience, and they tend to define literature as a secular correlative to the sacred. American Modernists across the board were committed to projects of re-imagining or re-invigorating precursor spiritual discourses, projects which included H.D.’s syncretic mysticism, Eliot’s Frazerian anthropology, and, in the cases I explore in the chapters to follow, the secularization of the intense subjectivism of American Protestantism.

Given my focus on subjective experience, the privatization thesis is of primary

importance to my dissertation. When James, Moore, and Stevens compare literature to religion, the comparison is almost always based around the idea that literature produces solitary experiences for both writer and reader that are similar to religion. Given that American Protestantism is similarly based around a deeply individualistic notion of what constitutes religious experience, it should be clear that secularity and religion are deeply intertwined in the work of these writers, as indeed they are intertwined in American culture more broadly. The secular project of these writers is not a negation of religion, but an attempt to use literature to depict and produce ineffable experiences for a modernizing world.

But the idea of a secular privatization of belief is not just a scholarly definition one can use to group these writers, and it is not only a common literary project. It is also, for all three of these writers, a deeply troubling problem. Aesthetic solitude can look, from a more cynical perspective, like outright solipsism, and these writers are concerned about the potential ethical and artistic dangers of removing oneself from the world in search of ineffable experience. This dissertation examines several limit cases: James' George Stransom lost in his array of candles; Moore's Psyche so covetous of a butterfly that she seeks to destroy it; Stevens' eerie book of unwritten words in "The Reader". In the chapters to follow, I show that these writers investigate both the pleasures and the dangers of a literary project to which they are already inescapably committed. Indeed, in a larger sense, they investigate the dangers of the American insistence that the most important psychic, spiritual, and aesthetic experiences must take place in absolute and even incommunicable privacy. American religion and American Modernism are unthinkable without the privatization of belief, and in questioning and testing the implications of that privatization, James, Moore, and Stevens probe into the center of American culture.

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My first chapter begins with Henry James' journals, where he writes that he finds sanctuary from the "vulgarity" of the world when he is alone in "the luminous paradise of art," and claims that his one true happiness is found when he dips his pen in "the sacred fluid of fiction." His short stories of this period also take up the sacralization of art as a central topic, but in his fiction he critiques the ethical shortcomings of those who devote their lives exclusively to aesthetics. In "The Altar of the Dead", George Stransom constructs an altar in order to memorialize his dead friends "better than faith or works could save them." James repeatedly describes the altar in terms that compare it to a work of art, and the scenes of Stransom's repeated transcendent reveries are some of James' most rhetorically pitched writing. But we also see that Stransom's "religion of the dead" causes him to withdraw from life, as he has no generosity to spare for friends who are not already dead. My reading of "The Figure in the Carpet" analyzes the pattern of James' metaphors. As the narrator begins his search for Hugh Vereker's secret meaning, literary interpretation is figured as a game or contest, but later in the story, reading is increasingly metaphorized as a path to transcendent revelation. As the narrator's metaphors acquire religious terminology, his tone grows obsessive and morbid, and all the characters become more envious and inhumane. Finally, I look at "The Death of the Lion", a comic story which critiques hero-worship in both its mass-cultural and elitist forms. In sum, I argue that James suggests that, if art promises to transform us, it can also bring out single-minded, isolating, and even covetous impulses.

Critics who have focused on Marianne Moore's religious thought over the last fifteen years have tended to imply she was anachronistic by referring to her beliefs as "Calvinist." In my second chapter, however, I argue that Moore's religiosity can be described much more precisely if we consider her interest in one of the most significant theological movements of the Twentieth Century, the Neo-Orthodox Protestantism most famously embodied in America by Reinhold Niebuhr. Moore's unpublished

correspondence with Niebuhr shines a light on the philosophical background of one of her central poetic concerns: the difficulty of discerning grace, whether aesthetic or divine, in a fallen, corrupted world. In “The Jerboa”, Moore poses the naive grace of a little-known desert rat against the artificiality and violence she perceives in artistic representations of animals. As the poem moves through a catalogue of exotic trinkets and curios made from captured and killed animals, we as readers find ourselves surprised by sin, as it were, as we realize how much we enjoy Moore’s representation of this Vanity Fair. Later in the poem, though, Moore’s description of the jerboa suggests an alternative aesthetic ideal, more austere and generous, less acquisitive and preening. In the chapter’s second section, I argue that Moore’s book-length sequence, *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, moves in a trajectory from poems about postlapsarian complexity into its concluding title poem, which sets out “to explain grace.” The sequence’s opening poem, “Virginia Britannia”, uses the story of John Smith and the colonization of North America as a means to demystify narratives of a temporal Fall by arguing that violence, contingency, and complexity were part of America from its inception. In “The Pangolin”, on the other hand, Moore considers a variety of different ways in which one can understand the term “grace”—aesthetic, religious, social—and she concludes that while she cannot understand grace in its most perfect form, art provides her with her closest experiential access.

Wallace Stevens shares with Moore a penchant for playful poems of self-doubt, but the terms of his self-doubt—the “empty spirit/ In vacant space” that seeks “final belief” in a “supreme fiction”—were part of Modernist poetry’s most audacious attempt at a secular cosmology. My third chapter begins with 1936 address “The Irrational Element in Poetry”, in which Stevens secularizes the theory of “pure poetry” propounded by the Abbé Henri Bremond, who argued that the irreducible essence of poetry was not words on the page, but the ineffable, mystical experience of the poet immediately prior to writing the poem. I contextualize the lecture by describing the wide range of theories of



“pure poetry” that were debated in America, England, and France throughout the 1920’s, and I then move to Stevens’ 1935 book *Ideas of Order*, which he describes on the dust-jacket as “essentially a book of pure poetry.” However, I show in my readings of various poems that the book is not a book *of* pure poetry, but a book *about* pure poetry that repeatedly describes its own inability to be pure poetry, even as it also critiques the urge towards solipsism that drives its desire for a supra- or even non-linguistic affective experience. In the best poems of *Ideas of Order*, Stevens stands apart from and argues with himself, as he considers whether the experience of aesthetic inspiration, taken as a new variety of the sacred, could be sufficient to fill the vacancy of a disenchanted world. The dissertation then concludes with the long poem “Esthétique du Mal”, in which Stevens begins with the proposition that literature is a secular correlative to religion, but then tests this idea by asking whether literature can respond to or compensate for the existence of pain and evil. The poem has rarely been seen as one of Stevens’ best, but it contains passages that are among the most honest and probing examinations of the limits of sacralized literature ever produced by a major Modernist writer.

## Chapter One

### Henry James and the “Luminous Paradise of Art”

#### *Section One: Introduction*

In 1891, after the mixed reviews and moderate success that greeted his adaptation of *The American* for the stage, Henry James resolved in his notebooks to continue his efforts to reap the economic rewards of the theater, but also made it clear that writing plays was a far cry from what he considered his true vocation:

I shall live, I trust, for several things; but a very prominent one, surely, shall be the firm—the exquisitely still and deep-rooted resolution—to compass, in the theatre, the solid, the honourable (so far as anything can be honourable there!), the absolute and interesting success. Meanwhile the soothing, the healing, the sacred and salutary refuge from these vulgarities and pains is simply to lose myself in this quiet, this blessed and uninvaded workroom in the inestimable effort and refreshment of art, in resolute and beneficent production ... The consolation, the dignity, the joy of life are that discouragements and lapses, depressions and darkneses come to one only as one stands *without*—I mean without the luminous paradise of art. As soon as I really re-enter it—cross the loved threshold—stand in the high chamber, and the gardens divine—the whole realm widens out again before me and around me—the air of life fills my lungs—the light of achievement flushes over all the place, and I believe, I see, I *do*.  
(1947, 111)

In an intellectual life dedicated to the representation of reality, art itself was the one thing Henry James was willing to mystify. As he reaches for a terminology commensurate to the experience of literary creativity, James invokes the language of faith wrested from despair, or, in his words, of “consolation” pulled from “depressions and darkneses”. In the final sentence of this entry, as tumbling hyphenated phrases suggest an accumulation of feeling coming almost too rapidly to be recorded, James successively finds himself standing in Eden, witnessing the kingdoms of the world spread out before him, breathing literary inspiration, and bathing in the light of the higher power of artistic achievement. It is a profession of faith in the spiritual kingdom of art. As James intones

a promise of devotion both to art and to himself—“I believe, I see, I *do*”—that which is worldly, fallen, and painful is cast aside for something transcendent, paradisiacal, and healing.

We must remember, however, that this faith is in something secular. Referring to art in religious terms, as James was wont to do throughout his career, requires an expansive definition of the word “religion”. James’ Art is not a higher power in the same way that the Christian God is a higher power, which can be seen quite clearly in the fact that James is the only actor required to afford himself salvation. The statement “I believe, I see, I *do*” performs not only a will to believe, but also a will to create the very atmosphere of aesthetic bliss in which he believes. It is, I would argue, a form of literary secularization that is considerably more solipsistic than the version ascribed to Romanticism by M.H. Abrams, where the poet’s sense of the sacred emerges from “the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature” (13). This is not to say that James did not think that transactions with the world were important: as he notes in the Preface to “The Altar of the Dead”, he was well aware of “the old burden of much life and little art, and of the portentous dose of the one it takes to make any show of the other” (1934, 259). But throughout his notebooks, novels, essays, and, especially, his short stories, one repeatedly encounters “the luminous paradise of art” invoked as a sacred refuge walled off from the profane world.

In this chapter, I look at three tales James wrote in the mid-1890’s—“The Altar of the Dead”, “The Figure in the Carpet”, and “The Death of the Lion”—in order to examine the metaphors of spirituality he uses to describe the experience of creating and receiving literature. Given the transatlantic omnipresence throughout the Nineteenth Century of the idea that literature could be seen as a sacralized secular space, there might be a temptation to assume that these moments in James’ work are simply dead, convenient metaphors. Nothing, in my estimation, could be further from the truth. To borrow a term from William James’ *The Will to Believe*, the question of whether or not

one ought to believe in the spiritual power of art is, throughout Henry James' short stories, a "genuine option", in the sense that the choice between the two positions is "living" ("each hypothesis makes some appeal"), "forced" (a "dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing"), and "momentous" (to fail to choose is to give up any of the potential benefits of choosing) (14-5). From a wide variety of perspectives, methods, and tones, James' stories about artists and critics ruminate on the costs and benefits of retreating to a sanctuary of art. When the protagonists of these stories seek spiritual solace in their encounters with aesthetic objects, the reader is allowed by James to empathize with the characters' sense of the beauty of these solitary moments of imaginative intensity, even as the stories also show the inhumanity and solipsistic narcissism to which these same characters are prone. Certainly it is worth attempting to parse these metaphors that spiritualize the aesthetic because they fit into a long trend of efforts in American literature to explore what Richard Poirier calls "the redemptive power of the imagination" (1966, 43), but they are also worth examining because their frequency and complexity highlights one of the central ambivalences of James' fiction. In these stories, James poses for us and for himself the problem of whether one can both live and live for art; of whether turning to the aesthetic as a site of sacred refuge means that one must turn away from the world.

Over the course of the 1890's, a period of both professional and personal instability for James, he wrote a significant number of short stories about novelists, critics, and readers. He told William Dean Howells in an 1895 letter that "I shall never again write a *long* novel, but I hope to write 6 immortal short ones—& some tales of the same quality" (1999, 278), and his notebooks expressed a similar hope that he should produce "a large number of perfect *short* things, *nouvelles* and tales" (1947, 101, italics in sources). Whenever James chose to indulge this new formal interest at moments when he found himself "in possession now of some interposing days...during which I should like to dip my pen into the *other* ink—the sacred fluid of fiction," it is striking how much of the

fiction he produced—in the middle of the decade, the vast majority—dealt with either writing or critical reading (1947, 133). Throughout these stories, James repeatedly uses religious or spiritual metaphors to describe the workings of literature. In “Sir Dominick Ferrand”, for instance, a new desk is seen as a “literary altar on which one could really kindle a fire” and its owner wonders “if fragrant, hallowed things had once been put away there” (169). In “The Middle Years”, the dying author Dencombe views his novel as an “altar” and a “temple”, and feels that when he had been inspired to write it, “only on that day, visited by soundless processions, had he recognized his kingdom” (220-4). In “The Lesson of the Master” a younger novelist is the “disciple” of his older mentor (141). In “The Figure in the Carpet”, the novelist Vereker stands like a priest behind an altar, while critical interpretation is figured as an act of worship, as a young admirer “had no wish to approach the altar before he had prepared the sacrifice” (297). Similarly, in “The Real Right Thing”, the journalist Withersmore feels he is “the young priest of his altar” as he investigates the life of a great writer (390), while in “The Next Time” the admirers of an obscure novelist feel themselves to be “the brotherhood of the faith [that] have become, like the Trappists, a silent order” (166).

James is not, I should add, tied in his allusions to any particular religious tradition. Obviously, the citations above are generally Catholic in their immediate referents, and one would not want to underestimate James’ obvious interest in Catholicism.<sup>5</sup> It must be noted, however, that in the full range of his metaphors we find a rich syncretism of allusion. These stories assume that authentic spiritual feeling must be based in primary experience, which was certainly, in James’ immediate milieu, a Protestant and American idea. But there is also much that is redolent of the aesthetics of European cathedrals, a tremendous amount of classical reference, and the occasional nod to Eastern traditions. I am not, absolutely not, arguing in this chapter that James, like the inmate of Weber’s iron

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<sup>5</sup>The fullest treatment of James’ interest in Catholicism can be found in Edwin Fussell’s *The Catholic Side of Henry James*.

cage, is unconsciously acting on the dictates of an inherited religious background, but rather that he is consciously manipulating language culled from a variety of discourses of spirituality, religion, and belief in an attempt to characterize, valorize, and comprehend the cultural role and the individual experience of art.

That James consciously uses such discourses in his stories about art should not be terribly surprising. With Wordsworth, Shelley, Whitman, Emerson, and Arnold in the near-historical background, and Pater and Santayana as immediate contemporaries, James was hardly original, alone, or even particularly unusual in using language culled from religion as a way to clarify, define, or defend the aesthetic. What makes James specifically interesting when we handle this topic, however, is the multiplicity of tonal registers in which we find this language. At times, he is rapt and celebratory in his accounts of the experience of reading and creating, but the characters who embody that high serious mode are often subject to withering blasts of James' irony. Indeed, in order to grapple with his language about religion and art in a meaningful, rigorous, way, we must wade neck-deep into the fact that so many of the narrators and characters who view art as a sacred and solitary refuge are unreliable, unappealing, or both. This is particularly true in the stories that are the focus of this chapter. The characters in these stories who are true believers in the sacredness of art tend to be covetous, manipulative, prying, anti-social, and given to wishing death upon those who stand between them and their object of worship. In "The Altar of the Dead", George Stransom's aesthetic imagination leads him into a dry, solipsistic necromancy; in "The Figure in the Carpet", the shift in the narrator's metaphors from playful to spiritual follows his own shift into morose obsessiveness; and in "The Death of the Lion", James' comic effects work to underscore his narrator's lack of linguistic and social subtlety.

But if the characters in James who fetishize art objects are so often covetous and inhumane, we can nevertheless not escape the fact that there is much in James to suggest that he believed along with them that, when the imagination is involved in the process of

aesthetic creativity or reception, it feels for a moment a sense of metaphysically heightened experience. We miss the full range of these stories if we are incapable of sympathizing with Stransom before the gathering luminosity of his candles or George Corvick at the moment when the figure in the carpet has appeared before him like Venus out of the clouds. Were these characters to read the notebook passage that opens this chapter, they most likely would have shared the belief James expresses in a “luminous paradise of art” that exists in only in the mind at moments of aesthetic recognition and productivity. In a similar notebook passage of the same period, James calls himself to work by reflecting, “Ah, how the gods are on one’s side the moment one enters the enchanted realm! Ah, consoling, clarifying air of *work*—inestimable sacred hours! Every doubt of them is an outrage—every act of faith is a triumph” (157). James’ stories repeatedly reveal the selfishness and inhumanity of characters who make idols out of art, but they also show a clear knowledge of the desire for beauty and intensified experience that motivates those same characters.

Before I move into my analysis of these three stories, I want to pause to note that what these stories ultimately share is an interest in spiritualizing the subjective *feeling* associated with art. Whether it be characters who create art, like Stransom in “The Altar of the Dead” or Paraday in “The Death of the Lion”, or characters like Corvick in “The Figure in the Carpet” or the narrator of “The Death of the Lion” who find in the act of reading a transformative moment of critical revelation, the characters in these stories read the subjective encounter with the aesthetic as directly analogous to subjective encounters with some larger spiritual reality. As such, these stories are conversant with a long tradition of American theology that insists on the idea that primary or subjective feeling is at the core of true spirituality. This is most famously manifested, of course, in Emerson, who argues in the Divinity School Address that faith “is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly

reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing. On the contrary, the absence of this primary faith is the presence of degradation” (72). This same belief that only primary faith can be legitimate courses through William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a text to which I will refer frequently throughout this chapter. One of the many varieties James touches upon is the effect of literature upon its readers:

Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words have now perhaps become mere polished surfaces for us; but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility. (383)

William James approaches this phenomenon with the detached eye of a scientist who has been disabused of such notions, but for his brother, the question of whether the reader of literature ought to open himself to such “mystical susceptibility” is a living option that motivates the ambivalence of these stories. The most powerful passages of every story I analyze in this chapter are the places where Henry James attempts to account in metaphor for the emotional experience of facing the aesthetic, and in American culture, the affective encounter with something outside of and larger than the self always has a tendency to be spiritualized. Marcia Ian argues that “One way to define secularization might be as a culture’s increasing willingness to gets its ‘ultimate’ experience of continuity outside of traditional religious contexts” (46), and certainly in those terms these stories are noteworthy as examples of secularization, as James ruminates in literature about his culture’s fascination with the self-aggrandizing spirituality of the self. These stories, then, are about feeling, but they are also about loneliness, the necessary flip side of such an obsession with primacy. Harold Bloom notes that:

A religion of the self burgeons, under many names, and seeks to know its inwardness, in isolation. What the American self has found, since about 1800, is



its own freedom—from the world, from time, from other selves. But this freedom is a very expensive torso, because of what it is obliged to leave out: society, temporality, the other. What remains, for it, is solitude and the abyss. (1992, 37)

These stories, as we shall see, meditate on just the dilemma Bloom elucidates.

Freedom, the word Bloom points to as the prize of a subjectivist spirituality, is also a fundamental obsession for James. The art-obsessed characters of these stories, like so many of their most memorable colleagues in James' work, seek speculative or imaginative freedom, but what they also find is loneliness and isolation. If these stories are worth reading, it is because of how thoroughly they sense the terms of this dilemma.

*Section Two: "Better than faith or works"*

When George Stransom first rose to the surface of Henry James' consciousness, he seems to have been a more uniformly admirable fellow than the character James ultimately presented to his readers in "The Altar of the Dead". At the beginning of his first notebook entry detailing the germ of his story, James writes:

I imagine a man whose beautiful and noble religion is the worship of the Dead. It is the only religion he has; and it is a refuge and consolation to him....He is struck with the way they are forgotten, are unhallowed—unhonored, neglected, shoved out of sight, allowed to become so much more dead, even, than the fate that has overtaken them has made them. He is struck with the rudeness, the coldness, that surrounds their memory—the want of place made for them in the life of the survivors. The essence of his religion is to make and to keep such a place. (164)

James wrote the story at the end of two year period during which he had suffered through the death of his sister and the suicide of Constance Fennimore Woolson (Boudreau 200), and in this entry it is apparent that James initially felt a good deal of sympathy for Stransom's "beautiful and noble" enterprise. Readers of the story, however, will realize quickly that it must still have been at an early stage of incubation. In his notebook entry, James had not yet invented the unnamed woman who would become Stransom's companion and competitor in mourning, but just as importantly, James gives no hint that this is a man about whom he would eventually write, in a remarkable moment of dark comedy, that "he almost caught himself wishing that certain of his friends would now die, that he might establish with them in this manner a connection more charming than, as it happened, it was possible to enjoy with them in life." (263) Stransom's altar, as we shall see, is described in terms that compare it explicitly to a literary art object, and the presentation of Stransom's relationship to his altar is one of James' most striking attempts to think through the implications of a spiritual life based in aesthetics and in the consciousness of the artist. Stransom's meditations produce moments of profound, and even sublime, meditative beauty, but

James ultimately forces the reader, and perhaps even himself, to see that this religion of art verges on a solipsistic form of necromancy that bleeds the life out of consciousness.

The opening section of “The Altar of the Dead” introduces us to the sources and practices of Stransom’s private religion. In the first paragraph, James nods to his protagonist’s spiritual hunger, as we are told that Stransom dislikes “lean anniversaries” and that, when his fiancée Mary Antrim had died many years before, “he had lost, before fairly tasting it, an affection that promised to fill his life to the brim” (252). The closest he gets to satisfying this hunger is on the anniversaries of Mary’s death, when “He waked to this feast of memory as consciously as he would have waked up to his marriage morn” (252). Here, James already hints at how internally Stransom directs his energies, as he finds in his “feast of memory” an experience as “conscious”, as present and real, as that of preparing to be married. His vigorous consumption of memory has obviously become a replacement for the lost possibilities of connection and continuity that marriage might have represented. His life, we are told, “was still ruled by a pale ghost”, and “he had not been a man of numerous passions, and even in all these years no sense had grown stronger with him than the sense of being bereft” (252). Already it is apparent, then, that as far as any relationship to the outside world is concerned, Stransom was emotionally freeze-dried at the moment of Mary’s death.

His imagination and memory, however, continue to teem with energy. Mary has become the virgin queen of Stransom’s religion of the dead, as he takes a “pilgrimage” through London to her grave on the “recurrent December day that his tenacity set apart.” There he has the first of many transcendent visionary experiences in the story, as “It was in truth during the moments he stood there that his eyes beheld the place the least. They looked at another image, they opened to another light. Was it a credible future? Was it an incredible past? Whatever it was, it was an immense escape from the actual” (253). It is not only Mary that the fifty-five year-old Stransom takes time to remember, however, but also nearly every other friend he ever had. “He had perhaps not had more losses than

most men, but he had counted his losses more closely; he had not seen death more closely, but he had, in a manner, felt it more deeply” (253).

These feelings of loss manifest themselves in the creation of a personal religion of the dead. Stransom, in a passage that closely echoes James’ aforementioned notebook entry, feels it is scandalous that the dead “asked so little that they got, poor things, even less, and died again, died every day, of the hard usage of life. They had no organized service, no reserved place, no honor, no shelter, no safety” (253). Stransom makes it his project to reflect frequently on his dead, thus keeping a “regular communion” with them, and eventually his reflections form themselves into an imaginary altar built in his mind, on which he carefully tends candles aimed at their remembrance.

James makes a particular point of claiming that Stransom did not adhere to any organized faith, and, indeed, “had wondered of old, with some embarrassment, whether he had a religion,” before realizing that his true faith, the one that “suited his inclination,” “satisfied his spirit”, and was “instilled by his earliest consciousness,” was “simply the religion of the Dead” (254). What we are presented with, then, is an intensely private, personal, self-created, and arguably secular form of spirituality. For modern Americans, there is a *prima facie* assumption that this kind of authentic personal emotion or experience sits at the heart of what it means to be religious: as Charles Taylor notes, “the spiritual as such is no longer intrinsically related to society” (102).<sup>6</sup> Certainly this assumption operates in William James’ definition of religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he states that religion “shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (31). James’ focus on

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<sup>6</sup>This passage is taken from Taylor’s *Varieties of Religion Today*, which argues that William James’ study of religion exemplifies a key moment in the evolution toward an individualist, expressivist, and consumerist model of religious identity that, between High Romanticism and the 1960’s, slowly encroached throughout the West until it replaced an earlier “Durkheimian” model that was more concerned with producing social cohesion and an ethos of citizenship. The fundamental belief of this expressivist model is that “The religious life or practice that I become part of not only must be my choice, but must speak to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development” (94).

solitude is striking, not only because it is a remarkably Protestant and even American<sup>7</sup> point of view, or because it begs all sorts of questions about the social sources and functions of religion, but also because it sits remarkably close to his brother's conception of spirituality. William James insists famously in the opening chapter of *Varieties* he will only study first-hand religious experience because the established denominations and creeds orient themselves around "suggested feeling and imitative conduct" (6). Henry James's essay "Is There a Life After Death?" explains his own spiritual sensibility in terms of a deeply personal sense of continuity between his consciousness, his aesthetic creativity, and larger spiritual forces.

"Is There a Life After Death?" was written as part of a 1910 collection entitled *In After Days* which also included pieces on the same topic by William Dean Howells, Julia Ward Howe, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, among others. James' argument in favor of the immortality of his soul boils down to a claim that when he experiences the creative energy of his conscious mind as it interacts with the world around him, he cannot imagine that all of it would be whisked away in a "practical joke of the lowest description" (226). As he builds to this conclusion, he describes with tremendous eloquence an understanding of spirituality built entirely out of the playfulness of his subjectivity. James claims that when he was battered by the scientific evidence of "the universe" into believing that "I and my poor form of consciousness were a quantity it could at any moment perfectly do without," he nevertheless continued "trying to take the measure of consciousness" until he learned, like Stransom, "to live in it more." He goes

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<sup>7</sup>Taylor attributes the rise of individualism and "expressivism" in modern religious practice to intellectual trends emerging from Romanticism and from consumer capitalism, but it is worth noting that in the case of American Protestantism in particular, the idea of a direct experience of God has always had tremendous importance. This is true not only of obviously theological developments ranging from colonial Calvinism to the Second Great Awakening to contemporary evangelicalism, but also, more significantly for James, Transcendentalism and various modes of spiritualism, including the rage for Swedenborg in which his father participated. All of these share in common a belief in the necessity of the individual's direct experience of some divine spark, grace presence, or visitation. For a general history of these trends see Mark A. Noll's *America's God*. For an account by scholars more in touch with literary history, see Philip Lee's *Against the Protestant Gnostics* or Harold Bloom's *The American Religion*.

on to confess that “I had doubtless taken thus to increased living in it by reaction to so grossly finite a world—for it at least *contained* the world, and could handle and criticize it, could play with it and deride it” (218-20). Now, as he has grown older, James has felt “a process take place which I can only describe as the accumulation of the very treasure itself of consciousness” (221). It is specifically as a writer, however, that James feels the spiritual energies of his subjectivity, for the artist “carries the field of consciousness further and further, making it lose itself in the ineffable” (223). Continuing to speak of the spirituality of the artist, James says, with a touch of false humility:

As more or less of one myself, for instance, I deal with being, I invoke and evoke, I figure and represent, I seize and fix, as many phases and aspects and conceptions of it as my infirm hand allows me strength for; in so doing I find myself—I can’t express it otherwise—in communication with *sources*; sources to which I owe the apprehension of far more and far other combinations than observation and experience, in their ordinary sense, have given me the pattern of. (224)

To claim that art can put the artist in touch with the ineffable, that it allows him to speak to “sources” that lie beyond the reach of mere observation, is to insist that the imagination is, for the artist, a site of religious and spiritual experience. A creative subject produces, in James’ argument, not only an experience of continuity with something otherworldly,<sup>8</sup> but also a belief in an afterlife. And yet, one cannot help but notice that this is a remarkably inward and insular religion of art. Arnold and Whitman, by way of contrast, believed that literature or culture, to state the matter quite broadly, could replace the social and socializing functions of religion, and could improve the lives not only of the writer but also the audience. In his almost gnostic conception of a divine spark lurking in his subjectivity, James clearly imagines a religion of art where “religion” is a term much closer to his brother’s conception of a wholly individual, primary, and authentic experience.

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<sup>8</sup>Marcia Ian, in her unpublished essay “The ‘Invisible Religion’ of Continuity”, talks at length about the centrality to American Protestantism of just such a quest for a feeling of continuity. Speaking of William James, Ian notes that all the accounts of religious experience he cites in *Varieties* share in common “an experience of continuity with something larger and other than the self” (31).

And, of course, it also contains some clear parallels to Stransom's drive to produce an utterly original religion that would save his dead through an act of aesthetic memorialization. He believes his altar is "no dim theological rescue, no boon of a contingent world; they were saved better than faith or works could save them" (286). Stransom, of course, is English, he builds his altar in a Catholic church, and his production of physical representations of spiritual beings obviously parallels Catholicism, but in his schismatic invention of a private faith suited to the requirements of his own imagination he is not even Protestant so much as American, and, I would add, eminently Jamesian. The essential requirements of Stransom's spirituality have less to do with iconography, textuality, or community than with meditative privacy and experiential primacy. As Stransom builds his actual physical altar, there is a sublime joy that he experiences, an aesthetic bliss, that the author of "Is There a Life After Death?" must have found appealing, and in Stransom's efforts to cling to lost friends as objects of the mind, we see an attitude that fits closely to the despair and loss that drove James to write the initial germ of the story in his notebooks. Stransom, I would argue, is an exaggerated version of one of the central requirements of James' spiritual imagination.

As Stransom constructs his altar, he is also an artist. He builds it in a dingy Catholic church in a suburb of London, and our introduction to it is a remarkable example of James' ability to put us inside the perceptions of a character in order to produce psychological insight. As he walks down the street, Stransom does not initially see a "church", but rather "the arch of a high doorway approached by a low terrace of steps, in the depth of which—it formed a dim vestibule—the raising of a curtain, at the moment he passed, gave him a glimpse of an avenue of gloom with a glow of tapers at the end. He stopped and looked up, making out that the place was a church" (259). The point, I think, is that Stransom perceives differently than others might. Rather than quickly adding together the rather obvious context clues to produce the conclusion, "church", Stransom lingers on particulars, assembling individual images piecemeal rather than leaping to the

socialized category that would, in a sense, allow him to stop looking. He enters the church, and immediately begins to appreciate the aesthetics of the candles on the altar, “an exhibition he always liked” (259). He sees a woman in mourning, and feels himself for a moment upset that he cannot equal her display of grief: “he wished he could sink, like her, to the very bottom, be as motionless, as rapt in prostration” (259). Then, as he stares at the candles on the altar, he has the second of his aesthetic trances. He “floated away on the sea of light,” and then “the thing became, as he sat there, his appropriate altar, and each starry candle an appropriate vow. He numbered them, he named them, he grouped them—it was the silent roll call of his dead. They made together a brightness vast and intense” (260). After this period of formal arrangement in his mind, he immediately wonders if he might not find comfort in “some outward worship,” and after an amusingly brief series of bribes paid to the local bishop, Stransom takes over a dark, unused corner of the church in which he builds and tends to his own altar, “a masterpiece of splendor and a mountain of fire” (260). The altar he constructs contains one candle for each of his dead friends, except for Acton Hague, formerly a very close friend, but one who had wronged him in some unspecified publicly humiliating fashion (263). Soon, he is tending to his altar every day, and as it becomes the central activity of his life, he feels himself, in a remarkable mix of religious allusion and sacrilege, “like the shepherd of a huddled flock, with all a shepherd’s vision of differences imperceptible” (262-3). Daniel Kim notes that the “altar is clothed in terms that indicate it is an aesthetic object” (105), and the passage Kim points to as evidence is worth quoting in full:

Symmetry was harmony, and the idea of harmony began to haunt him: he said to himself that harmony was of course everything. He took, in fancy, his composition to pieces, redistributing it into other lines, making other juxtapositions and contrasts. He shifted this and that candle; he made the spaces different; he effaced the disfigurement of a possible gap. There were subtle and complex relations, [and] a scheme of cross-reference. (287)

Clearly, in this passage near the end of the tale, Stransom’s formerly vague aesthetic



sensations have grown obsessively detailed, he has become haunted by his desire for the perfect aesthetic object, and, though the comedy is muted, the idea that there is “a scheme of cross-reference” amongst a set of identical candles is perhaps the funniest phrase in the entire story. And yet, it is also clear that Stransom feels a raw pleasure as he creates and rearranges in his mind, and discovers in his consciousness the ability to order a corner of the world. These visionary meditations embody what Wallace Stevens saw as the essential quality of the artist: an imagination that perceives “the opposite of chaos in chaos” (1951, 153). Stransom’s rage for order also bears some clear resemblances to James’ descriptions of the joys of the artist in “Is There a Life After Death.” If James, as previously quoted, invokes, evokes, figures, represents, fixes, and seizes, all in a manner that puts him “in communication” with something ineffable, some source beyond observation, so, quite obviously, does Stransom.

But one does not need to read deeply into the tone of Stransom counting over and rearranging the candles to sense trajectory deeper and deeper down into solipsistic withdrawal. He is, by the end of the story, utterly cut off from everything outside the closed circuit of self and altar. The final trajectory of James’ story serves to undercut the initial idea of the basically admirable, dutiful man he had originally sketched in his notebooks. Instead, Stransom comes to display the excesses and potential pitfalls of the sublime experience of creating. He is, I would argue, a crystallized example of the deep ambivalence about a sense of spirituality based in aesthetics that runs throughout James’ work in the mid-1890’s.

James sets the plot moving in this direction when he introduces the second major character of the story, an unnamed woman who was not mentioned in his journal entries for the story. Wayne Booth’s chapter on James in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* centers on characters he calls “reflectors”. These are characters who, based on what we can gather from James’ notebooks, seem to have been late additions to the initial germ of a story James had formulated in his notebooks. In Booth’s telling, a reflector is “an observer, or

group of observers, who because of their sensitivity can ‘reflect’ the story to the reader” (340). Booth himself is mostly concerned with central characters such as Fleda Vetch or the narrator of *The Aspern Papers*, but the general phenomenon he describes—a character James added late in the process of composition that radically alters how the reader experiences the story—can easily be applied to the unnamed woman, even if it is not “in [her] mind that the story really takes place” (340). Without her in the story, we would have no critical leverage by which to read the protagonist. By adding her to the story, James gives us the ability to look at Stransom through someone else’s eyes, and the addition of this perspective allows us to understand him differently, and perhaps more thoroughly. To alter Booth’s terminology, she serves as something a “refractor”, or a character we read not into like a mirror but through like a lens.

The woman, we soon realize, had appeared earlier in the story as the woman in mourning Stransom saw when he first entered the church where he constructed his altar, and once the altar is built, she becomes the only other person who sits before it in order to meditate. James tells us, once again in religiously coded language, that she “gradually guessed his call to be of the same order” (264), and eventually the two of them take to sitting in the church together, counting the candles and remembering their dead, forming together a strange sort of “faith” (268). Initially, we do not learn much about this unnamed woman, except to gather that while Stransom numbers off many fallen comrades, the altar for her signifies a single lost companion. One of the most significant effects of her presence as a “refractor” is to highlight how much Stransom has cut himself off from life. Before she arrives, we of course get many clues of Stransom’s inwardness, particularly when his anger at a friend who, unlike him, had the audacity to remarry, leads him to conclude that “he alone, in a world without delicacy, had a right to hold up his head” (257), or when he finds himself wishing his friends would die because that would bring them “instantly within reach” (259). Indeed, several critics have already noted that the single most unbelievable thing about the story is that Stransom would ever

have had as many friends as he now has candles (Warminski 282). It is through his interactions with this woman, however, that James is able to highlight the thoroughness of Stransom's withdrawal.

Although the two of them become close friends, they maintain an uncommon degree of distance in their relationship. He is initially reluctant to pursue her friendship because he feels that his dead jealously "reminded him that he went only for them—for nothing else in the world" (266). For years, he only meets the woman at the church, and they go "long ages" without knowing one another's names (267-8). James' decision never to reveal her name in the text seems calculated to reproduce in the reader a sense of their distance from each other. There are, to be sure, some striking moments of fellow-feeling between them, particularly when James notes that "there was not a word he had said to her that she had not beautifully understood" (267), but this only serves to make more upsetting the fact that her importance to Stransom ultimately relies on her role as the potential standard-bearer of his religion of the dead. For, as James notes, "Any faith, after all, has the instinct of propagation," and she eventually becomes "the high priestess of his altar, and whenever he left England he committed it to her keeping" (270).

Art, like faith, also has an instinct of propagation, and indeed, the great compensatory promise of the artist has always been that he, like the first creator, can produce immortality. Stransom hopes that so long as his altar lives, so long will it give life to him, and he repeatedly suggests to the woman that the last candle on his altar will be the one lit by her after his death (269-70). Then, he will be able to join his dead in his perfectly completed aesthetic object, and he will memorialized and immortalized in what Humbert Humbert calls "the refuge of art" (309). In his vision of the future, she will be the functionary of his aesthetic salvation, as she "would guard the temple" and, Stransom tells her, "if the spirit should move her, she might kindle a taper even for him" (270). Her reply to this request tolls across the blank space at the bottom of the story's fifth section: "And who," she asks, "will kindle one even for me?" His request of her is

perhaps forgivable in its narcissism, for who does not want to be remembered? But the gentle humor of her question reminds us that Stransom's religion of aesthetics can find room for his closest living friend only as a superintendent of funds and keeper of his flame. He is so focused on saving his represented dead that the actually living have become secondary. She has become a co-worshipper in his religion—has, indeed, become part of his flock—but as she notes, this shepherd's ultimate concern is only the salvation of himself. Geoff Ward writes of Stransom that "His tale may be read as an allegory about the dwindling psychic capital of a subjectivity that severs all investments in the world. Yet the world itself is dead, dishumanized, and flight in the face of its conditions accrues a lonely dignity" (67). While I certainly agree with Ward's first sentence, the second should give us pause. Stransom may well believe that the world is dead and dishumanized, but it is hard to imagine that James, a man who made the phrase "live all you can" the centerpiece of *The Ambassadors*, could possibly be behind his protagonist in his utter withdrawal from the world. Indeed, the comparison to Lambert Strether is a telling one. Richard Poirier writes that "*The Ambassadors* offers remarkably beautiful instances of the hero's effort to transform the things he sees into visions, to detach them from time and from the demands of nature, and to give them the composition of *objets d'art*" (1966, 124). Strether's internality obviously resembles to some extent Stransom's repeated aestheticized meditations, but it is worth remembering that Strether's visions are almost always the result of an interaction with the wide, vibrant world, and not of a removal from it. In fact, I would argue that Stransom, in his obsession with controlling and manipulating a set of dead art objects, and in his effort to make the woman closest to him into a servant of an aestheticism that closes itself to humanity, resembles no character in James more than Gilbert Osmond, who is perhaps the darkest version James gives us of the aesthetic imagination's potential for necromancy and narcissism.

The crisis moment in the plot of the story occurs when Stransom discovers that the

one lost soul the woman has been lamenting at the altar for all these years, Acton Hague, was the hated former friend for whom Stransom had refused to light a candle (273). Stransom realizes that the one person he had tried to exclude from his altar had in fact been there all along, and “The revelation seemed to smite our friend in the face” (273). Stransom, sensing that this could produce a significant crisis in his friendship with the woman, initially proposes, quite ecumenically, that they could continue to worship at the same altar while tolerating one another’s opposite interpretations of what it means (277). Her response to this request indicates that, for her, the intentions of the author of the faith take interpretive primacy, and when he refuses to light one his candles for Hague, she tells him that “the spell is broken” and she will no longer meditate at the altar (277). After this, Stransom sinks into a period of depression during which he does not visit the shrine as often (280), and when he visits her at her home, they are both saddened that they have lost the hope of a future in which he would have been memorialized by her continued attentions to the altar.

After three months away from the church, Stransom “felt so lonely that he went back; reflecting that as they had been his best society for years his Dead perhaps wouldn’t let him forsake them without doing something more for him” (285). Now alone and in failing health, his visits to the altar increasingly take the form of meditative reveries, as he sinks deeper and deeper into the symbolic world of the dead he has created. He begins to lose himself “in the large luster, which was more and more what he had from the first wished it to be—as dazzling as the vision of heaven in the mind of a child. He wandered in the fields of light; he passed among the tall tapers, from tier to tier, from fire to fire, from name to name, from the white intensity of one clear emblem, of one saved soul, to another” (286). This passage opens a five-page concluding section of the story in which James reaches for a high, sublime tone that appears only at rare, key moments in his work, and which seems calculated here to give full credit to the utter seductiveness of losing oneself in the aesthetic as a means of spiritual transport. With its

invocation of an oceanic sense of childish connectivity to a world of light and harmony, and the pulsing, incantatory effect produced by the combination of anaphora and iambs in “from tier to tier, from fire to fire, from name to name,” James clearly wants us to feel some of the joy Stransom finds in the order, harmony, and beauty of his altar.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is telling that James, arch ironist that he can sometimes be, never gives us the slightest reason to believe that the altar is not every bit as beautiful as Stransom thinks it is.

And yet, this same passage also gives us a sense of the extent to which he clings to his objects of desire, both his altar and his dead friends, as tightly as possible in a closed, narcissistic circuit. He takes joy in the fact that his religion of art surpasses any form of Christianity, for it has “saved his souls...better than faith or works could save them,” but it has more specifically saved them “for the warm world they had shrunk from dying to, for actuality, for continuity, for the certainty of human remembrance” (286). Here, contrary to the impulse of remembrance that prompted the germ of the story, James shows us that a single-minded obsession with retaining possession of the dead, like the desire to retain possession of any object, can choke off the subject’s connection to the rest of life. All of Stransom’s affective energies have been channeled into building and sustaining an altar which he feels will save the dead by enabling the remembrance of the world, but ironically the only person who remembers them has removed himself entirely from that very world. Indeed, the fact that Stransom saves them “for actuality” deprives them of the privilege he has sought throughout the story: the “immense escape from the actual” he achieved first at Mary Antrim’s grave, and subsequently in all of his altar

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<sup>9</sup>Warminski argues that we should read this passage very suspiciously, and certainly should not be moved by it, because it comes from Stransom’s point of view at a moment of when he is ill, “self-deluded”, and had already decided to renounce his altar (266). I want to resist this impulse: first, as William James notes, “for aught we know to the contrary, 103 or 104 Fahrenheit might be a more favorable temperature for truths to germinate and sprout in than the more ordinary blood-heat of 97 or 98 degrees” (1982, 15); second, inasmuch as this sort of rapt visionary experience happens to Stransom about once every five pages, illness is an insufficient explanation for why it happens here; third, James accomplishes too much by having us empathize with Stransom’s aesthetic spirituality, even if only for a moment. A story lampooning a crazy person is much less significant, and, more to point, much less typically Jamesian, than a story that both empathizes with and expresses deep reservations about a character’s spiritual imagination.

reveries (253). In short, the boldest claim of his religion of art is that it produces a kind of immortality through memorialization, but Stransom comes to exemplify the grasping, possessive nature of this gesture, which ultimately lacks any of the spirit of renunciation that, throughout James' characters, is essential to any sort of subjective maturation.

Stransom also exemplifies the pitfalls of an artist's spirituality based entirely in the creative molding of experience by consciousness. Daniel Kim has argued that James uses Stransom to parody Matthew Arnold, inasmuch as the altar quite literally fills a space formerly occupied by institutional religion with a work of art (Kim 110-1). It is important to remember, though, that for James and Arnold, art replaces decidedly different functions of religion. For James, the act of creating can allow the artist moments of ecstatic transport or feelings of continuity with ineffable forces that are analogous to the religious experiences of William James' "men in their solitude." Though Arnold's interest in culture certainly does not exclude the kind of affective experiences handled by James, he repeatedly insists that the true heroic role of culture is in producing social cohesion, national pride, and a citizen ethos. He insists in *Culture and Anarchy* that the student of culture must also seek to lift others up with him, for he cannot achieve "perfection... while the individual remains isolated. The individual is required...to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection, to be continually doing all he can to enlarge and increase the volume of the human stream sweeping thitherward" (412). Stransom's religion of art differs from Arnold's model because it values the experience of the private individual over a public mission. Though James' story displays a great deal of ambivalence about his character's solipsistic isolation, it is also clear that Stransom's hunger for the primary experience of consciousness molding the world sits much closer to James' own sense of the spiritual possibilities of art than does Arnold's civil religion of culture. If Stransom is, as I stated earlier, an exaggerated version of one aspect of James' spiritual imagination, then "The Altar of the Dead", it seems to me, is an exaggerated version of James' ambivalence

about the spiritual possibilities of art. Poirier, writing on an entirely different phase of the career, argued that “James is most intellectually congenial not with the aspiring visionaries, like Roderick and Isabel, but with those people who, made wise rather than cynical by experience and by their own limitations, are optimistically dedicated to helping them out” (35-6). “The Altar of the Dead”, alas, does not have a realist or an ironist of Ralph or Rowland’s stature, and Stransom suffers as a result. I would only add as a postscript to Poirier’s claim that the “aspiring visionaries” continue to show up throughout James’ fiction, and if he is not “intellectually congenial” to them, they nevertheless seem to appeal to him on a level of emotion or even seduction. Stransom, like Isabel, must be handled at arm’s length, but what he represents is far too important not to be handled.

The story concludes with one final visionary experience, as Stransom, near death, decides that he has returned to his altar “for the great surrender” (288). He falls to his knees, and stares at the one candle that represents Mary Antrim, finding that “it seemed to expand, to spread great wings of flame,” and then the entire altar “gathered itself into form, and the form was human beauty and human charity; it was the far-off face of Mary Antrim” (288). Mary has, at this point, fallen out of the story for a very long time, as the unnamed woman and Acton Hague become significantly more important to the plot, but here she returns, perhaps to put a human face on Stransom’s impending experience of sublime dissolution, or perhaps to bring the story back, full circle, to the initial “escape from the actual” he felt at Mary’s grave. Regardless, as he stares at the altar, lost in his experience of “rapture”, the unnamed woman appears at the church, and he is immediately convinced that “God sent her” (289). She tells him that earlier that day, she had decided to let go of their argument and return to the altar, “not for my own—that’s over. But I’m here for *them*” (289, italics in original). In short, then, she has given up her own interpretation of the altar as representing her one dead soul, and has acceded to his version. However, as she talks to him, and he speaks of the “choir of angels” singing



out to him, she realizes that he is dying, and she puts her arm around him as, in a remarkable echo of the *Pieta*, “He let himself go, resting on her; he dropped upon the bench, and she fell on her knees beside him with his arm on her shoulder” (290). Suddenly, the story has two Mary’s, one living and one dead, and I submit that the overabundance echoes the fact that Stransom’s religion ultimately seeks to harness everything surrounding him in his narrow, circumscribed world, into a servant of his own salvation.<sup>10</sup> He is a Christ who abandons the world of men, and he is a Messiah who, in his final words, seeks his own salvation in the immortality of art, as he begs the unnamed woman to finish off the altar by giving it the balance and harmony his candle will provide: “They say there’s a gap in the array—they say it’s not full, complete. Just one more” (290).

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<sup>10</sup>The Bible also has two Mary’s, of course, but here we have two Virgin Mary’s and no Mary Magdalene, signifying once again Stransom’s sense of superiority to the living, breathing, backsliding world.

*Section Three: "An experience quite apart"*

"The Figure in the Carpet", which was published in 1896, is an exemplary case of a story in which James' characters use metaphors of spirituality to describe the experience of creating and reading literature. The story is, in its essence, about metaphor. Its very title is a figurative term that the narrator invents to name the hidden meaning that is strung through the work of the great novelist Hugh Vereker. The action of the story consists almost entirely of critical reading, as the main characters first learn from Vereker of the supposed existence of this textual secret, and then proceed to hunt for it in his novels. The narrator and other characters present a multitude of metaphors for this mysterious literary object, but just as importantly, they also repeatedly metaphorize the experience of looking for it. The characters initially figure the search for Vereker's secret as a contest, hunt, or "some kind of game you're up to with your style" (291): Vereker, the narrator, and the narrator's friend Corvick all describe it in these terms. However, once the hidden meaning has been found and the "idol" has been unveiled, the language of the story shifts, and those who have learned the secret are described as having experienced a secular epiphany. Significantly, it is precisely at the moment that the primary mode of figuration shifts to metaphors of the sacred that the tone of the narrator grows morbid and obsessed, and many of the characters become clutching, covetous, and inhumane. The bitterness at the end of this story about the religion of art is in direct proportion to the zeal of the converted. By analyzing the architecture of figurative language in the story, I hope to show that the tale presents a version of the psychic results of the sacralization of art that is far more cynical than the celebratory account of James' notebooks, and arguably more acidic even than "The Altar of the Dead".

There is a long critical tradition of arguing that literature was, for James, a secular correlative to the sacred. T.S. Eliot famously noted that James had an "exceptional

awareness of spiritual reality” in spite of his “indifference to religious dogma”, an observation F.O. Matthieson cites approvingly when he describes a “religion of consciousness” running through James’ later works (145). In 1976, Peter Brooks argues that James and Balzac were interested in melodramatic plots because “in the absence of a true Sacred... they continue to believe that what is most important in a man’s life is his ethical drama and the ethical implications of his psychic drama” (21). Since the turn of the present century, this line of criticism has continued. Pericles Lewis, for instance, argues that James’ tendency to combine secularism with an interest in experiences of the unseen is comparable to the emerging sociology of religion of the late Nineteenth Century (249).<sup>11</sup> Kevin Kohan, in an article that relates James’ fiction to recent anthropological studies of the sacred, sums up something of a general critical consensus when he writes that James’ “work does persistently ask whether art can provide what religion once could—a sense of the enduring significance of our experience, a medium through which we awaken our deepest resources of consciousness—or whether these yearnings are fundamentally dangerous, inspiring a self-absorbed neglect of the everyday, the ordinary facts of life” (229).

I would like to pay heed to something Kohan mentions, but which has often been under-discussed in critical accounts of the Jamesian sacred: specifically, the idea that sacralized art is “dangerous”, and that when James’ characters begin to fetishize or covet art as a holy object, they are given to “self-absorbed neglect.” This phrase is certainly an apt description of what happens in the latter portions of “The Figure in the Carpet”. Near the end of story, the narrator grows increasingly selfish and obsessed as he lusts after Vereker’s secret meaning, and as this mental and ethical trajectory unfolds, a gradual evolution simultaneously takes place in the story’s metaphorical strategies, as the

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<sup>11</sup>Specifically, Lewis argues that James’ fiction is comparable to the work of Weber, Durkheim, Freud, and William James because he “seeks new forms and narrative techniques that can allow him to account for the kinds of experience generally associated with faith while avoiding a judgment as to the truth-content of those experiences” (249). For more on how William James’ study of religion relates to Henry James’ spiritual sensibility, see also Robert J. Reilly (20).

characters move from envisioning criticism as a game to defining it as a mode of spiritual experience. It is easy to imagine the narrator agreeing with James that art can be a “luminous paradise,” but it is hard to imagine that James believes the narrator is an ideal reader. The narrator, as we shall see, is an unappealing and unreliable character, and this story is therefore an essential text for gaining some insight into James’ ambivalence about his own fascination with a spiritualized aesthetics.

I want to begin my reading at the end of “The Figure in the Carpet”, because it is, even by James’ standards, a remarkably sour conclusion. The narrator, a middling literary critic, had been told at the outset of the story by the novelist Hugh Vereker that a secret meaning was threaded through the entirety of his work. The narrator quickly gives up on trying to find this “figure in the carpet”, but soon his friend George Corvick figures it out. Before long, however, everyone who knew the secret—Vereker, Corvick, and his wife Gwendolyn—has died. The narrator had spent the entire story obsessively seeking the hidden meaning of Vereker’s work, and in the end he discovers that Gwendolyn, the last person to know the secret, died without passing it on to her second husband, the literary critic Drayton Deane. The narrator tells Deane the entire story, and then concludes, “I may say that today as victims of unappeased desire there isn’t a pin to choose between us. The poor man’s state is almost my consolation: there are really moments when I feel it to be quite my revenge” (313).

Vengeance achieved by causing an innocent man to question whether he ever truly knew his dead wife is a shockingly dark place to find oneself at the end of what is, after all, a short story about reading novels. And yet one does not leave this story, one of James’ most admired productions, feeling that its conclusion, like University politics, is an instance where things are vicious precisely because the stakes are so low. We are willing to believe in the obsession and anger of the narrator because of the metaphorical language in the story, which, through the intensity of its vehicles, allows the reader to sense the ardency with which the characters covet the tenor, the hidden object. J. Hillis

Miller points out that “there are no literal terms for the ‘it’” (1980, 115), and every character who seeks Vereker’s “exquisite scheme” (290), including Vereker himself, describes it in floods of figurative language. It is, as the narrator summarizes to Deane, “the general intention of his books; the string his pearls were strung on, the buried treasure, the figure in the carpet” (311).

The narrator is first put onto the scent of Vereker’s hidden meaning when he encounters the novelist at a dinner party. Vereker insults the narrator unwittingly when he states, without realizing that the narrator is the author of a recent review of Vereker’s new novel, that the review is “the usual twaddle,” and its author “doesn’t see anything” (287-8). When he later apologizes for his rudeness, Vereker is kind and conciliatory, but also says that critics have always “missed my little point” (289). The narrator asks him what exactly this “little point” is, and the rest of the chapter consists of Vereker offering various explanations. His outpouring of description is the commencement of the main action of the narrative, wherein readers not only in but also of the story are forced to try to decrypt the wide variety of figurative language orbiting about *the* figure, which sits like a black dwarf star, undetected and perhaps undetectable, at the tale’s center.

Vereker’s “little point” is the thing he believes critics ought to be looking for in his books. It is the “idea in my work without which I wouldn’t have given a straw for the whole job. It’s the finest fullest intention of the lot, and the application of it has been, I think, a triumph of patience, of ingenuity...It stretches, this little trick of mine, from book to book, and everything else, comparatively, plays over the surface of it” (290). It is, indeed, “the particular thing I’ve written my books most for” (289), and though he realizes his description is vague, to him it is “as palpable as the marble of this chimney” (290).

In the New York Edition Preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, James claims that writing that story was “an exercise of the imagination unassisted, unassociated—playing the game, making the score, in the phrase of our sporting day, off its own bat” (1934, 171).

Vereker anticipates this later description of a story that, like his own *oeuvre*, tends to defy description, when he calls the figure a “trick” and an “exquisite scheme”, and insists to the befuddled narrator that the critics investigating his work have been blind to the fact that “My whole lucid effort gives him the clue” (290-1). He admits to the narrator that “it was indeed with him now the great amusement of life” to see if anyone will ever discover the secret he has hidden in his work (291). Tzvetan Todorov has noted that James’ tales are often driven by “the existence of an essential secret, of something which is not named, of an absent overwhelming force which puts the whole present machinery of the narrative into motion” (75). Certainly this tale fits nicely into the canon of Jamesian tales of secrets, but it is striking that unlike “The Beast in the Jungle” or *The Turn of the Screw*, where absent forces are ominous or unsettling, Vereker’s secret, at least in his first conversation with the narrator, is presented as a source of play and fun.

Indeed, “The Figure in the Carpet” has so frequently been handled by critics as a literary game that it essentially constitutes its own branch of the critical examination of James’ language of games.<sup>12</sup> Peter Lock describes the story as an allegory for how its own readers should seek textual meaning<sup>13</sup> when he says that it “plays with its reader...and the reader should, in return, learn (and more successfully than the narrator) to join in the game and play (whatever the consequences) with the text” (168).<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup>The most influential example of this is Todorov, who explicitly announces in his study of James’ short fiction that he will “take up” Vereker’s challenge and try to uncover the rules governing the tales of the 1890’s (74-5). American responses to Todorov varied, but important examples of opposition include essays by James E. Miller and John Bayley, both of whom attack what they see as Todorov’s tendency to reduce the messy details of James’ stories to “formulaic patterns” (Miller 305). A reader who has made it this far has likely discovered my own love of messy details, but to be fair, Todorov captures the spirit of the story inasmuch as James clearly goads the reader to play the critical games his characters describe. For examples of the language of games in other works by James, see Sklepowich on *The Awkward Age*, Morrow on *The American* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, and Williams on *The Turn of the Screw*.

<sup>13</sup>Or, in the case of the deconstructionist critics who have had a field day with the story, the story is read as an allegory for its own inability to make meaning. J. Hillis Miller provides one of strongest examples of these readings. He argues that “the text itself leads the reader to believe that he ought to be able to say what it means, while at the same time making that saying impossible” (1980, 113).

<sup>14</sup>See also Eric Savoy’s thoughts on the allegorical nature of the story (espec. p. 228), or, on the contrary, Denis Flannery’s claim that “the chances of (James) writing in effect a self-referential allegory are indeed slim” (156).

critical tradition surrounding this story has tended to “play the game” by looking to James’ figurative strategies to adjudicate late-Twentieth Century critical debates, in particular the issue of whether works of literature ought to be read as well-wrought urns or self-deconstructing instances of the limits of representation.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, the modern popularity of the story speaks to its relevance to those issues, but the actual characters of the story exemplify a different dilemma, inasmuch as they attempt either to demystify the art object by rooting out its secrets, or to sacralize the text as an object of veneration. This opposition between demystification and sacralization is not entirely absent from present-day critical debates, but still, it is not truly *our* issue, or at least not the issue it was in a century that produced both the Higher Criticism and Matthew Arnold. It is intriguing, then, that it is the author Vereker who encourages his readers to demystify his work by playing with it until the hidden meaning is revealed, while the narrator, a critic, is the story’s chief source of a rhetoric of literary mystification. This same basic distinction, where the artist is less concerned with the sacralization of art than the critic, is also on display in “The Death of the Lion”, as we shall see in the next section.

Vereker’s notion of play is subtly aggressive. After he has told the narrator that “I live almost to see if it will ever be detected”, he then “looked at me for a jesting challenge; something far within his eyes seemed to peep out. ‘But I need’t worry—it won’t’” (291). This moment tells us a great deal about how Vereker imagines his relationship to his ideal reader. He searches the narrator’s face for a “jesting challenge”, for a response that will engage Vereker on the grounds of his contest, but will also contain the same tone of good-hearted one-upsmanship that fills the language of his literary gambit. Clearly, he is seeking a worthy opponent, but he also strokes his ego with the fact that no critic has proved capable of sounding his depths. Perhaps the most telling description he gives of the figure is that “The thing’s as concrete there as a bird in

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<sup>15</sup>The most condensed example of this debate is the series of articles and replies between J. Hillis Miller and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan that were published in *Poetics Today* in the early 1980’s (see Works Cited). Todorov is certainly the best example of a reader who argues for the story’s structural coherence.

a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap” (291). The narrator seems to miss the looming threat in this statement, particularly since he notes that, immediately following Vereker’s line, “I scratched my head” (291). But Vereker’s statement is indeed ominous, since it suggests that to search for the figure is to fall into a trap.

Given the rhetoric of transcendence we see later in the story, it is important to remember that the object of Vereker’s proposed game is to discover a figure that is, in one way or another, immanent in the entirety of his work. He never directly answers the narrator’s questions as to whether it is an “esoteric message,” “something in the style or something in the thought,” or “an element of form or an element of feeling” (291). Instead, he tells the narrator, “Well, you’ve got a heart in your body. Is that an element of form or an element of feeling? What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the organ of life” (291). It is an “organ”, not a spirit or an aura of life, that pumps the blood through Vereker’s novels.<sup>16</sup> His use of so bodily an image is significant, as it suggests that whatever there is to be found, it is to be found by feeling for the very pulse of the book, and then tracing it back to its source somewhere in the core of his body of work. Moreover, Vereker is suggesting here that to find the secret is to demystify the text, since its discovery involves peeling back the skin of novelistic artifice so that one can anatomize the interior structure. Perhaps this helps to explain why, when he meets with the narrator again weeks later, Vereker for the first time approves of one of the narrator’s attempts to metaphorize the secret central meaning. The narrator recalls, “It was something, I guessed, in the primal plan; something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet. He highly approved of this image when I used it, and he used another

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<sup>16</sup>There have been a number of different critical opinions hazarded as to what James means by “the organ of life”. Eric Savoy nods to the narrator’s subsequent joke that Vereker’s secret might be a “preference for the letter P” in order to argue that the organ in question is a penis (234), whereas Peter Lock points to the female generative organs (171). Leon Edel argues that “Placed in the context of James’s total work it is not difficult to suggest what James was thinking of....We have his pronouncements, often reiterated, that it was art that *made* life. Consequently we may say that the ‘organ of life’ is art” (148). I personally agree with Raymond Wilson that the direct context of Vereker’s speech makes it clear that he means to denote the heart (143), but certainly the phrase could have other connotations.



himself. ‘It’s the very string,’ he said, ‘that my pearls are strung on!’” (295).

The narrator, however, never finds Vereker’s string of pearls. After a brief period of study, he quits in frustration, wondering if perhaps “Vereker had made a fool of me” and “the buried treasure was a bad joke” (293).<sup>17</sup> When George Corvick, the narrator’s colleague at the literary magazine *The Middle*, learns of what Vereker had told the narrator, however, he has the opposite reaction. Feeling vindicated in his earlier intimation that “something or other” was hidden in Vereker’s novels, Corvick sets out to analyze the writer’s “inmost art” because he feels that “He had hold of the tail of something: he would pull hard, pull it right out” (293). Corvick does not search alone, however; he and Gwendolyn Erme, who at this point in the story is his de facto fiancée, look into the books more “deliberately and sociably” than the narrator had done (296). The narrator feels “humiliated at seeing other persons deeply beguiled by an experiment that had brought me only chagrin” (296), and there is obviously a mix of textual and sexual jealousy that drives his incessant, fascinated observation of their progress.<sup>18</sup> The narrator is not merely upset that Corvick and Gwendolyn are more resourceful and diligent critics. He is also, quite simply, lonely and excluded, noting that “I was out in the cold while, by the evening fire, under the lamp, they followed the chase for which I

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<sup>17</sup>While he was planning the story in his notebooks, James was worried that the reader would also come to the conclusion that there was in fact no figure in the carpet to begin with, and that Vereker had played a practical joke on a critic he did not much care for. He writes “Two little things, in relation to this, occur to me. One is the importance of my being *sure* the disclosure has been made to the wife by her 1st husband. The other is the importance of *his* having been sure he had got hold of the right thing” (1947, 223). However, because the story is told by a first-person narrator who does not know the secret, all the evidence of the figure’s existence is circumstantial, and we, like the narrator, never can be sure that it is real. Indeed, everyone who is said to know the secret could potentially have a motive to lie: Vereker due to disdain for a foolish critic; Corvick as a means to gain leverage in his attempt to marry Gwendolyn; Gwendolyn to hide the fact that she had been fooled if indeed she had been. I am not saying that this is how I read the story, but rather that the fact that James does not (and, due to his perspectival choices, cannot) foreclose the possibility that the figure is a sham adds to the general air of mystery surrounding it, and also provides the reader with some common ground upon which to empathize with the narrator.

<sup>18</sup>This jealousy also helps explain the narrator’s personal disdain for Gwendolyn, whose presence has driven a wedge into the homosocial world of men of letters that had filled the story to this point. Kristin King notes that the narrator “insistently reads” Gwendolyn as a “sexual complement to men rather [a] literary figure in her own right” (19), in spite of the fact that James often lets us see that she is quite intelligent.

myself had sounded the horn” (296). Many of James’ characters who put a tremendous emotional investment in aesthetics, from Rowland Mallet to Fleda Vetch, are subject to a loneliness borne of silently watching someone else’s relationship unfold while they themselves lack interpersonal attachments, and in the narrator of this story James replicates such a character in a much shorter set of brushstrokes. From this point forward, all the narrator’s recollections are colored by his feeling that he is on the outside looking in, “a kind of coerced spectator. All my life had taken refuge in my eyes” (304). Indeed, much of his subsequent mystification of the figure in the carpet has to be understood as coming from a man for whom the secret is tantalizingly just out of reach, obscured by the backs of those who stand around it in a closed, inner circle.

A few pages into Corvick and Gwendolyn’s search, the narrator and Corvick each provide an extended conceit for the effort to find Vereker’s secret. Both of them pick up on Vereker’s air of competitiveness by using metaphors that present reading as a game or a hunt, but the mystification of art that will dominate the second half of the story begins to creep into their language. Corvick’s metaphor is introduced after the narrator asks him whether he has considered going to Vereker himself in an attempt to glean any clues first-hand. Corvick says that he wishes not to do so until he has found the answer, arguing that “he had no wish to approach the altar before he had prepared the sacrifice” (297). This is the first significant instance of religiously coded language in the story, and it is interesting for several reasons. First, and most obviously, Corvick imagines himself humbly approaching an altar behind which presumably stands Vereker, who is now transformed into the guise of a priest or even an oracle. Second, by suggesting that a sacrifice will be offered up at an altar, James’ metaphorical resources draw on pagan religion as much as or more than anything Judeo-Christian, which sets the tone for the allusion to Virgil which occurs later in the story. Third, the metaphor implies that Corvick wishes to forestall the moment when the figure will be sanctified, thus prolonging his critical partnership with Gwendolyn, and postponing their trip to the

marriage altar, in an erotics of delayed gratification.

As an alternative to “approaching the altar,” Corvick chooses instead to pursue a line of critical investigation which he describes as a hunt. He aims to “bring down the animal” that will eventually be offered up as a sacrifice, but as he gives “chase”, Corvick’s primary concern is with playing the game at the utmost level of sportsmanship (297). Referring to Corvick’s similarity to Vereker, the narrator notes that “He quite agreed with our friend as to the delight and as to the honour of the chase” (297). Like Vereker, Corvick imagines criticism as a game played with live rounds, where a critic must be a “keen shot” in order to take down the trophy animal (297). At the same time, Corvick worries that Gwendolyn is violating the game’s honor code with her expressed desire to seek some sort of hint from Vereker. Corvick states, “I’m ashamed to say she wants to set a trap. She’d give anything to see him; she says she requires another tip. She’s really quite morbid about it. But she must play fair—she *shan’t* see him” (297, italics in original). Corvick wants to be a good sport, and he, like the narrator, is anxious about this woman who has entered their arena without any respect for its norms of behavior. He wants to play the game fairly, discover the figure, and finally end up at Vereker’s door, where, in a remarkable fantasy of fatherly approval, “I’ll have it from his own lips. ‘Right you are, my boy; you’ve done it this time!’ He shall crown me victor—with the critical laurel” (297).

The narrator, in his retrospective depiction of events, matches Corvick’s game metaphor with one of his own. The narrator imagines Corvick as “a chessplayer bent with a silent scowl, all the lamplit winter, over his board and his moves” (297). He goes on to describe in more detail the picture that “held me fast”:

On the other side of the table was a ghostlier form, the faint figure of an antagonist good-humouredly but a little wearily secure—an antagonist who leaned back in his chair with hands in his pockets and a smile on his fine clear face. Close to Corvick, behind him, was a girl who had begun to strike me as pale and wasted and even, on more familiar view, as rather handsome, and who rested

on his shoulder and hung on his moves. He would take up a chessman and hold it poised a while over one of the little squares, and then would put it back in its place with a long sigh of disappointment. The young lady, at this, would slightly but uneasily shift her position and look across, very hard, very long, very strangely, at their dim participant. (297)

Chess is a game of hierarchy, rank, and regicide, and the narrator evokes all of these associations as he imagines this grim battle for dominance. Vereker has the same paternalistic self-assurance that has characterized him throughout the story, but here the narrator has made him less a man than a spirit or presence, as he is “ghostly,” “faint,” and “dim.” In prior representations, Corvick had been filled with boyish optimism as he went bounding out into the field of glory, but here he is silently befuddled, and the correct move fails to present itself. Gwendolyn, pale, wasted, and staring, is like something from a nightmare. The narrator has heard from Vereker and Corvick that criticism is a game, and here he tropes and trumps their metaphors by imagining a game that is static, morbid, and disembodied rather than fluid, playful, and physical. Where Corvick had figuratively made Vereker into a high priest standing behind an altar, the narrator mystifies the author even further by imagining him as a ghost or spirit looming over the textual field. Criticism as the narrator imagines it is an almost other-worldly phenomenon, and just as importantly, even as “the picture held me fast” in his imagination, there is no room left for him in the game he imagines. The paragraph containing the chess metaphor sits almost at the midpoint of James’ tale, and by mystifying the language of games that has thus far defined the story, the narrator signals an impending change in how he will metaphorize the figure.

The final game metaphor of the story appears a few pages later when the narrator imagines all the searchers for Vereker’s secret sitting around a roulette wheel. He says that for all the characters in the story, “literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion” (299). The specific game they play here, “as intently as the grim gamblers at Monte Carlo”, is a game of roulette where “the stake on the table was of a special substance and our roulette was the

revolving mind” (299). Inasmuch as my contention is that the figuration of reading in the story drifts toward increasingly mystified metaphors, it is telling that we have moved, in a couple pages, from chess, a game which mimes militaristic realpolitik, to gambling, which mimes the operations of fate or grace. Here, as the whirling wheel of critical thought spins in the minds of Vereker’s readers, the implication is that it is only a matter of time before the wheel stops and someone’s number comes up. Only a few sentences later, Corvick’s does. He has been in India on a trip to report for his brother-in-law’s paper. The journey had given him time to ruminate on the problem, and his telegram to Gwendolyn reads simply “Eureka. Immense” (300).

When the narrator asks Gwendolyn how Corvick knows he is right, she responds “Oh I’m sure that when you see it you do know. *Vera incessu patuit dea!*” (300). The Latin here is an allusion to a scene in the *Aeneid* where Venus, disguised as a maiden huntress from Tyre, has been advising Aeneas to go to Carthage and seek the aid of Dido. As Venus turns to leave, Aeneas recognizes his mother and, in the line quoted by Gwendolyn, “by her gait is the goddess made known.” Here, Gwendolyn imagines that Corvick’s critical comprehension is commensurate to the revelation of some otherworldly figure. It is also, of course, a showy learned allusion and, implicitly, a suggestion that whatever was lurking in Vereker’s work, its beauty must be as immense as that of Venus. But significantly, the language of heavenly recognition continues through the scene. Corvick is said to have “struck light” as a result of the “magic shake” he got by taking a trip, while Gwendolyn is “literally facially luminous” and “thought like one inspired” (300).

James is, in part, using readily available terms to describe what people are like when they are flushed with success, but the reference to the *Aeneid* has a deeper significance which critics of the story have tended not to explore. For Aeneas, the scene James alludes to is not one of success, but pain and alienation. His homeland has just been destroyed, and now, though his mother guides him, she does so through disguises. The

lines following the one Gwendolyn quotes are particularly interesting given the context of James' story: "And when Aeneas recognized his mother,/ he followed her with these words as she fled:/ 'Why do you mock your son—so often and/ so cruelly—with these lying apparitions?/ Why can't I ever join you, hand to hand,/ to hear, to answer you with honest words?'" (I. 579-84).<sup>19</sup> Aeneas' moment of recognition is also one of disconnection and anger. To discover the truth is also, in this case, to discover a lie. By approaching her son through codes and artifice, Venus has undermined the possibility of real intersubjective connection. The narrator, of course, seems entirely oblivious to the implications of Gwendolyn's statement, and it is also difficult to imagine that Gwendolyn would have intended to introduce such a dark, ironic note into the proceedings, particularly since that note has to do with misapprehension. Given the rich reverberations of the allusion, however, it seems likely that James, from his distant authorial perch, is using the citation to comment on the situation. The parallel between Corvick and Aeneas is compelling: like Aeneas, Corvick will soon depart for Italy to complete his mission (in Corvick's case by getting confirmation from Vereker), and much as Aeneas did not live to see Rome come to its final fruition, Corvick will die before he has written the book that will trace Vereker's figure. By quoting a line that is immediately followed in its source text by a cry against loneliness and "lying apparitions", James subtly foreshadows a lurking danger.

For the time being, however, Corvick is filled with "ecstasy" as he travels to Italy to see Vereker and "submit his conception to the supreme authority" (301).<sup>20</sup> Vereker indeed confirms that Corvick has "not a note wrong", and he keeps the critic at his home for a month (302). When Corvick writes back to Gwendolyn and the narrator, he implies that "It was great, yet so simple, was simple, yet so great, and the final knowledge of it was an experience quite apart. He intimated that the charm of such an experience, the

<sup>19</sup>From Allen Mandelbaum's translation, which alters the lineation of the original.

<sup>20</sup>James, in his Preface to the tale, would later echo this deifying description of Vereker, as he calls him a "designer left wholly alone, amidst a chattering, unperceiving world" (1934, 228).

desire to drain it, in its freshness, to the last drop, was what kept him there close to the source” (302). This language of “final knowledge” and an “experience quite apart” is striking inasmuch as it suggests that when one knows the literary icon in its fullest depth one knows the world in way that is somehow different. Paradoxically, knowledge of the one true answer expands rather than limits one’s sense of the implications of Vereker’s work. Thus, Corvick does not demystify Vereker’s body of work by pinning down the author and limiting his potential meanings, but instead sacralizes the texts by making them a pathway to an indescribable higher knowledge. Indeed, inasmuch as this moment of critical revelation is figured as a primary, subjective perception that transcends all of one’s previous frames of reference, yet is difficult to communicate and “can’t be described in cheap journalese” (291), these metaphors for reading describe something akin to William James’ definition of “religious experience” as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (31). The allusion to the *Aeneid* is an allusion to a moment of religious experience in just these terms: Aeneas has a primary perceptual experience of an otherworldly phenomenon. Now, Corvick too has had “an experience quite apart,” and the narrator, looking in from the outside, will spend the remainder of the story hungering for the same “final knowledge.”

After reading Corvick’s letters describing his happiness at having found the truth, the narrator begins to imagine what it must be like to know the secret: “The buried treasure was all gold and gems. Now that it was there it seemed to grow and grow before him; it would have been, through all time and taking all tongues, one of the most wonderful flowers of literary art...When once it came out it came out, was there with a splendour that made you ashamed” (302). The narrator has used the term “buried treasure” to describe the figure at various points in the story, but now that it has been found, he presents it as an altogether different sort of treasure. This treasure is unimaginably vast and sprawling, and is of such a profound beauty as to induce shame. This description of

the time-transcending vastness of the treasure discovered by Corvick shows a remarkable similarity to the references to Matthew 4:8-9<sup>21</sup> that reappear throughout James' fiction. Much like Milly Theale atop the mountain in *The Wings of the Dove*<sup>22</sup> or Olive Chancellor being persuaded to marry off Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians*,<sup>23</sup> Corvick at this moment has all the kingdoms of the world spread out before him, which is always, in James as in the Bible, a dangerous moment of temptation.

Corvick responds to this vast new critical wealth first by sinking into a kind of critical gluttony, as he seeks "to drain it, in its freshness, to the last drop," but then he turns his knowledge of the figure into a tool for manipulation. Gwendolyn covets the secret as much as he does, and he now informs her that the only way she will learn it is to marry him. Gwendolyn is blocked from doing this by a mother who will not consent to the match, but she tells the narrator that her mother is ill, and "'Poor dear, she may swallow the dose. In fact, you know,' she added with a laugh, 'she really *must!*'" (303, italics in original). This story shares with *The Aspern Papers* and "The Altar of the Dead" a moment where a character wishes someone would die because of the closer access it would provide to a fetishized or sanctified aesthetic object. This instance, however, has the distinction of being the only one in which someone wishes death upon his or her own mother. At this point, the quest for the figure in the carpet has gone beyond the "delightful" game envisioned by Corvick and Vereker, and the figure has instead become a tool for cynical manipulation and the object of a dehumanizing level of obsession.

Gwendolyn does marry Corvick, but on the honeymoon he has an accident and is killed (305). Gwendolyn soon reveals that when she reviewed his papers, she discovered

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<sup>21</sup>"Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;/ And saith unto him, All these things I will give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me."

<sup>22</sup>"She was looking down on the kingdoms of the earth, and though indeed that of itself might well go to the brain, it wouldn't be with a view of renouncing them. Was she choosing among them or did she want them all?" (135)

<sup>23</sup>"She seemed to be offering Olive all the kingdoms of the earth if she would only exert herself to bring about a state of feeling on Verena Tarrant's part which would lead the girl to accept Henry Burrage." (266)



that he did not complete the task of describing Vereker's secret: "The opening pages were all that existed; they were striking, they were promising, but they didn't unveil the idol. That great intellectual feat was obviously to have formed the climax" (305). She herself had the secret revealed to her in "a private ceremony" where she had "seen the idol unveiled," but the paper that would present it to the world was never completed. The narrator's description of the figure as an "idol" is telling. No longer is the figure the heart of Vereker's work, the burrowing animal waiting to be pulled out by the tail, or the structural string that ran through the pearls of all his books; instead, it is an impenetrable sanctified object.

Within only a few pages, the other two characters who knew the secret, Vereker and Gwendolyn, have also died. As Miller notes, "They die so abruptly and so fortuitously as to suggest that possession of this secret is deadly, like looking on the goddess naked" (1980, 116). Prior to her death, the narrator had repeatedly tried to get Gwendolyn to tell him what she had learned, but she refuses, first on the grounds of "piety" (307), and then, after the narrator attempts to bait her into telling him by suggesting the figure did not in fact exist, she reveals that she will not tell him because "It's my *life*" (307, italics in original).

If she has been living on this literary secret, we discover in the tale's final pages that it has died with her. The narrator seeks out her second husband, Drayton Deane, hoping that, as with her first marriage, literary criticism was exchanged along with the vows. We learn immediately that Deane has no idea what the narrator is talking about, as Deane stares at him "like a dim phrenological bust" and stutters, "'Vereker's books had a general intention?'" (311). The narrator is stunned, and now is forced to try to describe to Deane a secret of which "All I know is that that knowledge is infinitely precious" (311). He explains to Deane that his wife "had it, as I say, straight from Corvick, who had, after infinite search and to Vereker's own delight, found the very mouth of the cave. Where *is* the mouth?" (311, italics in original). The allusion to Plato suggests that the

figure in the carpet is like the sun that represents ideal truth, suspended far above the world of shadows and images from which Corvick had managed to escape, but where the narrator continues to flounder. Corvick has been clued in to a knowledge not shared by any other man. To see the figure, as the narrator here imagines it, is to have one's entire conception of the world transformed. As he interrogates Deane, "Where *is* the mouth," it is clear that the narrator has become obsessed to the point that he ignores the impropriety of demanding that a man dwell on the fact that his wife had withheld from him such an important secret. It is perhaps even more remarkable that such a prying, fetishized relationship to the hidden meaning of these novels would come from a man who has openly and repeatedly admitted that he does not particularly care for them. The narrator does not care about what is in the texts, but rather what can be experienced by going through or beyond them. The figure in the carpet is more than Casaubon's key to all mythologies; it is a sacramental or shamanistic secret that holds the promise of a renewed vision of life.

The story's final use of the name "Vereker" comes in the final paragraph, as the narrator settles down with Deane and tells him "the anecdote of Vereker's one descent from the clouds" (312). James comically echoes the story's other mention of an appearance of a deity, his earlier nod to the *Aeneid*, by having an elderly novelist take the place of Venus. By the end of the story, a novelist who had demanded that his critical readers play a game with his texts by searching in them for "the organ of life" has been transformed into a god whose relationship to the world of the living is only fleeting and tangential. Vereker has been lifted up, possibly into what James refers to in his notebooks as "the luminous paradise of art." "The Figure in the Carpet", then, problematizes the sacralization of literature by examining obsessive, unethical readers who are so focused on art as a pathway to transcendence that they cease to care for art as a source of play or pleasure. By the end of the story, the narrator is consumed with seeking a knowledge he can never find, and he has been made miserable by his

fascination with Vereker. The narrator's path into increasing misery is paralleled in this story by the trajectory of its metaphors of critical practice, which move from liveliness and games to mystification and death. All of the models of reading explored in this story—from gentlemanly hunting to religious experience—ultimately turn out to be fodder for the subtle and sometimes grim humor that has made this tale famous. James' stories about literature often trade on the idea of art as religion, but "The Figure in the Carpet" is perhaps his most damning critique of a critical practice that justifies its obsessiveness by sacralizing the aesthetic.

*Section Four: The Consecrated Workshop*

“The Death of the Lion” is, from its outset, a conversion narrative. “I had simply, I suppose, a change of heart, and it must have begun when I received my manuscript back from Mr. Pinhorn” (255). The unnamed narrator does not begin his tale as a priest in the temple of art, like the narrator in “The Figure in the Carpet”, and he is not, like Stransom, fulfilling what had seemed a lifelong calling. Instead, he is a mediocre celebrity journalist; in the words of James’ notebook, he is a “young intending interviewer who has repented” when he comes to believe that the culture of publicity violates the sanctity of art and that he ought to dedicate his life to aiding and protecting the great author Neil Paraday (149). The narrator has all the clumsy zeal of the recently converted, and his enthusiasm helps drive this comedy of manners which, much more than any other of James’ artist tales, shows his sense of the widespread cultural currency of the sacralization of art. Virtually everyone in the story, from American tourists and hack journalists to high society hostesses, conceives of the aesthetic through the language of spirituality. Most of all, though, it is James’ narrator who has recourse to this terminology, as he re-invents himself as the stalwart defender of his literary faith, attempting to guard its sacrosanct spaces against the incursions of a profane age.

“The Death of the Lion”, then, is yet another story in which the language of spiritual experience is repeatedly used as the essential metaphor for aesthetic experience. It is nevertheless markedly different in its tone from “The Altar of the Dead” or “The Figure in the Carpet”. Those stories might be called mock-tragedies, where the reader stands at an ironic remove from main characters whose obsessive, solipsistic relationship to a fetishized art object leads them to construct heroic or tragic self-conceptions that the details of the story tend to undermine. “The Death of the Lion”, however, is arguably a stranger beast: one almost wants to call it a mock-comedy. The narrator of the story intends to write a comic narrative which combines a social satire full of barbed

observations, a comedy of errors in which chance mishaps propel the plot, and a romantic comedy in which an earnest young man meets, molds, and ultimately weds a quirky young girl. And yet, the reader is not entirely “with” this narrator either: in fact, the story gives us ample clues that we ought to question his motivations and his ability to understand what is going on around him. However, an unreliable comic narrator produces a different sort of story, which in turn produces different critical challenges, than does a story told by an unreliable narrator who understands himself to be tragic. In “The Figure in the Carpet”, there is a tension that between a belief that only a language of the sacred can do true justice to the value and beauty of art, and a realization that fetishizing art in this way leads to obsession, dehumanization, and a dying to life. In “The Death of the Lion”, however, the tension is between, on the one hand, a belief that spiritualizing language can represent what it is like to be moved by art, and on the other, a recognition that these metaphors of cosmic grandeur cannot help but seem ridiculous when secularized into the context of the culture of contemporary letters. I want to close with this story because it forces to me face up to the elephant in the corner: what is James’ tone when he uses these metaphors for aesthetics which are, after all, borrowed from a long and powerful cultural discourse about the status of art? Is he ironic? Serious? Is he both at different times, and how do we sense the switches? This story is significant because there are moments where the mystification of art is seen as utterly authentic and vital, but other moments where the same metaphors are meant to seem foolish. While the first two stories handled in this chapter exemplify a fraught ambivalence in James’ fiction about his investment in using the language of spirituality to describe and appraise the aesthetic, in this story James plays with that ambivalence by placing it at the heart of his comic effects.

The story’s basic structure puts it in a venerable line in the history of American literature: a first-person narrator describes the life of a great man he lionizes and, to some extent, hides behind. However, inasmuch as the entire story must be seen through

the lens of that act of idealization, the narrator becomes the psychic center of the story. Thus, just as *The Great Gatsby* is as much Nick's story as Gatsby's, or *American Pastoral* is more about Nathan Zuckerman than Swede Levov, any reading of "The Death of the Lion" almost cannot help but be an analysis of its narrator. This is particularly true since the narrator is the character who changes most significantly over the course of the story. Paraday, the "great man", goes from lonely and ignored to famous and overexposed, but even as his new public obligations mortally exhaust him, James shows in his dialogue that he remains the same vaguely bemused character throughout. The narrator, on the other hand, shifts from a cynical journalist to a deeply transformed appreciator of art who eventually appoints himself Paraday's defender against the distractions created by his new fame. Most of the action of the story is centered on the narrator's efforts to protect his hero from the demands of the public, and the tale's satirical tone is obviously colored by his ultimate failure to prevail against the society of readers he mocks.

If to read "The Death of the Lion" is ultimately to read its narrator, then it is worth noting that critics have generally read him by condemning him morally. Gerald Hoag, for instance, questions the narrator's skills as a literary critic, and calls him a "venal, if not shocking, fraud whose motives and whose very judgment we ought to mistrust" (164). Paul B. Armstrong notes that although the narrator makes Paraday "an object of divinity," he also uses his relationship to the author "to assert his authority" in the power games he plays with the literary world (103). Along similar lines, Marc DaRosa accuses the narrator of "seeking to occupy the author's position—of replacing Paraday's story with his own. The accusation that the narrator brings against those who profit from the author's presence by 'perching on the shoulders of his renown' ...is thus entirely applicable to his own relation to the master" (841). Throughout the criticism of the story, the narrator is read as selfish, inefficient, and, more recently, motivated by a jealous desire to protect his homosocial intimacy with Paraday (Person 189, King 22). None of

these points are fundamentally misguided. Clearly the narrator gains a great deal from his relationship to Paraday: he witnesses the production of art from a tantalizingly close vantage point, his proximity to fame allows him to meet suggestible young women, and his experience purchases him the authority necessary to hold the reader's attention. He is a failure at virtually every project he attempts, whether that be journalism or protecting Paraday and his work from the dangers of publicity. He is manipulative and even sadistic in his relationship with the woman he will eventually marry. Most importantly, as I will point out later, James repeatedly gives us clues that we ought to question the narrator's belief that Paraday understands himself to be a self-abnegating monk of literature devoted solely to his craft.

Perhaps, however, we should momentarily set aside this heap of evidence and innuendo and ask whether the story sanctions an exclusively hostile reading of its narrator. There is, of course, a long history of reading James' first-person tales using such a hermeneutics of suspicion: Edmund Wilson's psychoanalytic take on *The Turn of the Screw* and Wayne Booth's presentation of *The Aspern Papers* as a model of narrative unreliability are two of the most famous examples. However, "The Death of the Lion" is a different beast. The governess has to be read, even by her defenders, as being at the very least obsessive and terrified in a way that potentially clouds her judgment, and the *Aspern* narrator displays a blatant amoral covetousness that makes him easy to condemn. Both of those tales cannot be read sensibly if they are not read suspiciously. By way of contrast, in the "Death of the Lion" the narrator is neither a puritanical neurotic nor an acquisitive antiquarian, and we miss much of what James is trying to do in the story if we are entirely unsympathetic to its narrator.

In his notebooks, James clearly has in mind a story that will satirize the culture of celebrity that his narrator also loathes: "If I can devise a little action, a little story, that will fit and express the phenomenon I mean, I think the thing would be really worth while. The phenomenon is the one that is brought home to one every day of one's life by

the ravenous autograph-hunters, lion-hunters, exploiters of publicity; in whose number one gets the impression that a person knowing and *loving* the thing itself, the work, is simply never to be found” (148). The narrator, throughout the tale, is James’ mouthpiece for precisely these opinions. It is left to him to describe his editor, Mr. Pinhorn, as a man “whose own sincerity took the form of ringing door-bells and whose definition of genius was the art of finding people at home” (256). It is he who describes a reporter carrying his notebook “slightly behind him, even as the dentist approaching his victim keeps the horrible forceps” (263). He notes at the country house party that all the guests who lionize Paraday without having read him are passing around a volume that is “rather smudgy about the twentieth page” (276), and on the exit of the Princess who is the most celebrated guest at the party, he says, “She departed as promptly as if a revolution had broken out” (282). James, when planning, felt that the “The whole intention of the story should be admirably satiric, ironic,” (148), and his narrator is generally the instrument rather than the object of that satire. In short, then, we miss out on James’ initial stated intention for this story—namely, to satirize a literary world full of mindless hero worship—if we dismiss the narrator based on our judgment of his moral failings. This is not to say that there are not moments in the story where we should read against or around the narrator, as indeed I will do later in this section, for James’ narrators are obviously never just his mouthpieces. However, it does not seem to me that this narrator is untrustworthy in the same *prima facie* manner that we see in some of his other, more famous, first-person tales. This narrator already understands himself to be an ironist and a satirist, and when James in turn ironizes him, it is necessarily through subtle operations.

It is my contention that most of these subtle operations are transacted through the narrator’s understanding of art. On the topic of the public sphere at large, all of James’ notebook scribbles about the triviality of literary celebrity suggest that the narrator’s opinions are by and large shared by his creator. James differentiates himself from the narrator, however, on the issue of how a reader ought to characterize the experience of



encountering art in the act of intimate, careful reading, and how that characterization in turn impacts the expectations the reader places on the author. Even as he mocks the shallow or lazy readers around him, the narrator is as dedicated as they are to understanding art as mystified or sacred: when the utterly ridiculous Mr. Morrow says that he wants to visit the “literary sanctum” of Paraday’s workshop, it is telling that even as he recoils from the suggestion, the narrator thinks of the same space as a “consecrated workshop” (264). Where the majority of the characters in the story want novelists to present themselves for appearances and lectures like an itinerant sermonizer, the narrator’s similar beliefs lead him to expect that Paraday should behave like a mendicant friar in the service of art. Peeking out meekly from behind all these demands are the few occasions where we get some glimpse of what Paraday thinks of all this, and in those moments James lets us see that the demands of both the public and the narrator are unreasonable. The narrator is not untrustworthy in the sense that he is baldly immoral, nor is he unreliable in the sense that he drastically misperceives his surroundings. However, his belief that art is an escape from life rather than an embrace of it should be sufficient to guide us to cast a wary eye upon him. The narrator, like Stransom or the narrator of “The Figure in the Carpet”, is a character whose aesthetic obsessions lead him away from an ethos of living all you can, and thus he too becomes a limit case in James’ ruminations on the value of mystifying the aesthetic.

As with “The Figure in the Carpet”, which was written only a year after this story, James begins the tale in the office of a literary journal. The narrator tells us that a change in ownership of the unnamed periodical he writes for had recently taken place, and that he had been kept on only because, like the furniture, he came relatively cheap (255). His new editor, Mr. Pinhorn, is described in mock-heroic terms as having accepted the “high mission” of saving a paper “which had been supposed to be almost past redemption” (255). Pinhorn believes that his writers should try to do “personal” articles on their subjects because “an immediate exposure of everything [was] just what the public

wanted” (256). To this end, the narrator sets off to do a story on the political opinions of “Lord Crouchley” and an interview with a “Mrs. Bounder, who gave me, on the subject of her divorce, many curious particulars that had not been articulated in court” (256-7).<sup>24</sup> In an effort to do more serious work, however, he proposes to Pinhorn an article about Neil Paraday. “I remember how he looked at me—quite, to begin with, as if he had never heard of this celebrity, who indeed, at that moment was by no means in the center of the heavens” (255). Nevertheless, the narrator is dispatched to do the interview, but once he has met Paraday, the article he writes focuses almost entirely on the man’s work instead of the man: “I had been sent down to be personal and then in point of fact hadn’t been personal at all: what I had dispatched to London was just a little finicking feverish study of my author’s talent” (258). Pinhorn is unsurprisingly unhappy with the piece, and his replying note “was not only a rebuke decidedly stern, but an invitation immediately to send him—it was the case to say so—the genuine article” (258).

Again, while so much of the critical argument about how we ought to read the narrator has been either moralistic or, more recently, sexual, I would contend that the real crux of the issue lies in how we are to understand a narrator who is given to puns. One effect of opening the story with a string of wisecracks at the expense of such obvious fools is to create sympathy in the reader for a narrator who seems affable and perceptive. My contention, however, is that the sympathy created here through the narrator’s obvious sarcasm is a tool James uses to reel us in before he later works against his narrator with smaller ironies.

This satiric tone continues into a passage where the narrator jokingly spiritualizes his own textual productions. After being critiqued for his unsatisfactory article, the narrator explains that he only stopped himself from writing the “personal” article of Pinhorn’s

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<sup>24</sup>James’ names for characters can often seem a little perverse (Fleda Vetch, Rowland Mallet, etc), but in this story, the exceedingly silly names seem to be part of a conscious strategy to help create the aforementioned comic tone. James rarely gives us a bouquet of names so pungent as Paraday, Pinhorn, Crouchley, Bounder, Fanny Hurter, the male Dora Forbes, the female Guy Walsingham, and the wealthy Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, who dispenses her favors from an estate called “Prestidge”.

preference because

a miracle—as pretty as some old miracle of legend—had been wrought on the spot to save me. There had been a big brush of wings, the flash of an opaline robe, and then, with a great cool stir of the air, the sense of an angel’s having swooped down and caught me to his bosom. He held me only till the danger was over, and it all took place in a minute. With my manuscript back on my hands I understood the phenomenon better, and the reflexions I made on it are what I meant, at the beginning of this anecdote, by my change of heart. (258)

The mock-visitation the narrator stages in this passage is quite intricate and dramatic. The angel that appears to him is fleshed out for the reader in a single sentence through auditory, visual, and tactile descriptions (“big brush of wings”; “flash”; “great cool stir”). This is followed by a melodramatic sentence in which the angel cradles the narrator to protect him from the temptation of writing to please Pinhorn, and then, the danger having passed, leaves him and his outcast manuscript to take their solitary way. All this is clearly ironic enough on its own, but what is most striking about the passage is that an angel visits a writer in order to stop him from writing. The narrator tropes the commonplace of a visitation from the muse as a way of admitting that he, unlike Paraday, is no true artist, since art is best served not by loosening his stops, but by shutting him up. However, the passage also serves as a capstone to James’ tendency throughout this first section to play with popular terminologies for spiritualizing literary production. When the narrator speaks of Pinhorn’s editorial position being a “high mission”, or when he talks of the obscure Paraday existing far from “the centre of the heavens” (255), the intended humor is based around the arrogance inherent in the widespread but unexamined metaphors by which the literary world understands itself.

And yet, the passage ends on a much more serious note in the description of the narrator’s “change of heart”, which is narrated as a conversion to a belief in the sanctity of Neil Paraday’s fiction. In fact, after a section break, the next paragraph is saturated with the same types of spiritual metaphors that previously were ironized, but this time the narrator uses them with the utmost sobriety. The narrator tells us that he has continued to

visit Paraday, and “I was frankly, at the end of three days, a very prejudiced critic, so that one morning when, in the garden, my great man had offered to read me something I held my breath as I listened” (259). This comes two sentences after the aforementioned pun on the phrase “genuine article”, and the narrator’s hairpin turn from drollery to rapt breathlessness suggests the degree of his “change of heart”. As he plays out this garden scene, a creation of remarkable beauty is placed before him. Paraday reads him the “written scheme of another book” which will be his next project:

Loose liberal confident, it might have passed for a great gossiping eloquent letter—the overflow into talk of an artist’s amorous plan. The theme I thought singularly rich, quite the strongest he had yet treated, and this familiar statement of it, full too of fine maturities, was really, in summarized splendour, a mine of gold, a precious independent work. I remember rather profanely wondering whether the ultimate production could possibly keep at the pitch...It was a high distinction simply to be told such things. The idea he now communicated had all the freshness, the flushed fairness, of the conception untouched and untried: it was Venus rising from the sea and before the airs had blown upon her. I had never been so throbbingly present at such an unveiling. (259)

This is worth quoting at length to emphasize the tonal difference between the sublime appearance of Venus here and the narrator’s earlier wrestling match with the angel of journalistic integrity. The narrator is deeply moved by Paraday’s manuscript, and the only way he can think of to do it justice is to compare it either to vast sums of money or the birth of a deity. Interestingly, James, as discussed above, will repeat all of these metaphors a year later in “The Figure in the Carpet”. There too the aesthetic is figured variously as a treasure, an unveiling, or the appearance of Venus, and James’ fixation on these ideas suggests just how committed he was, even or perhaps especially at this mid-nineties moment of professional crisis, to finding a terminology that would express the inherent value of art. The narrator is deeply stirred by what he has heard; indeed, more than just stirred, he uses the phrase “throbbingly present” to suggest how deeply Paraday’s presentation has resonated. What this story shares with “The Figure in the Carpet”, then, beyond just a similarity in metaphors, is a strategy of basing a story around

an exalted, obsessed-about aesthetic artifact (Paraday's manuscript, Vereker's secret), but then putting that artifact offstage so that the reader does not see it directly, but instead sees it reflected and refracted through the responses of the audience within the story. As such, these stories do not represent art so much as the experience of encountering and being moved by art. James clearly wants to represent the anxieties of the artist in this story, with its wish-fulfilling image of an artist who has "come into [his] second wind" (260), but he is also concerned with mapping the emotional landscape of reading, and the language of religious experience that pervades these stories is part of an attempt to suggest something commensurate to those emotions.

The story, then, is about the subjective, emotional dimensions of aesthetic reception, and this brings us around, once again, to William James in the *Varieties*. Perhaps the most telling portion of that book for my present purpose is James' discussion of "saintliness", where he again insists, as he does throughout the book, that "religious experience" is most authentically understood as "that which lives itself out within the private breast" (335). Against the religious virtuosi who have such primary experiences, James insists, the mass of men "live at second hand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn" (337). Henry James, however, repeatedly writes about a type of character—the dedicated reader—who tries to locate himself between the virtuoso and the masses. The great dream of the dedicated reader, whether his dedication is to a sacred text or a literary one, is that somehow he will move beyond the second-hand distance of the masses and be granted a vision of the interiority, the intentions, the very experience of the creator; that somehow, the originary energy of creativity will be made "throbbingly present" to him. Charles Taylor has pointed out that William James' insistence on primacy as a determinant of the genuineness of religious experience was a result of the fact that James, like us, was the product of a "culture of authenticity" (83). The artist and his audience, however, just like the evangelist and his readers, embrace a possibility that the text can be more than just a mediator, and that it can allow the reader to experience a

moment of spiritual or emotional intensity that is, in its own way, primary and authentic.

William James, of course, would not accept this, arguing instead that spiritual experience is untranslatable, for “First-hand individual experience of this kind has always appeared as a heretical sort of innovation to those who witnessed its birth,” and thus, “when a religion becomes an orthodoxy, its days of inwardness are over” (335).

For Henry James, however, it is clear that the spirituality of art is trickier. On the one hand, his description of his own artistic consciousness in his Notebooks or in “Is There a Life After Death?” suggests that only the artist can drink from the primal inspirational fount. The various critics and appreciators who appear throughout his tales, however, complicate, the picture. Several of them are buffoons, but it is also clear that, for instance, Corvick, the unnamed woman of “The Altar of the Dead”, and the narrator of this tale, have a heightened sensitivity to the art objects they love. When we are moved by art, we might ask with them, is it a primary or a secondary experience?

Michael A. Cooper speaks intelligently to this issue when he writes about the logic of discipleship that drives so many of James’ stories about writers and their admirers:

Sometimes one reads for narration (mystery stories, Harlequin Romances), sometimes for information (the newspaper, textbooks), but to read as a disciple reads is to pursue the author behind the text, and more. Disciples pursue authors, read their texts, invade their notebooks and letters, occupy their private studies, because the *authors themselves mediate* the disciples’ desire for a yet more distant object, namely the intangible and ineffable seat of power that is the author’s wisdom. (80, his italics)

Cooper’s idea that the literary disciple reads not only into but through the text strikes me as an apt description of dedicated readership as James represents it, but it seems to me that those readers search for something more than just the “wisdom” Cooper cites here, (though certainly that is part of what they seek). To return to the passage where Paraday reads his sketch, it is clear that what excites the narrator is his proximity to the birth of beauty. In “Is There a Life After Death?”, James claims that, when he is writing, “I find myself—I can’t express it otherwise—in communication with *sources*; sources to which I

owe the apprehension of far more and far other combinations than observation and experience, in their ordinary sense, have given me the pattern of” (224). When Corvick discovered the figure in the carpet, he presumably understood the wisdom by which Vereker had set his cosmos in order, but the narrator of this story, when he hears the plan for Paraday’s novel, catches a glimpse of the moment of inspiration in which an unformed beauty is born. The narrator jokes that angels visit him only to stop his pen, but Paraday witnesses in full view the appearance of goddesses, and the narrator hopes that his literary discipleship can let him share in that moment at which the “sources” are apprehended. It is not only wisdom he seeks, then, but a readerly equivalent to the moment of artistic creation.

If nothing else, the tonal shift between the narrator’s ironic tone when metaphorsizing the journalistic arena and the reverent tone he applies to literature suggests that he sees Paraday’s work, and, indeed, art in general, as existing on a higher, sacrosanct plane. Much of the drama of the rest of the story is the narrator’s attempt to create for himself, the devoted reader, a right of entry into that sacred space.

It is not until after the narrator has heard Paraday read his manuscript that James presents an actual conversation between the two men. The narrator addresses Paraday as “my dear master”, which certainly suggests a different type of relationship than the one he had with Pinhorn (359) The narrator is worried, however, that Paraday will not have the time or isolation necessary to complete his new work. “It’s infinitely noble,” he says, “but what time it will take, what patience and independence, what assured, what perfect conditions! Oh, for a lone isle in a tepid sea” (259). The narrator, then, imagines that the artist must be monastic to be successful. Paraday, interestingly, does not openly agree or disagree with this, but instead chides himself for not taking full advantage of his time, and quips, “Isn’t this practically a lone isle, and aren’t you, as an encircling medium, tepid enough?” (259) This sets up a pattern that will run throughout the story, as the narrator fanatically insists that the author must seek solitude and work, while Paraday

jokes about his own laxity and becomes an increasingly public person. His good humor suggests first that James wants to create a character who we can believe is a lively manipulator of language, but it also gives the reader a sense that Paraday is trying to avoid having to deal directly with the narrator's concerns. Though he does not pick a fight on the point, his attempt to blow off his admirer's concerns with a joke implies that he does not agree with the narrator's belief that a novelist must be an absolute ascetic.<sup>25</sup>

The narrator, however, is blithely unaware of this tension, and the events that follow this scene cause him to voice an even greater concern over Paraday's privacy. After the two men are done talking, they pick up a copy of a periodical called *The Empire* and discover that it has published a rave review of Paraday's new book. Suddenly, he is no longer obscure. The magazine "fired, as if on the birth of a prince, a salute of a whole column. The guns had been booming these three hours in the house without our suspecting them. The big blundering newspaper had discovered him, and now he was anointed and crowned" (261). This is, intriguingly, the second birth metaphor James uses in the space of three pages, but here the birth that is represented is not that of Venus but of a prince. Where the birth of Venus is mythological, aesthetic, mystified, and outside history, the birth of a prince is political, ritualistic, public, and historical. The narrator, to be sure, is horrified. He feels that "a fat usher with a wand" has directed Paraday "away up to the dais and the throne" because "a national glory was needed, and it was an immense convenience he was there" (261). His horror, then, is due to the fact that what he views as the private sphere of high art has been invaded by the public sphere of politics, celebrity, and hollow secularity. Paraday obviously cannot have his lonely, quiet isle if the guns of critical celebration are thundering around him: "I felt as if he had been overtaken on the crest of a hill and brought back to the city. A little more and he would have dipped down the short cut to posterity and escaped" (261).

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<sup>25</sup>Paul B. Armstrong says more bluntly that "Speaking for Paraday without listening to him, [the narrator] claims to know his interests better than the author does" (104).



However, it is not only authorial privacy that he is worried about, but also, quite significantly, readerly privacy. Indeed, it is telling that in the above quote the narrator values “posterity”, the realm where judgments are made by cloistered scholarly readers, over the contemporary mass public. Along the same lines, the narrator says that when he realized the new popularity that awaited Paraday, “In a flash, somehow, all was different; the tremendous wave I speak of had swept something away. It had knocked down, I suppose, my customary little altar, my twinkling tapers and my flowers, and had reared itself into a temple vast and bare” (261). The warm private sanctuary of the cult reader, then, is overwhelmed by the cold, empty space of a broader public, and also, given all the language of nationalism in this passage, civil religion. The narrator, to be sure, is primarily worried that his frail friend will be overwhelmed by new demands, but his elaborate metaphors suggest that behind his entire understanding of art lies a belief that private, lonely, obsessive reading gets one closest to the authentic core of the literary work, and that literary worshippers in a vast public temple will never have the direct experience of the aesthetic object that one might have in the small, candle-lit chapel of critical discipleship.

The narrator, in the face of these new obstacles, undertakes to protect Paraday from the distractions of publicity, and his first challenge comes in the person of a hack journalist named Morrow, whose glasses, in a wonderful, proto-Fitzgerald metaphor, “suggested the electric headlights of some monstrous modern ship” (262). Morrow attempts at one point to grab Paraday’s manuscript, but the narrator is able to save it in time. Morrow says that he wishes to enter into what he calls Paraday’s “literary sanctum”, but the narrator will not let him into what he calls the “consecrated workshop” (264). Obviously, these terms feel a bit different depending on whether the character using them is attempting to violate or guard a sacred space, but what is most significant is that for both men, this language is accepted as natural. Moreover, the terminology serves to underscore the fact that the narrator has a fair amount of power in his new role. Since

he has access to that sanctum as Paraday's friend, he is able to serve as a sort of gatekeeper.

If he is able to protect Paraday from thieving critics, however, the narrator is not able to protect him from fame. Soon his books are selling well, and he is widely seen as a "revelation" (266). The narrator worries more about Paraday's future work, for "success was a complication and recognition had to be reciprocal. The monastic life, the pious illumination of the missal in the convent-cell were things of the gathered past" (267). He is utterly serious when he compares novelists to monks, and seems convinced that art must be produced by an utter withdrawal from life. A paragraph before, however, James provides a counter-weight to this claim when he has Paraday put his public obligations in a positive light by noting that "observation too was a kind of work and experience a kind of success; London dinners were all material and London ladies were fruitful toil" (267). The narrator dismisses this claim as a "portable sophistry", but it is less clear that James wants us to do the same. Certainly, Henry James as we know him would not exist if not for his observations of London's ladies and dinners. The narrator's hostility to life is troubling, and troubling not from a sober moralistic point of view, but from the point of view of James' own sense of the artist's obligation to observe. This is underscored when he notes without comment that Paraday "once told me he had had no personal life to speak of since his fortieth year, but had had more than was good for him before" (267). James does not give us much direct access to Paraday in the story, but when he gives us brief glimpses, they suggest a man who is frankly a bit lonely. That the narrator's obsession with Paraday's art blinds him to the man is perhaps not damning, but it does indicate a certain lack of generosity and fellow-feeling. James works in much smaller effects here than he does in the other stories I look at in this chapter, but in all of them, characters who attach a grave spiritual importance to aesthetics tend to be hostile toward life.

For much of the story, it feels as though the narrator is preparing himself to be a

priest in the church of Paraday, so it is only a matter of time before he finds the first member of his congregation. A young American woman named Fanny Hurter<sup>26</sup> arrives at Paraday's door seeking an autograph. The narrator implies that generally he would just turn away such a person, but this time he decides to "catechise" her, thus taking "my duty to the great author" more "seriously" than he had before (269). He convinces her that the best way to pay homage to Paraday is to swear never to see him in person, and instead to encounter him exclusively through his works. He decides that he needs to "make her my peculiar charge, just as circumstances had made Neil Paraday. She would be another person to look after, so that one's honour would be concerned in guiding her straight" (269). He thus sets himself up as a mediator between Fanny and the author, and she for her part is happy to be "one of the enthusiasts", and to have "the chance of some great sacrifice" (270). The narrator goes on to tell her that Paraday is "beset, badgered, bothered", and that her goal should be to "admire him in silence, cultivate him at a distance and secretly appropriate his message" (271). He proposes to her, in short, that she should be the literary equivalent of what William James calls a "second-hand" religious worshipper, basing her faith not on a primary experience of the man but on textual equivalents. He then goes on to tell her, "in illustration of my point, the little incident of my having gone down into the country for a profane purpose and been converted on the spot to holiness" (272). He becomes, in this moment, no mere priest, but in fact the literary equivalent of St. Paul, as he recounts his transformation from a journalistic oppressor of art to its great champion and proselytizer. While the narrator's explicit motive in deterring Fanny is to protect Paraday from autograph hounds, his implicit motive can be sensed when she agrees to his suggestion, but nevertheless sighs that while he has a point, he, at least, gets to see the great author (272). The narrator, by

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<sup>26</sup>It is worth noting that James had once planned to use the name "Hurter" for the estranged parents of *What Maisie Knew*, which arguably could suggest, given the callousness of those characters, that James had in mind the idea that Fanny had the potential to harm Paraday, and wished to suggest as much through the pun in her name (1947, 134).

emphasizing his conversion narrative and his proximity to Paraday, has foregrounded his status as one who has had a comparatively primary experience of literary grace. Not only does he, like Fanny, have access to the emotional experience of Paraday's texts; he has a further personal connection that affords him power over the rank and file.

There is much, though, that is hard to read in this passage. For starters, James is having a great deal of fun with Fanny's youthful earnestness, particularly in the moment when she is worried that the real reason Paraday will not be seen is because he has "some disfigurement" (271). Moreover, the narrator is motivated by two different attractions in this section: first, his deep connection to Paraday, which he wants to keep safe from any outside influence; and second, the obvious sexual attraction to Fanny that motivates him to talk to her at length and, eventually, to marry her. As Fanny goes on with her project of reading Paraday intensely while not meeting him, she and the narrator set out on an odd courtship, during which "the generous creature's sacrifice was fed by our communion" (273). By reading Paraday, the narrator believes in a rather Arnoldian fashion that Fanny receives "an education in decency" as she "seeks him in his works even as God in nature." He also details the "touching feats of submission" she performs<sup>27</sup> in order to avoid seeing Paraday (273). The narrator is certain that Fanny's self-control is a profound act of readerly ethics, but the couple's absolute seriousness in this section is so hyperbolic that the effect is primarily comic. They do not come in for the sort of sharp satire James directs at newspaper reporters earlier in the story, but there is a warmly ironic sense here that the little church of two they have constructed is something of a *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea of a religion of art. Again, the issue is not that James constructs this story so as to morally condemn its narrator, but rather that he subtly

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<sup>27</sup>It is also important to note how much of this submissiveness is performed for her beau's benefit, particularly when, at the opera, the narrator, "to torment her tenderly", offers her a looking glass through which she could see Paraday. She refuses, and "looked at me in charged silence, letting me see that tears had gathered in her eyes. These tears, I may remark, produced an effect on me of which the end is not yet" (273). It would take me far from my topic to discuss this scene at length, but with its muted domination game, this is certainly one of James' most memorably odd erotic scenes.

indicates his awareness that these spiritualizing metaphors, can, when taken too far, feel much too heavy for their task.

The final act of the story tonally resembles the first, as a satire of the wealthy people at a country house party takes the place of the earlier satire of journalists. The narrator's nemesis on this occasion, however, is more than a match for him. Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, the owner of an estate called "Prestidge", takes it upon herself to give great authors the token of prestige that comes from an extended stay at her house. She takes a liking to Paraday, and soon invites him to give a reading to her other summer guests. The narrator, however, feels this is a disastrous decision, for any time spent wining and dining will be time Paraday is not spending on his work. Even if only a small volume were to come of his efforts, the narrator is certain that it would be a book "which, for the faithful, might well become an object of adoration" (273). The guests at Prestidge, however, are most assuredly not the faithful. The guests all claim a great affinity for Paraday even though they have not read his work, and when the author falls mortally ill, he is quickly and quietly replaced by a different writer who can perform the function of giving a reading just as easily. When Paraday does in fact die, Mrs. Wimbush's reputation is greatly enhanced by the perception that she had lent him "the most beautiful of her numerous homes to die in" (282). Most significantly, the great sketch that had produced the narrator's conversion by giving him a vision of the very birth of Venus, is lost through a series of foolish mishaps wherein one person passes to another without having read it, and finally a Lord Dorimont accidentally leaves "the mystic scroll" on a train, and it is never again found (280).

Neil Paraday dies without knowing that his sketch has been lost; indeed, the most touching moment in the story comes when the narrator, having just learned that the blessed document has disappeared, lies to Paraday on his deathbed by promising that he will see to the publication of the fragment. It is interesting, though, that for the most part the author is nonplussed by all the slights to his presumed divinity that so infuriate the

narrator. When Mrs. Wimbush has arranged for Paraday to have his portrait done, for instance, the narrator recalls that his own objections to the imposition on the author's time were not necessarily shared: "Paraday had been promptly caught and saddled, accepting with characteristic good humour his confidential hint that to figure in [the painter's] show was not so much a consequence as a cause of immortality" (274). Again, James gives us only a glimpse of his attitude, but that glimpse suggests that Paraday, unlike the narrator, knows that art is not inherently sacred. It is taken to be sacred only because a culture decides that it ought to be, and Wimbush's artificial puffery is as much a "cause" of that canonization as is the narrator's apostolic devotion. Every time we see Paraday, he is the very picture of "good humour", and the contrast between this and the ever-heightening seriousness of the narrator's rhetoric sits at the core of the tale's comic effects.

The point is not that it is utterly incorrect to say that art can be a secular form of the sacred: indeed, that very idea is so central to so many of James' own critical pronouncements that he obviously believed it. As the narrator becomes a full devotee to the church of Paraday, however, he loses the sense of irony that colors his metaphorical play earlier in the story. Paraday, on the other hand, is a figure of levity. The writing of fiction is the most important thing in his life, but he retains a generous humor about it. The narrator of this story does not lose his perspective about aesthetics in the dark, myopic manner James represents in the narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet", but he does at times lose his sense of humor. With his narrator on one hand and Paraday on the other, James is able to express two different sides of his own aesthetic sensibility: the belief that aesthetic experience is commensurate to religious experience, and the belief that the artist must be humorously and generously open to the world. These two ideas, through the very ambivalence of their coexistence, motivate the basic philosophical conflicts that drive not only this story, but a substantial majority of James' short fiction throughout the mid-nineties.

### *Section Five: Conclusion*

Marianne Moore wrote in 1934 that “Henry James seems to have been haunted by awareness that rapacity destroys what it is successful in acquiring” (1986, 321). As we shall see in the next chapter, Moore had rapacity on the brain in the 1930’s. “The Jerboa”, “Half-Deity”, and “Virginia Britannia” are all, in different ways, poems about how attempts to control a beautiful thing will inevitably destroy it. James too wrote about issues of control throughout his career. Who will acquire the treasures of Poynton? Will Lambert Strether follow the orders of Mrs. Newsome? Can the Governess protect Miles and Flora? The stories I have examined in this chapter are about rapacity and control, not only in the obvious sense that certain characters seek to discover or protect a sanctified aesthetic object, but also in the sense that these characters are motivated by a desire to shut the world out of their moments of spiritual insight. Stransom allows only one other person access to the true meaning of his altar; Corvick essentially writes his literary discovery into a prenuptial agreement; and the narrator of “The Death of the Lion” jealously guards his own access to Paraday. A search for spiritual experience as defined in American terms—as a private experience of something divine or otherworldly—is perhaps inherently rapacious, since experiences of this type are incommunicable, and therefore can be stored up in the coffers of the imagination, but can never be distributed. One recurrent concern about the sacralization of art, for Moore and Stevens as well as James, is the fear it will lead to writing that is too divorced from reality to be able to say anything meaningful about the world. James, as we have seen, uses the characters in his short stories to express his own worries about the navel-gazing tendencies of the religion of art, but I agree with Moore that, whatever James’ concerns, his prose is finally a place where we go in order to see reality more vividly:

Things for Henry James glow, flush, glimmer, vibrate, shine, hum, bristle, reverberate. Joy, bliss, ecstasies, intoxication, a sense of trembling in every limb, a shattering first glimpse, a hanging on the prolonged silence of an editor...the bonfires of his imagination, his pleasure in the “tender green sea” or “rustling rose-color” of a seriously best dress, are too live to countenance his fear that he was giving us “an inch of canvas and an acre of embroidery.” (317)



## Chapter Two

### Marianne Moore's Poetics of the Fall

#### *Section One: Introduction*

Over the past fifteen years, increasing attention has been paid by scholars to the religious character of Marianne Moore's poetry.<sup>28</sup> What is not often stated directly, however, is that for someone as religious as Moore, whose letters and notebooks are full of prayers, quotes from sermons, and theological reflections, she makes her readers work relatively hard to recognize the Protestant archetypes, attitudes, and beliefs that fill her poems. She certainly does not announce herself as a religious poet in the manner of Herbert or Hopkins, two poets she deeply admired. More to the point, she is reticent even when compared to poets of her own milieu: next to *Four Quartets* or "Sunday Morning", for instance, poems like "The Steeple Jack" or "The Pangolin" imply rather than explicate a spiritual sensibility. With her elaborate depictions of animals and art objects, Moore may always have been more Eliotic than Eliot in her stratagems of self-effacement, but this was especially true when her poetry touched upon her religious beliefs. As she herself once wrote at the start of one of her essays, "Feeling at its deepest—as we all have reason to know—tends to be inarticulate" (1986, 396).

And yet, one might ask, if deep feeling "tends to be inarticulate", why write poetry? Particularly when the poetry one writes is so bookish and polysyllabic—so inescapably articulate? Throughout her poems, Moore poses to herself the problem of whether a medium as complicated as poetry can convey "feeling at its deepest." This is certainly an aesthetic question, but for Moore it is a spiritual one as well, and it is an issue that puts

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<sup>28</sup>Though the criticism focusing on the role of religion in Moore's poetry is not voluminous, it has grown more substantial in recent years. Since Jeredith Merrin's *An Enabling Humility* appeared in 1990, there have been a few articles written on Moore's Protestantism, most notably pieces by Merrin, Eliza New, Andrew Kappel, and Jennifer Leader.

her in a conversation with a long tradition of writing emerging from the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, if any one aspect of Moore's poetry shows her debt to the Protestant writing of Seventeenth Century England, it is her tendency to write difficult poems that celebrate the virtues of simple truth. At the beginning of "Jordan (I)", George Herbert asks, "Who says that fictions and false hair/ Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?" (1-2). Later in the poem, he further laments the complications of art, asking, "Must all be veiled, while he that reads, divines,/ Catching the sense at two removes?" (9-10).<sup>29</sup> Moore's version of this sentiment can be seen near the end of her 1919 poem "In the Days of Prismatic Color", where she figures sophistication as a monster lumbering from its lair. She writes, "In the short-legged, fit-/ ful advance, the gurgling and all the minutiae—we have the classic/ multitude of feet. To what purpose! Truth is no Apollo/ Belvedere, no formal thing" (24-7). What is striking about these examples is that the excessive complexity that both poets attack could easily and justly be ascribed to their own poems. Throughout his work, Herbert's dense metaphors require his reader to do precisely the sort of "divining" that he bemoans, and few poets have ever burdened their "multitudes of feet" with so much trivia, reference, and "minutiae" as Moore (though I am less sure we can accuse her of "gurgling").

Moore's poetry repeatedly gives voice to ideals of simplicity or plainness only to acknowledge, and even find joy in, the fact that the necessary artificiality of art eliminates any hope of naturalness, simplicity, or direct unironic expression. She searches, like the Protestant observer that she is, for clarity in the world and in her writing, only to recognize that her lot is to seek rather than understand. In the era of "no ideas but in things", this is certainly a central problem of modernist aesthetics, but in Moore's work it also takes us to the heart of her religious beliefs. Moore's Protestant sensibilities show through most clearly when she describes culture itself as dandified, corrupt, and idolatrous, and dramatizes her doomed attempts to imagine some

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<sup>29</sup>For more on Moore's interest in Herbert, see Merrin (1990, 5-6).

straightforward and even pre-lapsarian simplicity that could stand in contrast. Like Herbert's poems, her work is filled with a sense of her own complicity in artifice and embeddedness in culture. Simplicity is a central ideal for Moore, but she never escapes the sense that this ideal is unrealizable by an artist tainted by the imperfection and self-consciousness of fallen humanity. At the same time, however, she also recognizes that this fallenness is fortunate in that it allows for the inventiveness of art, the fortitude of the seeker, and the revelation of aesthetic and theological grace.

In this chapter, I explore the themes of fallenness and grace in Moore's poetry of the 1930's. First, I look at "The Jerboa", a poem which ruminates on the inherent imprecision of art while simultaneously describing a small desert rat. Then, I analyze *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, a five-poem book which is Moore's longest consideration of the question of whether poetry, with its inherent artificiality, can adequately reflect or represent divine grace. In these poems, Moore shares James' worries about the covetousness that can stem from aesthetic appreciation, and like Stevens, she hopes poetry can help its readers perceive order and meaning in the world. She differs from these two writers, however, in that she was a practicing member of an organized religion. For Moore, art is secular not because there is no God, but because there *is* a God, and artistic creativity necessarily pales in comparison to divine creation. Like many Protestant intellectuals since Calvin, Moore flirts with dualism in her understanding of the relationship between God and the world. The more monistic and even gnostic Emersonian inheritance that runs through the work of James and Stevens is less significant for Moore, who can be better understood within the framework of Twentieth Century Neoorthodox theology, in particular the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr. In the following section, I describe Moore's interest in Niebuhr's work, and thus provide an important intellectual context for my subsequent readings of Moore's poetry.

*Section Two: “Unprotected Profundity of Experience”*

Thus far, I have avoided attaching any specific label to Moore’s religion beyond the vague “Protestant”. In criticism published in the last two decades, “Calvinist” has often been used as the default shorthand term for her beliefs. Jeredith Merrin, the first critic to pay extended attention to religion in Moore, bases her analysis around Moore’s “Calvinist inheritance” (1997, 91). Luke Carson points to Moore’s “deeply rooted Calvinist and civic republican values” (317), and Linda Leavell writes of “the Calvinist beliefs to which [Moore] and her family subscribed” (228). The term has some explanatory force. Moore’s poems repeatedly valorize hard work and fortitude, obsess over human fallibility, and engage in close observation of the natural world, all of which are, as described most famously by Max Weber, characteristics of a Calvinist mindset or ethic. Moreover, Moore, as a lifelong Presbyterian, was raised as a member of the only major American denomination that was still substantially and directly influenced by Calvinist theology into the early Twentieth Century.<sup>30</sup> Moore’s mother was deeply pious, and taught her children that they had been sent on a vital spiritual errand, as can be seen in a letter in which she urges them to remember that “we three are ‘a Peculiar people;’ that is, acc. to the Scriptures, a people *set apart*” (quoted in Merrin 1997, 94). Perhaps most importantly, Moore repeatedly read and referenced the work of Seventeenth

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<sup>30</sup>After the Second Great Awakening, most American denominations moved away from staunch Calvinism as they became more amenable to the idea of salvation through works and the belief that one could directly experience God’s grace. Presbyterianism, however, retained many Calvinist beliefs much longer than most other churches. For a description of the Calvinistic adherence of various branches of Presbyterianism from the Civil War to World War I, see Gary Scott Smith (11-22). For an account of the decidedly Calvinist Princeton Theological Seminary, and its “loyal opposition” to the dominant American Protestant trends of the late Nineteenth Century, see Mark A. Noll (1985, 15). For a perspective on the evolution of Presbyterianism in the mid-Twentieth Century, see Walter Lingle’s 1944 *Presbyterians: Their History and Beliefs* and Andrew C. Zenos’ 1937 *Presbyterianism in America*. These last two books are of interest because both aim to explain Presbyterian beliefs to a lay audience, and both disavow much of Calvinism—most notably the belief in predestination—even as both also insist that Calvin remains a major influence on the church (see Lingle 84-5, Zenos 176-7). Though his focus is much tighter, tracing the course of a single Chicago congregation through the entire Twentieth Century, historian James K. Wellman’s analysis of the evolution of Mainline Protestantism in *The Gold Coast Church and the Ghetto* is excellent (see espec. 25-37).

Century writers like Bunyan, Baxter, and Milton, and their influence can be seen throughout her poems, particularly, as we shall see, in “The Jerboa”.

In spite of all this, I want to qualify the term “Calvinist” for a number of reasons. It is an imprecise and overloaded term that is of only limited use in describing a well-educated American Protestant of the Twentieth Century. Moore was certainly not a Calvinist in the sense that she adhered to the theology of John Calvin (predestination, for instance, seems to have held little interest). Nor was she, like Jonathan Edwards, obsessed with the fires of hell, and the modern use of small-c calvinist (dour, rigid, pompously moralistic) hardly seems applicable. Moore read Calvin’s work, but in the early thirties she wrote that she was more interested in “Calvin the man of letters” than in “Calvin the theologian” (1986, 273).<sup>31</sup> Moore is clearly part of a Protestant intellectual and literary line that runs back through colonial America and into early modern England, and “The Jerboa” is vital in understanding her place in this tradition. The danger of the term “Calvinist”, however, is that it implies that Moore’s religious beliefs made her in some way anachronistic, which in fact, in early Twentieth Century America, could not be further from the truth. She is marked as a Protestant of her time by her belief in ecumenicalism, tolerance, science, civil religion, and love, both divine and human, as a force of good in a corrupt and fallen world. Moore’s spiritual interests can be seen not only in her fascination with Protestant writers from centuries past, but also in her conversations about religion with her contemporaries, both religious and secular.

For instance, while Moore’s focus on human fallibility and depravity clearly owes to her reading of Seventeenth Century English writers, these issues also have a particular

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<sup>31</sup>These phrases are from a review of *The Draft of XXX Cantos* that Moore wrote in 1931. In full, her statement reads, “And since the Cantos are scrupulous against half-truth and against *what has been thought for too long*—ought they not suggest to those who have accepted Calvin by hearsay—or heresy—that one must make a distinction between Calvin the theologian and Calvin the man of letters?” (1986, 273—italics in original). Later, in a letter to Pound, Moore elaborates, writing “I agree with you that there are substitutes for Calvin but the commentaries on the minor prophets, the letters, trouble about translators, and so on, have life.” Moore then quotes passages from Calvin that she enjoys, and then argues that even though Calvin was a political tyrant who executed heretics, “such things even if true have nothing to do with style” (1997, 260).

significance in the theological context of the Twentieth Century. Eyal Naveh notes that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many mainline American Protestant congregations had abandoned a belief in original sin for a more progressive combination of “utopian yearning for human and social perfection, with religious redemptive inspiration” (10). Many church leaders de-emphasized the more dogmatic or mysterious elements of Christianity in order to accommodate modern science or progressive social theories. Social Gospel theologians like Walter Rauschenbusch and progressive politicians like Woodrow Wilson took seriously and literally the idea that America should unite public piety with activist government as part of a redemptive mission to create a new Promised Land within history (10).

Moore, particularly in her Depression-era poetry, seems considerably less confident about the essential innocence and improvability of humankind. Her dramatization of a more tragic view of human fallibility directly parallels the rejection of liberal Christianity by some of the most important theologians of the 1930’s, most notably Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.<sup>32</sup> Tillich, for instance, attacked American denominations for their abandonment of the “numinous power” of Christian myth and sacrament in favor of “rational concepts, moral laws, and subjective emotions” (80-1), and argued that the Enlightenment had caused modern theology to lose sight of “the structural, and therefore inescapable, power of evil” (77). In Niebuhr’s work of the thirties, a critique of what he saw as the metaphysical thinness of liberal religion is a constant refrain, as when he argues that “the liberal church has been in constant danger of obscuring what is distinctive in the Christian message and creative in Christian morality. Sometimes it fell to the level of merely clothing the naturalistic philosophy and utilitarian ethics of

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<sup>32</sup>In the early twenty-first century, the idea of Protestant leaders rejecting “liberalism” has a political meaning that, it is important to note, does not apply to this earlier period. Tillich and Niebuhr were anti-liberal in the sense that they attacked the more utopian strains of Enlightenment thought (in particular, anything that hinted at a belief in human perfectibility). In terms of a modern political spectrum, however, they were decidedly to the left, as Tillich was hounded out of Germany in 1933 for his involvement in a Christian Socialist party, while Niebuhr was concerned with social justice throughout his life, and was an important early voice for civil rights.

modernity with pious phrases” (1935, 5). Martin Marty argues that Niebuhr did “more than any contemporary to revive” the doctrine of original sin (14). Specifically, Niebuhr claims that while the book of Genesis should not be taken as literal truth, the “basic motif of the myth of the Fall” was “a revelation of a tragic reality of life, [and] is attested to by every page of human history” (88).

The spiritual sensibility of Moore’s poetry, then, is strikingly similar to the most significant discourse of mid-twentieth-century mainline Protestant theology, a school of thought typically referred to as “neoorthodoxy.”<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr in particular was a figure of great interest to Moore, and he was also widely renowned in American culture generally.<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr’s fame owed to his ability to articulate what religious historian Dennis Voskuil calls “a theology for an Age of Crisis” (260). In books like 1932’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in the same year as “The Jerboa”, Niebuhr uses Reformation skepticism about salvation through works as the philosophical basis for a repudiation of utopian ideologies on both the right and left, even as he also argues that the “impossible possibility” of religious love, although incommensurate to politics, could provide the ethical impetus for a more just society.<sup>35</sup>

Moore began to read Niebuhr’s books and attend his lectures in the late 1930’s, and in the 1950’s, she carried on an occasional correspondence with him that culminated in her giving a reading to his students at Union Theological Seminary.<sup>36</sup> She found Niebuhr

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<sup>33</sup>For a concise summary of the major ideas of neoorthodoxy, see Voskuil’s chapter on the history of the movement in *Reformed Theology in America*. For a longer study, see Donald Meyer’s *The Protestant Search for Political Realism* or Naveh’s *Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Utopian Liberalism*.

<sup>34</sup>Though his star has faded in recent years, he was once considered important enough to have been placed on the cover of *Time* in 1948, to have a block of 120th Street in Manhattan named for him, to receive the President’s Medal of Freedom, and to be called, by Nathan Scott in 1975, “a towering figure in American intellectual life in the last half-century” (ix).

<sup>35</sup>For an analysis of the parallels between the political and ethical philosophies of Moore and Niebuhr, see Jennifer Leader. Leader is the only critic to have previously discussed Moore’s relationship with Niebuhr at length. Her article touches on the theological issue of fallibility that is my central concern here, but her primary focus is political, as she seeks to draw links between Niebuhr’s “dialectical methodology for theorizing social justice” and Moore’s “ethical poetry of engagement”. Both writers, Leader argues, try to discover “how to assert a just and loving truth while at the same time avoiding extremes of determinism, totalitarianism, repression, and fanaticism” (317).

<sup>36</sup>See letter dated June 9th, 1954. Rosenbach Library V.45.15. Moore’s letters to and notes on Niebuhr are

himself to be an interesting enough specimen that, while attending a lecture he gave in 1946, she described his speech patterns at the bottom of her notes, where she writes “He said strength and bul-leeve and proposition. His voice was harsh, with a dragging bark, but purposeful and indigenou<sup>s</sup>”.<sup>37</sup> His ideas compelled her to recommend his *Beyond Tragedy* to Elizabeth Bishop, and to describe to her a lecture in 1938 where:

to my satisfaction he said Christianity in comparison with the simplicity of its substitutes is complex and mysterious; that man is consequential and inconsequential; that evil is not a tempting devilry which we espouse but the exaggeration of what is in itself good and harmless; that I am not myself evil but if I expand myself into a persecuting autocrat which I present as object for general idolatry, then I sin, exaggerating reasonableness into an evil.<sup>38</sup>

Here, Moore latches onto the idea that we should never think ourselves so perfect as to believe that our efforts to be good cannot contain selfishness and even evil. This, as we shall see, is one of the central anxieties expressed in Moore’s poetry, especially but not exclusively in 1930’s poems like “The Jerboa” and “Half-Deity”, where she worries that the effort to create or understand beauty will bring with it a dangerous tendency toward covetousness and self-glorification. For neither Moore nor Niebuhr did this skepticism about human motivations lead to quietism—as Jennifer Leader notes, during the buildup to the Second World War both wrote about “the imperative need for individual and national resistance to tyranny, despite...their recognition of how easily corrupted are even the most enlightened individuals and governments” (317). Both were insistent, however, that a humble awareness of fallibility must accompany the desire to do right.

Niebuhr’s belief that we are inherently sinful, even in our most virtuous moments, continued to appeal to Moore as she continued to read his work. In 1952, for instance, she writes to Niebuhr himself in praise of his *The Irony of American History* that “As for

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housed at the Rosenbach Manuscript Library in Philadelphia, and all of them are unpublished.

<sup>37</sup>See July 14, 1946 notes on Niebuhr’s lecture at Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church. Rosenbach Library VII.09.11.

<sup>38</sup>See letter dated May 15, 1938. Rosenbach Library V.05.01. This is the third of three letters which are in part given over to a discussion of Niebuhr. The first, from Moore to Bishop, is dated May 1, 1938, and is published in Moore’s *Selected Letters*. The last two—Bishop to Moore on May 5 and Moore to Bishop on May 15—are unpublished.



certain axioms rivaling scriptures, one can but hope that print can make readers: ‘Nothing however virtuous can be accomplished alone’ and ‘even the best human actions involve some guilt’; a point that strikes me more forcibly perhaps than any other—that virtue is never unmixed.”<sup>39</sup> Moore’s sense of the power of this idea is perhaps seen most clearly in the fact that she expressed it to, of all people, Ezra Pound, at, of all times, 1946, when he had been arrested on charges of treason. She writes, “Don’t be embittered. Embitterment is a sin—a subject on which I am an authority. I wish you would let me tell you something about a sermon that Reinhold Niebuhr preached in the church near us two or three weeks ago” (1997, 461-2). The reticence of Moore’s offer to discuss Niebuhr suggests her awareness that Pound was unlikely to be interested in a Protestant theologian, but that she would mention him to Pound at all suggests the depth of her interest in Niebuhr’s work.

In 1938, Moore wrote a letter to Elizabeth Bishop in which Niebuhr and Bishop both figure in a discussion about the relationship between art and spiritual experience. Moore begins the letter by announcing, “You and Dr. Niebuhr are two abashing peaks in present experience for me. Never have I heard an abler man nor seen a more insidiously innocent and artless artifice of innuendo than in your prison meditations” (1997, 390). Moore refers here to Bishop’s short story “In Prison”, an odd production in which a first-person narrator describes, in a meticulous and chirpy voice, a masochistic desire to be imprisoned. The narrator says at the start of the story that “I already live, in relationship to society, very much as if I were in a prison” (181), and then goes on to imagine what the ideal, romantically dreary prison existence might look like, right down to the particulars of cell dimensions and tattered garments. The story is, as Moore incisively states, “insidiously innocent”, though I might add that its particular mode of insidious

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<sup>39</sup>See letter dated May 20, 1952. Rosenbach Library V.45.15. The material Moore quotes is her quoting Niebuhr to herself, as she was wont to do when someone impressed her. She does the same thing on April 8, 1955 when she writes to him, “Exhilaratingly impeccable the statement: ‘The self does not realize itself most fully when self-realization is its conscious aim.’”

innocence is the result of a narrator who combines Tom Sawyer's elaborate daydreaming with the flat tone and lucid madness of a Kafka story.

In her letter, Moore goes on for a full paragraph to praise and encourage her protégé, paying particular attention to the "close observation" in many details of the story. Then the letter takes a turn, as Moore states her reservations about Bishop's story:

On the other hand,—Dr. Niebuhr says Christianity is too much on the defensive, that it is more mysterious, more comprehensive, more lastingly deep and dependable than unsuccessfully simpler substitutes which objectors to it offer; and I feel that although large-scale "substance" runs the risk of inconsequence through aesthetic impotence, and am one of those who despise clamor about substance—to whom treatment really *is* substance—I can't help wishing you would sometime in some way, risk some unprotected profundity of experience; or since no one admits profundity of experience, some characteristic private defiance of the significantly detestable. Continuously fascinated as I am by the creativeness and uniqueness of these assemblings of yours—which are really poems—I feel responsibility against anything that might threaten you; yet fear to admit such anxiety, lest I influence you away from an essential necessity or particular strength. The golden eggs can't be dealt with theoretically, by presumptuous mass salvation formulae. But I do feel that tentativeness and interiorizing are your danger as well as your strength. (1997, 391)

As with the above letter to Pound, this passage brims with hesitation. The paragraph begins with "on the other hand," and then pivots on an "although", an "or", a "yet", a "lest", and a "but". When Moore starts this paragraph, she clearly means to qualify her preceding praise of Bishop, but it takes her almost six lines to arrive at a specific criticism, namely that "In Prison" does not "risk some unprotected profundity of experience". Moore is likely trying to protect the feelings of her younger and less accomplished friend, but more surprisingly, she seems a bit unsure of herself as she suggests this unmet goal of profundity. She worries that "substance" could undermine aesthetic achievement, suggests vaguely that Bishop attempt this new approach "sometime in some way", and acknowledges in the next clause that "no one admits" to such a profound experience. However, I propose that the very hesitancy of this passage suggests its importance to Moore. She is uncertain of how to convince the atheist Bishop

to take spiritual risks, but the ideal of “unprotected profundity of experience” is so vital that she forces herself to give voice to it.

I want to lean whatever interpretive weight I can on the phrase “unprotected profundity of experience”. Whatever it means, it is clear that Moore believes Bishop does not achieve it. As a criticism of Bishop’s story, Moore’s phrase is pointed. “In Prison” is clever, often to the point of being laugh-out-loud funny, but it never tries to be more than clever. Moore is not suggesting here that Bishop fix some small linguistic error or narrative excess, but is saying, albeit in guarded language, that Bishop lacks the nerve to write something of genuine importance.<sup>40</sup>

As Moore uses it, the term “risk some unprotected profundity of experience” sits at the opposite pole from “tentativeness and interiorizing,” and is connected to her sense of the philosophical depth of Christianity. This is complicated, however, by the fact that Moore discourages interiorizing when it comes in a form she perceives to be a navel-gazing language game, but she encourages a quest for profound experience that requires an intense dedication to and observation of one’s private or internal life. As it was for Emerson or Henry James, aesthetic creativity for Moore is a form of lived experience, and as an American Protestant, she finds experience, more than tradition or symbol, to be the primary pathway of spiritual realization. Thus, it is important to her that the experience of creating be charged with “profundity” or characterized by acts of “defiance”. If experience is potentially holy, Moore reticently suggests to Bishop, it ought not waste itself on nihilistic cleverness. The term “private defiance of the significantly detestable”, which Moore uses as a sort of gloss or clarification of her meaning, points to the ways that for her, as for Niebuhr, an ethical act is the result of a

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<sup>40</sup>I do not purport to know the extent to which Bishop took Moore’s advice to heart, but I think it is worth noting that the poems for which we now remember Elizabeth Bishop—all of them, in 1938, a mere twinkle in her eye—tend to pivot on moments when a speaker is left unprotected before some shattering epiphany. Think, for instance, of “In the Waiting Room”, “The Fish”, or “The Moose”. In Bishop’s handling, “unprotected profundity of experience” is something much more frightening, uncanny, and secular than her mentor would have imagined, but it nevertheless speaks to Moore’s skills as an editor that, in this letter, she attempts to tease out of her friend what would one day become her signature mode.

fundamentally internal struggle during which one must simultaneously resist the evil of the self and the corruption of the world. Moore indeed acknowledges that the profundity she wishes Bishop would seek is “unprotected” and a “risk”, but in the particular Protestant context from which she speaks, this is not a negative thing. It is the language of a quest to overcome the self (“private defiance”) which is simultaneously a surrender to the power of grace against which we can never be protected (“profundity of experience”).

Moore’s religious poetry encompasses the Christian drama of sin and grace in a particularly modern and American way. Like Niebuhr, she saw original sin not in terms of Biblical literalism, but instead as a story and concept that provided a mythic framework through which she could examine moral and aesthetic imperfectibility. At the same time, her belief in the need to risk “unprotected profundity of experience” embodies a concept of grace that owes as much to literature as to religion, for it is in the laboratory of art, she tells Bishop, that we can imagine the possibility of an ideal that exceeds our failings. Moore wrote about fallibility and grace throughout her career. They appear in her many references to Adam in 1924’s *Observations*—most notably in “An Octopus” and “In the Days of Prismatic Color”—and they are key topics of her major poems of the early-to-mid-thirties like “Virginia Britannia”, “The Pangolin”, and “The Jerboa”. Indeed, when Moore began to read Niebuhr in the late thirties, he likely did not influence her as much as he confirmed what she already believed. In the sections to follow, I look at several poems in which Moore imagines art as both inherently sinful and potentially graceful, and thus places herself at the intersection of *ars poetica* and theology.

### *Section Three: The Jerboa's Progress*

In 1931, Raymond L. Ditmars, curator of the New York Zoological Park, wrote a one-page digression in his book *Strange Animals I Have Known* about a small desert rat called the jerboa. He introduces the jerboa as a marvel of adaptation and survival, for, given the violent sandstorms that sweep across the Sahara, "it would seem as if all types of life would abandon such areas, but this is not the case" (274). The jerboa "run(s) on hind legs as thin as a match," and is able to move rapidly across the desert because "the feet have furry pads to prevent their becoming imbedded in the soft sand" (274-5). The key to its survival, however, is its ability to subsist on the barest of resources: "I kept one for several years, not giving it a drop of water. It fed on dry corn and loved stems of dry grass. The only moisture it had came from occasional bits of greens, of which it was not over fond" (275).

Ditmars was a key source for Moore's 1932 poem, "The Jerboa".<sup>41</sup> She cites his description of match-thin hind legs in the notes to the poem, and she quotes or refashions a number of other phrases or images from his book in the text of the poem itself.<sup>42</sup> Moore, like Ditmars, pays homage to the jerboa for its asceticism and toughness. Stubborn determination in the ravages of the desert is a repeated motif of a wide variety of myths and legends, most notably those of the Bible, and Moore was obviously drawn to this strange little creature at least in part for its archetypal and allegorical possibilities. However, as we shall see, in "The Jerboa" Moore ultimately resists allegory as much as

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<sup>41</sup>A letter Moore wrote to her brother on July 19, 1932 gives further insight into her research process, which included trips to libraries and zoos and the frustrating discovery that the Museum of Natural History had no jerboas. Additionally, Moore wrote a letter to Ditmars seeking further details on the sleeping and eating habits of the jerboa (1997, 267-73). Sketches Moore made of jerboas can be seen in Fall 1981 edition of the *Marianne Moore Newsletter* (1).

<sup>42</sup>Analyses of Moore's use of source materials form one of the central branches of Moore criticism. Some of the most interesting work on the topic includes Elizabeth Gregory's book on quotation in modernist poetry; Patricia Willis' work on Genesis, Milton, and National Parks Guidebooks in "An Octopus"; and Marie Borroff's article on Moore's use of advertising language.

she courts it. Specifically, the poem resists the type of allegorical reading that would see in the jerboa a model for human morality, and leads us to see that the jerboa's fortitude and adaptability exceed human capabilities, and therefore mark our moral and aesthetic limitations.

"The Jerboa" is a religious poem, but it is not a confessional or devotional poem, and it also differs subtly from allegory or parable. It is decidedly modernist—Moore is more concerned with the details and particularities of desert rats than an allegorist or fabulist would be, and she uses the exotic jerboa to perform a decidedly anti-confessional, Eliotic "escape from personality." Moore's characteristic techniques—syllabic verse, prose-like language, quotation, and a thematic interest in nature's curiosities—are used to stage a central ethical dilemma of Protestant art, namely, the question of whether art is irredeemable, given that it is produced by inherently fallen, corrupt artists. Moore's answer is not simple, and it is not finally an answer so much as an acceptance of limitations, and a reconciliation with the idea of the fortunate fall.

"The Jerboa" is one of Moore's longer poems (around five pages), and she divides it into two sections. The first section, "Too Much", is set in ancient Rome and Egypt, and consists primarily of catalogues of art objects, curios, and captive animals. The items Moore describes, from engraved "bone boxes" to giant pine cone statues, and from small eagles to wild ostrich herds, exemplify the wealth and power of those societies. The second section, "Abundance", meticulously describes the jerboa and its ability to adapt to its desert habitat. The terms "Too Much" and "Abundance" bear obvious similarities, but convey decidedly different moral judgments. Both denote plenitude, but "too much" bears the further implication of excess. Furthermore, "too much" is a prosaic, everyday term, while "abundance" has a vague hint of oratorical flourish, as well as an impressive Biblical pedigree visible in any good concordance. Indeed, following such a concordance takes one to the heart of the Bible's ambivalence about materiality. "Abundance" can denote God's grace exemplified in the fecundity of nature, as at the end of Job where "the

clouds do drop and distil upon man abundantly,” and “he giveth meat in abundance” (36:28-31), but “abundance” is also found in warnings against worldliness and greed, as in Psalm 52, where “mighty man” is attacked as one that “made not God his strength, but trusted in the abundance of his riches.” Moore’s section titles, then, announce that the poem will ruminate on the ethics of our relationship to material things both natural and artificial, and examine how the divine gift of abundance is hoarded and corrupted into excess.

How critics read the poem tends to be reflected in how they construe the relationship between the two sections. Randy Malamud, who reads the poem as a “didactic” attempt to show how humanity has “used animals badly” (118), argues that Moore contrasts the two sections in order to highlight her moral argument (116). Margaret Holley, on the other hand, argues that the poem is about both “the distinction and compatibility of these two poles, nature and art,” and therefore the two sections “are presented less as opposites and more as complements of one another, two kinds of plenty” (89). My own sense, as I hope to show in the following pages, is that the two sections speak to one another primarily through their differences: the title “Too Much” obviously carries a tone of condemnation, and the second half of the poem is at times almost breathless in its delight at the jerboa’s leaps across the sand. But Moore is seldom a didactic poet, and this particular poem’s self-awareness undermines any straightforward moralistic reading. The poem itself bears far more resemblance to the inventive art objects of the Egyptians than the easy freedom of the jerboa, and it is difficult not to find oneself taking pleasure in the curious scenes of wealth Moore simultaneously constructs and condemns. We discover in the poem’s final stanzas that in order to understand this creature, Moore has to return to the language of well-wrought artifice that defines the first section of the poem. “The Jerboa”, then, is a poem about nature and artifice in which artifice finally proves inescapable. The poem’s stakes are whether a reliance on artifice must be tragic, or if there is a way that this fall can be understood to be fortunate.

Early in the poem, art appears to be little more than a barometer of human greed, vanity, and depravity. The poem opens in Rome:

A Roman had an  
 artist, a freedman,  
 contrive a cone—pine-cone  
 or fir cone—with holes for a fountain. Placed on  
 the prison of St. Angelo, this cone  
 of the Pompeys, which is known

now as the Popes', passed  
 for art. A huge cast  
 bronze, dwarfing the peacock  
 statue in the garden of the Vatican,  
 it looks like a work of art made to give  
 to a Pompey, or native

of Thebes. (1-13)

In “Poetry”, perhaps Moore’s best-known poem, she states that “genuine” poetry will appear when poets present “imaginary gardens with real toads in them” (24). Here, in the opening lines of “The Jerboa”, Moore is considerably less pleased by this real garden with a titanically unreal pine cone.<sup>43</sup> Her language of moral and aesthetic condemnation is subtle, but it is undeniably present in her choice of verbs: “a Roman *had* and artist,” “*contrive* a cone,” “*passed/* for art,” “it *looks* like a work of art.” The statue does not emerge from an outpouring of authentic inspiration, but is instead a mercenary chunk of decor. The artist is a “freedman,” but his aesthetic choices are made for him by the market. The giant pine cone’s primary use is to display economic and cultural power, which Moore underscores by beginning the poem with the statue’s strange history of ownership. It was created as a fountain to please an unnamed wealthy Roman, only to become a decoration on a Papal prison,<sup>44</sup> and finally land in its present location in the

<sup>43</sup>For more on how the poem condemns unnatural representations of nature, see Schulze, particularly her compelling argument that the pine cone and scarab beetle are classical images of rebirth that have been turned into static stone artifacts (84-5).

<sup>44</sup>The Castel Sant’ Angelo in Rome was originally constructed as a Mausoleum for the Roman emperor Hadrian. All Roman emperors who died between 139 and 217 A.D. (from Hadrian to Caracalla) were interred there. The structure was later converted to a fortress, and came under the control of the Vatican in



Vatican's Court of the Belvedere (Calvesi 99).<sup>45</sup> Moore participates in a tradition of Anglo-American literature that runs back at least to Spenser and forward to James as she describes lavish Catholic display in order to suggest the corrupting influence of artifice, hierarchy, and wealth.<sup>46</sup>

This corruption is not limited to Rome, however. Moore pivots quickly to Egypt, where the rest of the poem takes place. She invokes Exodus as she notes that the Egyptians knew "how to use slaves", and then moves to a long catalogue of captive animals. We are told that wealthy Egyptians "kept crocodiles," and "put/ baboons on the necks of giraffes to pick/ fruit" (16-8). "They had their men tie/ hippopotami/ and bring out dappled dog-/cats to course antelopes, dikdik, and ibex" (19-22). The exotic circus procession goes on to include such rarities as impalas, onagers, mongooses, storks, anoas, and ostriches with "necks rearing back in the/ dust like a serpent preparing to strike" (27-8). Here, we begin to get a sense of what Moore means by "Too Much": who, after all, would need an onager when the dikdik and impala already take up so much space? Again, the work of condemnation is transacted largely through the verbs, as animals are "kept", "used", and "tied." The Egyptians "looked on as theirs" all of these strange animals, and the poem's presentation of this attitude of possession seems calculated to move the reader to moral judgment.

It is not only "colossi" and exotic fauna that mark the scene Moore describes. She

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1379. Moore's tone of disapproval in this stanza is produced in part by her willful decision to refer to St. Angelo as a "prison" rather than a "castle". The latter is the usual name, and is, for instance, the one used in the 1928 Baedeker guide from which the above information is drawn (331-2).

<sup>45</sup>The statue, also known as the "Pigna", has an even more storied history than Moore details. Maurizio Calvesi notes in his *Treasures of the Vatican* that "In the Middle Ages the Pigna stood in the atrium of Old St. Peter's, where Dante saw it (he mentions it in the *Divine Comedy*); it was moved to its present site in 1618 after the demolition of the old basilica. On each side of the Pigna is a bronze peacock from the Mausoleum of Hadrian" (99).

<sup>46</sup>For an example of the Moore family's tendency to equate Catholicism with moral danger, see Merrin (1997), who quotes from an extraordinary letter written by Moore's mother in 1905 to her two college-aged children. Mrs. Moore writes that she worries that her children Warner and Marianne, then at Yale and Bryn Mawr respectively, are "as if young Cromwell and young Milton were taken up bodily and put down in the French Court, there to grow up. I pray the stamina may be in you to do as they would have done in such a case; for I think Milton would have come forth at last, the unsullied soul he pictured 'the Lady' in Comus, to be, and Cromwell alike would have come out unscathed; the valiant, the fighter of evil" (94).

notes also that “These people liked small things” (39), and follows this observation with a two-stanza list of various curios and knick-knacks. Of particular note is the following: “Lords and ladies put goose-grease/ paint in round bone boxes—the pivoting/ lid incised with a duck-wing// or reverted duck-/ head; kept in a buck/ or rhinoceros horn,/ the ground horn; and locust oil in stone locusts” (46-52). If artifice had, earlier in the poem, been connected subtly to violence by its association with slavery or prisons, here the link is much more explicit, as these craft objects serve as fixed, ornate signifiers for the formerly living things they contain. Animals have been killed for by-products like paints and powders which are useful only for the creation of more artifice. The poem conveys a culture that is simultaneously inventive, lazy, and sadistic, which is made even clearer as Moore notes that this wealth is seen as a “right to those with, everywhere,// power over the poor” (66-7).

This first section of the poem is, in spite of its modernist formal strategies, strikingly reminiscent of the pageants of corruption, excess, and oppression one sees in the great allegorical texts of Protestant England. As in Spenser’s *House of Pride* or Bunyan’s *Vanity Fair*, we are taken on a phantasmagoric tour of lavish, violent tableau that are meant to warn us against the evil that lurks beneath the glittering surfaces of the baubles of this world.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, it is striking that the societies Moore invokes—Egypt, Imperial Rome, the Vatican—are the villains of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Reformation. The attitude of the poem is comparable to Bunyan’s pilgrims, who, when they are confronted by the merchants of *Vanity Fair*, cry out, “*Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity*; and look upwards, signifying that their Trade and Traffick was in Heaven” (74, italics in original).<sup>48</sup>

The irony, of course, is that “Too Much”, like the *Vanity Fair* section of *The*

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<sup>47</sup>For a compelling reading of “The Jerboa” as an allegory for the excesses of Western consumer capitalism, see Luke Carson’s essay on Moore’s “civic republicanism” (316-7).

<sup>48</sup>Andrew Kappel also discusses similarities between Moore and Bunyan, and pays particular attention to their shared “sense of living among a godless people” (175).

*Pilgrim's Progress*, is tremendous fun. Moore's formal cleverness shines through in the rhyming of "tie" with "hippopotami"; the lists of strange objects read like a combination of poetic catalogue with commercial catalog; and there are, it should be noted, baboons sitting on top of giraffes in order to pick fruit. Robin Schulze nicely articulates the critical consensus on this section when she writes that "In both Rome and Egypt, then, life has become nothing more than a pageant...Both locations reflect the whims of vicious romantic imaginations that have lost all touch with the actual and, by virtue of their isolation, forfeited all vitality and compassion" (85). This is an excellent summation of the content of the poem, and it certainly describes the place we find ourselves after closely analyzing Moore's language. But Schulze, like most other critics, does not do justice to the enjoyment one derives from encountering, in Moore's lavishly detailed language, these imprisoned animals, tasteless statues, and aesthetic fruits of economic injustice. Indeed, as we come to recognize the evil embodied by all these aesthetic delights, we are, as it were, surprised by sin, as we see our own implicit and complicit acceptance of the scenes Moore describes.

Moore concludes the first section of the poem by describing a mongoose, an animal that is useful to man because of its ability to kill snakes. She writes that the king "feared snakes, and tamed// Pharaoh's rat, the rust-/ backed mongoose. No bust/ of it was made, but there/ was pleasure for the rat. Its restlessness was/ its excellence; it was praised for its wit" (84-9). Here, for the first time, we see a creature that in some measure escapes the domination to which the previously described animals were subject. The mongoose is tamed, but it is only valuable because of its "restlessness," the natural ferocity which it never loses. While other creatures are reduced to art objects, no bust is made of the mongoose, either because it will not remain still for a sitting, or because the king does not want to memorialize a creature that provides evidence of his fear of snakes. The mongoose is, in the terms Moore uses, not subject to artists, but rather comparable to them, for it is noted for "excellence" and "praised for its wit" (89). The mongoose,

indeed, is a sort of living analogue to the art already described in the poem: witty, violent, and in the service of power. Moore was also praised for her wit—she was celebrated by Pound, for instance, for producing “logopoeia” (22). She was also referred to in family correspondence as “Rat”,<sup>49</sup> and in a July 1932 letter to her brother describing her progress on this poem, she signs off as “Rusty Mongoose” (1997, 273). One cannot draw too much from such biographical tidbits, but these small points of identification suggest that the first section of the poem is less a jeremiad denouncing outrageous aesthetic practices, and more a series of self-implicating ruminations on the inherent, inescapable worldliness and fallenness of art and, implicitly, of artists. The poem insists on its own imperfections in the same way that Moore would later insist on her own sinfulness in her responses to the work of Niebuhr. Moore’s poem, with its precise syllabic measure and marvelous bits of trivia, has a great deal in common with the ornate, precious curios of the Egyptians, and very little in common with the natural, easy grace of a desert rat. The jerboa, as we shall see, emerges as a vision of what poetry ought to strive to be, but in the brief appearance of the mongoose, we get a sense of the predatory thing that art actually is.

Three pages and fifteen stanzas into the poem, Moore finally presents her title character. The jerboa is “a small desert rat” that, unlike the mongoose, is “not famous” (91-2). Though it “lives without water,” the jerboa “has happiness” in its “shining silver house/ of sand” (93-7). That particular line break—“silver house/ of sand”—works as an amusing formal surprise, but it also calls attention to the jerboa as the representative of an aesthetic dispensation where nature, not wealth or artifice, is the measure of beauty. Elisa New writes compellingly that we do not understand why the poem insists that the mongoose’s “pleasure” is disreputable until it is weighed against the jerboa’s “happiness” (106-7). New compares Moore’s use of the terms “pleasure” and “happiness” to the

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<sup>49</sup>Everyone in the Moore family had a nickname taken from *The Wind in the Willows*. Marianne was Rat, her brother Warner was Badger, and their mother Mary was Mole.

distinction Seventeenth Century meditative writer Richard Baxter draws between “the carnal and saintly temperament,” and I would further add that their slight incompatibility mirrors the subtle difference between “Too Much” and “Abundance”. Even the most committed ascetics seek some form of “happiness,” but “pleasure” carries a taint of sensual and sexual gratification that has been seen as “too much” from many moral or religious perspectives, particularly the Protestant one from which Moore emerges.

It might seem paradoxical that Moore looks to nature to remedy her queasiness with materiality and carnality, but in this too she is eminently Protestant. Like Jonathan Edwards, she attends meticulously to nature’s details, but she does so in order to look through nature to something that transcends it. As she finishes her description of the jerboa’s home, Moore, for one of the few times in her career, unironically gives voice to the sublime: “O rest and/ joy, the boundless sand,/ the stupendous sand-spot,/ no water, no palm-trees, no ivory bed,/ tiny cactus; but one would not be he/ who has nothing but plenty” (97-102). Here, Moore attempts to invoke a spiritual plenitude that comes from standing before nature’s vastness and finding the “unprotected profundity of experience” she had told Bishop to seek. In this moment, as “stupendous” emptiness spreads to the horizon, the jerboa seems to be a Saharan parallel to Stevens’ “Snow Man”. But where, for Stevens, the blasted landscape was a blank canvas for the re-enchanting secular poet, Moore turns to the sublimity of the desert for its Biblical resonance.

The particular Biblical narrative to which the poem refers is the story of Jacob’s Ladder, which Moore retells briefly in one stanza: “Part terrestrial,/ and part celestial,/ Jacob saw, cudgel staff/ in claw-hand—steps of air and air angels; his/ friends were the stones” (109-113). In Genesis, Jacob is sent from Canaan to find a wife, and one night, alone in the wilderness, he has a vision of a ladder to heaven teeming with angels, and is told by God that his progeny “shalt spread abroad” throughout the entire world (Gen. 28:11-22). In “The Jerboa”, Moore is interested in Jacob as a liminal figure. He is a man, “part terrestrial,” but he also sees a spiritual vision, and is therefore “part celestial”.

Moore's oddest addition to the story, however, is the "claw hand", which suggests that this version of Jacob is part-animal, and even, perhaps, part-jerboa. In the same way that the jerboa is at home in its silver house of sand, Jacob finds amity with the stones which are "his friends" (in Genesis, he uses them as pillows).<sup>50</sup> He is halfway between the world of men and the world of nature, even as he also is granted a moment of spiritual insight that exceeds both. Like the jerboa, he is fundamentally differentiated from the mass of corrupted humanity that Moore described in the first section. His experience is unrepeatable by other men, and therefore his story is less an ethical precept or moral guideline, and more a philosophical or theological limit case used to imagine the extreme, even impossible, situation in which a man could view truth in its unrefracted singularity. Both Jacob and the jerboa, then, are set apart from the first section of the poem. In the next stanza, however, Moore further differentiates them from each other.

The jerboa, it turns out, does not need Jacob's vision of divinity in order to be content. Moore writes, "The translucent mistake/ of the desert does not make/ hardship for one who/ can rest and then do/ the opposite—launching/ as if on wings, from its match-thin hind legs" (113-8). Here, Jacob's vision is brushed aside as a mirage, a "translucent mistake of the desert," that is in fact a "hardship." From a different poet, a Stevens or a Dickinson, calling Jacob's ladder a mirage could be read simply as an impious quip, but for the Presbyterian Moore, the word "hardship" is every bit as important as "translucent mistake." One might assume that there is no hardship in being granted a reassuring divine vision. But even in his moment of insight, Jacob is burdened by the duty of building a temple and a nation, and he is still faced with a life in which he will, quite literally, wrestle with angels. As Weber made clear, clues about grace, whether perceived as real or a mirage, do not always eliminate a life of spiritual struggle. The jerboa, however, in his simplicity and joy, need not speculate on such immaterial

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<sup>50</sup>Taffy Martin also describes the commonality between Jacob and the jerboa, alluding to the story of the theft of Esau's birthright to argue that Jacob has "the same ingenuity, perseverance, and self-protective instinct that makes the jerboa the hero of the poem" (131).

matters. Instead, he can “do the opposite,” “launching” himself across the desert.

The final six stanzas of the poem are given over entirely to a detailed description of a jerboa. Moore writes here in one of her characteristic modes, as she combines her prosy, light-rhymed verse with the chatty tone of an amateur naturalist giving a lecture to a local Sierra Club chapter. She details the color of the fur on various parts of the jerboa’s body, teaching us that “the underside’s white,/ though the fur on the back/ is buff-brown like the breast of the fawn-breasted/ bower bird” (122-5). She also describes the jerboa’s manner of hopping, and its head turned “neatly back and blending/ with the ear which reiterates the slimness/ of the body” (129-31). Moore is clearly fascinated by, in her own words, the “strange detail of the simplified creature” (136). The word “strange” here is striking. The jerboa is an obscure, little-known animal, and Moore herself had a hard time finding one to study in New York’s zoos and museums (1997, 271-2). To the vast majority of the poem’s readers, the jerboa will likely seem as alien as any Egyptian “basalt serpents and portraits of beetles” (82). However, the jerboa is also, as Moore describes it, a “simplified creature,” radically different from the artificial complications of the first part of the poem. Moore turns to the jerboa not because she wants to establish a point of moral normalcy against an outrageous civilization, but because she wants a marvel of simplicity to stand in contrast to marvels of artifice.<sup>51</sup> The jerboa is inimitable; it is not a model. To return to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian is told at one point that the Celestial City lies on the other side of the Town which, in Bunyan’s allegory, stands for the world itself. Therefore, if Christian were to avoid Vanity Fair he “must needs *go out of the world*” (73, italics in original). Christian, however, is a man, and thus his fate is to follow his path through the persecutions of the town. The jerboa, in contrast, is already outside of the fallen, sinful world through which humankind must travel. In this sense, the jerboa is not like Christian at all. The jerboa does not pass through the Vanity

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<sup>51</sup>See also Anne Shifrer, who focuses on the jerboa’s superhuman asceticism and agility in order to argue that it is “an aesthetic and evolutionary wonder rather than a mirror for morals” (218-9).

Fair of the poem's first section, but Moore does, and we do.

Moore underscores the jerboa's difference from humanity when she writes that "It/ honors the sand by assuming its color" (142). Where "have," "use," and "kept" were the dominant verbs of the first few stanzas, the jerboa "honors" the landscape. The artists of Rome and Egypt wrench nature into new forms to suit their own needs and whims, but the jerboa adapts to nature. "Honors the sand" is also a fascinating turn of phrase because it ascribes willfulness to an evolutionary trait. The pathetic fallacy is prosaically typical in poems about nature, but Moore goes one step further here by committing the intentional fallacy. She implies that jerboa is an artist paying tribute to its natural environment through the coloring of its fur. The jerboa, however, is imagined as a very different artist from the ones described earlier in the poem. The freedman who designs the pine cone statue means to honor his client, but the exchange value of his services and the colossal proportions of his creation serve to warp and dwarf nature, while the jerboa is intimately connected to its natural surroundings. The small trinkets made of animal parts imitate nature, but they are an imitation that crushes nature in the attempt to own it, while the jerboa echoes the world without doing violence to it.

It is tempting, then, to read the jerboa as a model of humble representation that allows Moore an escape from the moral problem of artifice.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, this reading is encouraged in the next stanza, where Moore writes that the jerboa moves "By fifths and sevenths,/ in leaps of two lengths,/ like the uneven notes/ of the Bedouin flute" (145-8). As many critics have noticed, the stanzas of "The Jerboa" begin with two lines of five syllables, and end with a line of seven syllables. The lines, like the title character, move by fives and sevens, which leads John Slatin to argue that the poem "honors the jerboa not only by

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<sup>52</sup>Critics have hazarded many arguments about whether the jerboa should be read as a model for ethical and aesthetic behavior. Malamud, who sees the poem as a parable about animal rights, believes that the jerboa, or at least Moore's attitude toward it, is presented for purposes of "ethical indoctrination" (121). Schulze reads the jerboa, with its playfulness and reticence, as Moore's "poetic self-portrait" (88). Shifrer, Carson, and Costello, on the other hand, all argue in various ways that the jerboa should be read as irreconcilable to human behavior because it is too alien, too perfect, or too prelapsarian. Slatin feels that the poem tries to be a model for poetics, but fails because the jerboa is too "polite" (207).



assuming its name but also by tuning its own movements to those of the animal” (206). From a poet as formally aware as Moore, this is clearly a moment of high self-consciousness, and the brevity of the lines at the beginning and end of each of stanza arguably cause the reader to leap from one to another with jerboa-like rapidity. However, in the lines quoted above, the poem does not imitate the jerboa, but rather a metaphor for the jerboa. The “fifths and sevenths” have no essential connection to the animal itself, but rather to music, an intermediating formal language that Moore invokes in an effort to get some handle on her subject. Furthermore, it is not merely music that Moore invokes, but a Bedouin flute, an instrument foreign to western ears that would, if heard, call attention to the fact that music is not a natural language, but a constructed one that gains an illusion of naturalism only within the borders of a particular cultural context.<sup>53</sup>

In an effort to get art to imitate life, Moore twists through a series of metaphors—jerboa as artist; poem as music as jerboa—that take her farther and farther into artificiality. For several previous stanzas, Moore had provided naturalistic, even photorealistic, descriptions of the biological traits of the jerboa, but as the poem concludes, she shifts her mode of description, and leaves the reader with a flourish of figures:

...it stops its gleaning  
on little wheel castors, and makes fern-seed  
foot-prints with kangaroo speed.

Its leaps should be set  
to the flageolet;  
pillar body erect  
on a three-cornered smooth-working Chippendale  
claw—propped on hind legs, and tail as third toe,  
between leaps to its burrow. (148-56)

The jerboa is, by turns, a wheeled vehicle, a dancer, a pillar, and a decorative base to

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<sup>53</sup>Robin Schulze, writing about this musical metaphor, points out that fifths and sevenths are “two intervals in the Western scale that long to resolve to tonic.” However, they never resolve in the poem because this choice of “unending suspensions” over “traditional musical expectations” is apropos of an animal that never comes to rest (87-8).

a piece of furniture. Moore is once again playing with the language of Ditmars' *Strange Animals I Have Known*. Ditmars writes that when jerboas stop running their tail "is rested on the ground so that the whole body is as firm as a little tripod" (274-5). Not content with a simple tripod, Moore makes the jerboa as firm as a pillar, and then turns it into a three-cornered wooden claw. Both of these images make the jerboa more statuesque as it pauses for our final perusal. No bust may have been made of the mongoose, but Moore makes sure there is one of the jerboa. Within the ethical terms the poem has set for itself, this could seem contradictory or even hypocritical. Moore critiques the Egyptians and Romans for their efforts to control nature by stabilizing it in static representations, and yet the poem ends on just such a static representation of the jerboa.

The poem ends, in fact, on the stanza that has most bothered interpreters of Moore's work. Jeanne Heuving, for instance, writes "That this 'free-born' and untouched rat should finally inspire a 'Chippendale claw'—life becoming furniture—is troublesome" (155). Schulze worries similarly that the final image "embodies the very sort of solidifying capture by convention that the jerboa tries so hard to avoid throughout the poem" (90). Both of the above critics do not attempt to unknot this observed contradiction, but others have tried to do more with it. Slatin, for instance, argues that Moore's decision to freeze the jerboa in a careful pose is a symptom of the excessive politeness which he feels causes the poem to fail as an attempt to imagine "poetic freedom" (207). Anne Shifrer, on the other hand, feels that the closing lines are a success, for "this motion at the end of the poem can hardly be ignored and leads to a reappraisal of the idea that Moore is a maker of moral bestiaries. 'The Jerboa' unweaves its analogy intricately and deliberately, and leaves us with our problems and a beautiful creature" (222).

Shifrer's argument strikes me as the most compelling reading of this stanza, because she recognizes that the poem is not a moral fable so much as a series of unresolved

speculations on the ethical problems and possibilities of aesthetic representation. Indeed, this lack of resolution is underscored by the fact that, in the final lines, even as Moore temporarily freezes the jerboa, the poem gains a light, almost buoyant tone. The poem both reviles and revels in artifice, and it never decides which of these attitudes is preferable.

Shiffrer further argues that Moore's acceptance of contingency and complexity is a "postmodern" move comparable to Jean-Francois Lyotard's attack on modernist "ideologies of progression" (220). This claim is not without some merit, particularly inasmuch as it implicitly subverts clunky divides of periodization within Twentieth Century studies. However, I would argue that, if we follow Lyotard and characterize the "modern" as the cluster of progressive, secular ideologies that emerged from the Enlightenment, the poem's sense of the impossibility of moral perfection is not postmodern but pre- or even anti-modern. Lyotard defines the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives," but Moore, of course, was an adherent of Christianity, the most resilient metanarrative in Western civilization (138). The particular Presbyterian metanarrative from which Moore emerged was incredulous toward "ideologies of progression" not because of an embrace of decentered contingency, but because of a belief that humans are too fallible and sinful to alter or improve themselves in any fundamental way through their own works. "The Jerboa" suggests that, in a world of violence and excess, ethical and aesthetic ideals can only be found by moving out of the world, imaginatively and spiritually, into the great blank desert of rumination, revelation, and grace.

The social theorist Moore parallels here is not Lyotard but Niebuhr. Like Niebuhr, Moore's writing indicates a belief that fallibility puts an inherent limit on the perfectibility of both self and society. Three years after Moore wrote "The Jerboa", Niebuhr would write in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* that "The Christian analysis of life leads to conclusions which will seem morbidly pessimistic to moderns, still

steeped as they are in their evolutionary optimism. The conclusion most abhorrent to the modern mood is that the possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good, and that human history is therefore not so much a chronicle of the progressive victory of the good over evil, of cosmos over chaos, as the story of an ever increasing cosmos, creating ever increasing possibilities of chaos” (97-8). In the first section of her poem, Moore parades these “possibilities of evil” as they are manifested in a society characterized by political domination, economic exploitation, and aesthetic artificiality. The second section of the poem does not solve these problems, but rather tries to imagine what it might look like to stand outside of and even transcend them. The poem itself cannot escape fallibility, as it makes clear when it turns in its final stanzas to metaphors that resemble the giddy artifice it had earlier belied, but it can, in the image of the jerboa, envision a grace that exceeds the capacities of poetry. Moore’s self-implicating turn at the end of “The Jerboa” cannot be understood apart from her roots in a deeply cynical strand of Protestant thought, explained by Niebuhr as the belief “that though man always stands under infinite possibilities and is potentially related to the totality of existence, he is, nevertheless, and will remain, a creature of finiteness...[H]e will never be able to escape the sin of accentuating his natural will-to-live into an imperial will-to-power by the very protest which his yearning for the eternal tempts him to make against his finiteness” (118-9).

Art, as Moore presents it, is a register of that finiteness. In its exaggerations and misapprehensions, it marks our distance from any perfect Adamic knowledge of the world, or from the jerboa’s simple harmony with nature. The speaker of this poem has much in common with the freedman who makes colossal pine cones, the artisans who carve intricate swiveling duck-heads, and the mongoose who is famous for his killer wit. As Moore spins a web of metaphors around her title creature, she implicitly accepts that her poem is not like the jerboa. However, she also tries to mark her distance from the violence of “Too Much.” Though the jerboa pauses at the end of the poem in a statuary pose, it is nevertheless “between leaps to its burrow.” It has stopped long enough to be

commemorated, but it will move on. The poem, then, concludes by honoring the jerboa. Moore attempts to mark the fact that while poetic language is necessarily fallen into mediation and artifice, the tools of poetry can be used to appreciate the simplicity and directness they cannot themselves achieve. The jerboa's grace is less a model, and more a wonder and an impossible aspiration.

*Section Four: The Book-Length Poem of God's Second Book*

*The Pangolin and Other Verse* has been championed by many of Moore's readers in spite of the fact that Moore herself essentially erased any evidence of the book from her oeuvre. She composed *The Pangolin*, a slim volume of five poems, at the behest of her friend Bryher, who wished to publish a small book of Moore's verse in a fine-press limited edition (Molesworth 274). The book was printed in London in 1936 by artisan Maurice Danastiere, illustrated by Moore's friend George Plank, and had a run of only 120 copies. Four of the poems form a sequence entitled "The Old Dominion": "Virginia Britannia", "Bird-Witted", "Half Deity", and "Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle". The book then concludes with the title poem, "The Pangolin". Moore is famous, even infamous, for her lifelong tendency to self-revision, but *The Pangolin and Other Verse* is unique among her six books printed after 1935 for not having a section dedicated to it in *The Complete Poems*. "The Old Dominion" was never again published as a poetic sequence, and Moore dropped "Half Deity" from her collections altogether after 1941. The remaining four poems are included in the 1951 and 1967 *Complete Poems*, but in a different order, and with no mention of the book in which they originally appeared.

In spite of this elision, *The Pangolin and Other Verse* is much-loved by a small group of Moore's critics. John Slatin insists that the poems of "The Old Dominion" should be read in their original order because together they form "a coherent and powerful sequence which represents a critical juncture in Moore's career" (208-9). Grace Schulman argues that "Half Deity" is "remarkable, hard to find, [and] unjustly excluded" from Moore's collections (xxv). When Schulman recently edited a collection of Moore's poems, she chose to put the poems of *The Pangolin* back together in their original sequence for the first time in seventy years (212-25). Biographer Charles Molesworth makes the boldest claim of all, stating that "*The Pangolin* can be read as Moore's masterpiece, the high-water mark of her developing poetic skills and a tightly integrated book in its own right"

(275).

Much of the critical interest in the book stems from the fact that it contains several very good poems, but *The Pangolin* is also of interest to Moore scholars because it represents a furtive and eventually abandoned attempt to write in the genre of poetic sequence. Moore is unusual among major modernist poets for not having produced a widely known, career-defining sequence or long poem. Even relatively minor figures like Mina Loy and Louis MacNeice wrote longer works of verse that are still read and admired. Moore presented herself primarily as a writer of shorter poems, and it is as a writer of shorter poems that she is known. The thirties, however, were an unusual moment in Moore's career because she displayed a definite, if brief, interest in writing and reading poetic sequences. She published two short sequences in *Poetry* during the first half of the decade. In the June 1932 issue, the poems "The Steeple Jack", "The Student", and "The Hero" were published as the sequence "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play", and in the November 1934 issue, "The Buffalo" and "Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain" appeared together under the heading "Imperious Ox, Imperial Dish".<sup>54</sup> "The Old Dominion" sequence in *The Pangolin*, then, was Moore's third attempt in four years to combine poems into a longer, cohesive unit, and she was concerned enough about the unifying structure that she sought out T.S. Eliot's advice on the matter on two separate occasions (Molesworth 275-6).

Moore's interest in the modernist long poem is also registered in the reviews she wrote at the time. In 1932, she reviewed two book-length poems by Conrad Aiken, *The Coming Forth by Day of Osiris Jones* and *Preludes for Memnon*. Moore's most thorough and thoughtful engagement with the modernist long poem, however, is in her reaction to

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<sup>54</sup>As with "The Old Dominion", these sequence titles were eventually dropped by Moore in subsequent collections of her work. As a result, casual readers of Moore have had no idea that there were earlier, alternative arrangements of these poems, and scholars have been left with the tricky task of adjudicating which moment of Moore's career should be considered "authoritative." I personally will plead agnosticism on the "authoritative" issue, but for a good discussion of the bibliographical conundrums posed by Moore's constant self-revision, see Robin Schulze's introduction to her collection of Moore's early poetry, *Becoming Marianne Moore*, or see Christanne Miller's article on editing Moore's poetry.

*The Cantos*. Pound's *A Draft of XXX Cantos* was published as the thirties began, and Moore reviewed it twice, once in 1931 for *Poetry* and again in 1934 for *The Criterion* (1986, 268-77, 322-5). Though one cannot, of course, be sure, *The Cantos* seems to have been the first modernist long poem that moved Moore to this depth of reflection and interest. We tend to define American modernist poetry by its numerous monumental long poems, but it is worth remembering that as Moore wrote *The Pangolin* in 1935, the bulk of the canon of modernist epics had not yet been produced: *Paterson*, *Trilogy*, *Four Quartets*, and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" were all still a few years in the future. Moreover, Moore seems not to have been much influenced by the major sequences and book-length works of verse of the twenties.<sup>55</sup> In her two reviews of Pound, then, we see Moore's first visible and significant attempt to grapple with the challenges of longer forms.

Moore's 1931 review expresses a few reservations about Pound's book, as she argues variously that "unprudery is overemphasized," "an annoyance by no means petty is the lack of an index," and that Pound's critique of Calvin fails to acknowledge that "one must make a distinction between Calvin the theologian and Calvin the man of letters"<sup>56</sup> (272-3). For the most part, though, it is clear that she was deeply affected by *The Cantos*.

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<sup>55</sup>Moore enjoyed William Carlos Williams' mixtures of prose and verse in books like 1921's *Kora in Hell* (1986, 56-60), but she never showed any interest in producing something similar. Her initial reaction to *The Waste Land* was ambivalent. She wrote to Yvor Winters that she felt Eliot's poem was "macabre; it suggests that imagination has been compressed whereas experience should be precipitate. I too, question the rhythmic cohesiveness. 'Demotic French,' the bats and tower and bursts of imagination do, however, set up an 'infectious riot of the mind' and the impression long after reading justifies the poem to me" (1997, 191). Hart Crane had published *The Bridge* in 1930, but Moore did not review it, and did not discuss it in her letters at any length. However, she had read parts of it with varying responses, as under her editorship *The Dial* published Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge" and an earlier version of "The Dance" entitled "Powhatan's Daughter", and Moore personally wrote the letter rejecting "Harbor Dawn" (*The Dial* 82 [1927], 489-90; *The Dial* 83 [1927], 329-32; Molesworth 220).

<sup>56</sup>Specifically, Moore writes, "And since the Cantos are scrupulous against half-truth and against 'what had been thought for too long'—ought they not to suggest to those who have accepted Calvin by hearsay—or heresy—that one must make a distinction between Calvin the theologian and Calvin the man of letters?" Pound asked Moore about this comment in a letter, and she clarified her point, writing "I agree with you that there are substitutes for Calvin but the commentaries on the minor prophets, the letters, trouble about translators, and so on, have life" (1997, 259-60). She then goes on to quote several examples that she feels show the excellence of Calvin's prose style.



Moore's reviews generally carry an air of critical detachment, and rarely provide direct recommendations, but of Pound she writes, "You must read it yourself; it has a power that is mind and is music; it comes with the impact of centuries and with the impact of yesterday" (272). At moments, Moore's own language even becomes suddenly and subtly Poundian, as in the final clause of the sentence, "It may true that the author's revisions make it harder, not easier, for hurried readers; but flame kindles to the eye that contemplates it" (273).

The major goal of the 1931 review is to find connective linkages between various Cantos, and to illuminate anything that suggests a unifying logic to the entire sequence. For instance, Moore notes that, recurring throughout his book, Pound focuses on writers and poets who fought and died in wars (270-1), and she provides an extensive catalogue of images of painting and color that she believes account for "the tactility with which Mr. Pound enables us to relive antiquity" (273-4). At the center of her review, Moore asks, "Of the Cantos, then, what is the master-quality? Scholastically, it is 'concentrating the past on the present,' as T.S. Eliot says; rhetorically, it is certitude; musically, it is range with an unerring ear. Note Cantos XIII, XVII, XXI, and XXX" (272). Her review suggests that, above all else, Moore found *The Cantos* to be a book one ranges across in search of connections. The piece she wrote three years later was shorter and less thorough, but it suggests a deepening sense that *Cantos* is, finally, the sort of book one lives with. Moore concludes, "The test for the *Cantos* is not obstinate continuous probing but a rereading after the interval of a year or years; 'rhythmic vitality' needs no advocate but time. 'The great book and the firm book' can persuade resisters that 'good art never bores one,' that art is a joyous thing" (325).

It is unlikely that Moore was attempting in *The Pangolin* to write her own version of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. Her idiosyncratic style, her tendency to quirkiness rather than erudition, and even her preference for digressive Renaissance prose over distilled epic and ballad archetypes, made it improbable that she would ever simply repeat Pound's

devices. However, Moore thought a great deal about Pound's work during a period when her interest in poetic sequences was at its peak, and *The Pangolin and Other Verse* is the final fruit of that period. I noted above that Moore sought to uncover connections between figures and images across various sections of *The Cantos*, and *The Pangolin* contains a similar logic of repetition and interweaving among its five poems. Birds, in particular mockingbirds, appear repeatedly throughout the book. Twice, Moore proposes a bird as an alternative or corrective to a famous songbird of English Romanticism: in "Virginia Britannia" she describes a "little hedge-/ sparrow that wakes up seven minutes sooner than the lark" (131-2), and in "Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle" a bulbul is a "'tame clever/ true nightingale'" (19-20). The "lead cupids" in "Virginia Britannia" are joined by Psyche in "Half Deity". Moore, like Pound, returns again and again to images drawn from the visual arts: she references a Goya painting in "Half Deity", Da Vinci's engineering marvels in "The Pangolin", an ornate frontispiece in "Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle", and a marble sculpture in "Virginia Britannia". The first poem in the book ends with a sunset, and the final poem concludes by invoking a sunrise. All of the poems evince Moore's lifelong fascination with nature, but more specifically, they focus on nature uncomfortably domesticated. Every poem in "The Old Dominion" takes place in a garden.

From the four poems of "The Old Dominion" to the concluding poem "The Pangolin", *The Pangolin and Other Verse* moves through a trajectory from describing fallenness to imagining grace. Each poem of "The Old Dominion" deals, in one way or another, with a natural landscape altered by man's intrusions, and filled with fecundity, violence, and heat. Then, in "The Pangolin", Moore announces that "to explain grace requires/ a curious hand" (56-7), and she tries to provide that explanation. Her attempt to "explain grace" makes for difficult reading—perhaps even willfully difficult reading—and on a literal level the attempt fails, even as the poem suggests compensatory joys for the mysteries it cannot solve. My topic, then, is fallenness and grace, or, more

thoroughly, Moore's sense that art and nature are inherently corrupted by complexity and violence, even as art and nature also provide the only hints we can receive of something uncorrupted and transcendent. Aesthetic grace, for Moore, is not identical to divine grace, but it is the closest approximation available to the imagination. Though Moore's religious beliefs differ starkly from James' and Stevens', what she shares with them is a desire to delineate both the spiritual truths art can reveal, and the limitations of artistic understanding. Her poetry is haunted by the idea of a clarifying, world-ordering truth that she can intuit but never fully comprehend. In *The Pangolin and Other Verse* she tries, over a sequence of poems, to describe a chaotic world, and to seek "an intimation of what glory is."

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Family vacations were good for Moore. She had written "An Octopus" in 1923 after she had toured Mount Rainier during a trip to Washington to visit her brother, a naval chaplain. By the mid-thirties, her brother had been transferred to Virginia, and Moore and her mother spent the summer of 1935 at his home in Portsmouth. Much of Moore's time there was devoted to reading about the history of her surroundings. In a letter to Hildegard Watson, she writes, "The prides of Virginia, as found on my bookshelf—for Warner has been so busy he couldn't take us to many of the actual places—have been eating up my time." (1997, 350). Based on the footnotes in Moore's *Complete Poems*, it seems William Strachey's *The Historie of Travell Into Virginia Britania* and a large collection of John Smith's writing were of particular interest. She also planned a number of poems: "Virginia Britannia" was obviously inspired by the trip, but Moore also describes in a letter to Elizabeth Bishop various birds she had observed in a nearby tree that would end up in other poems in *The Pangolin* (353). The title of the sequence she produced, "The Old Dominion", refers to the nickname of the state of Virginia, and its

status as an early colonial holding of England. It also alerts us that the sequence will deal with matters of ownership, control, and domination, especially given that the roots of the word “dominion” lie in the Latin *dominium*, “property”, and *dominus*, “lord.” *Domus*, or “home”, also resides in “dominion”, and the first poem of the sequence describes a wide variety of peoples who have called America their own.

In the same way that Pound opens Canto I with Odysseus, and thus returns, in a sense, to the beginning of Western civilization, the opening stanzas of Moore’s “Virginia Britannia” are dominated by John Smith, the great adventurer and braggart of nascent America. Moore does not, however, cast Smith as either a hero or a villain. Instead, she tries to imagine how strange he must have looked from the perspective of another civilization. She writes,

We-re-wo-  
comoco’s fur crown could be no  
odder that we were  
with ostrich, Latin motto,  
and small gold horseshoe,  
as arms for an able  
sting-ray hampered pioneer,  
painted as a Turk it seems,  
the incessantly  
exciting Captain Smith. (22-31)<sup>57</sup>

The ostrich, Latin motto, and horseshoe were part of Smith’s coat of arms, and in describing them to us, and, more to the point, describing them in a way that is opaque enough to require several perusals and a glance at the footnotes, Moore defamiliarizes a major elementary school icon. This is further aided by her references to an incident in

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<sup>57</sup>All of my line references are to the 1935 version of “Virginia Britannia” that appears in *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, and which can also be found in *The Poems of Marianne Moore* on pages 420-5. Moore revised the poem heavily throughout her life, and the version that appears in *Complete Poems* from 1951 onward is lineated differently, and has many substantial alterations to the text. For a more thorough account of the differences between the versions of the poem, see Slatin, who argues rather polemically that Moore’s later changes simplify and “wreck” the poem (208-20). Molesworth provides a shorter and less opinionated account of the revisions of the poem, though he does note that in later versions Moore made the poem “less socially and historically pointed” (288).

which Smith was injured by a stingray,<sup>58</sup> and by a description of Smith “painted as a Turk.” Smith may well have been “exciting,” but the figure Moore sketches of a man painted, wounded, and represented by an ostrich is also, as she phrases it, “odd.” The effect of these lines is to estrange the reader from a history that is thought to be known, and thus to induce us to look at this history as Moore describes it. Moreover, by initially referring to Smith’s coat of arms as belonging to “we”, Moore insists on the strangeness of the American personality as reflected in Smith, and on the culpability of all those who have benefited from the original sins of colonization.

Moore also subtly introduces the idea of conquest. The Latin motto in Smith’s coat of arms, which Moore quotes in her footnotes but not in the poem,<sup>59</sup> reads *vincere est vivere*, or, “to conquer is to live.” Smith, as Moore presents him, is not a monster—he is “patient with his inferiors” and a “pugnacious equal” (32-4)—but he is the harbinger of an era of conflict, violence, and cultural collision. Indeed, the colonial Virginia Moore describes is not an untouched, pristine landscape, but is already flooded with multitudes. Moore begins at the shoreline, where “Pale sand edges England’s old/ dominion” (1-2). As she moves inland, the poem populates rapidly: “The air is warm, hot,/ above the cedar-dotted emerald shore/ known to the redbird,/ the redcoated musketeer,/ the trumpet-flower, the cavalier,/ the parson, and the/ wild parishioner” (2-8). Given her variously avant-garde and eccentric tastes, it is by no means probable that Moore would have known *The Great Gatsby* in 1935,<sup>60</sup> but her “emerald shore” is intriguingly reminiscent of the “fresh, green breast of the new world” viewed by Dutch sailors in the closing moments of Fitzgerald’s novel. For Fitzgerald, the shoreline induces “aesthetic contemplation” because man was “face to face for the last time with something

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<sup>58</sup>Smith narrates this event in both *The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia* (I.228) and in *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (II.168). Apparently, while Smith was spearfishing with his sword, he stabbed a stingray which, in turn, stung him in the arm. His entire arm was swollen for a few hours, but a Doctor Russell was able to heal him in time for dinner, at which point Captain Smith ate the offending stingray.

<sup>59</sup>Beginning with 1924’s *Observations*, Moore provided footnotes in her books of poems.

<sup>60</sup>Fitzgerald is not mentioned in either Moore’s *Selected Letters* or *Complete Prose*.

commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (189). In *Gatsby*, that wonder follows from reading the New World as a blank, as an utterly pristine landscape that, for one prelapsarian moment, was held tantalizingly open. Moore lacks Fitzgerald’s romanticism, and arguably his naiveté, but for her too the colonial landscape is an object of “aesthetic contemplation.” Moore’s Virginia, however, is not virginal, and her “capacity for wonder” is piqued not by an untapped continent, but by one that is teeming with history, complexity, and intermixture.

Fitzgerald, like Moore, is obsessed with a myth of fallenness, but the fall signifies something very different in the work of these two writers. For Fitzgerald, fallenness is a tragedy of temporality. Once there was something pure and untrammelled—an undiscovered continent; a blushing Louisville debutante—but over time this thing was corrupted by greed or wealth or experience, and now we (Nick, *Gatsby*, the reader) sit on the wrong side of an unbreachable temporal barrier, cut off from and longing for a prelapsarian ideal. For Moore, however, the myth of the fall is not an occasion to bemoan belatedness, but is rather a metaphor for the limits on knowledge and perception that result from the fact that we are flawed beings. Like Niebuhr, she feels that we are necessarily sinful and inescapably grounded in culture and history.<sup>61</sup> She focuses less on a lost perfect thing than on the inherent imperfections of human understanding and virtue, and thus, “Virginia Britannia” presents an America that, even at its outset, was characterized by complexity rather than clarity, hybridity rather than purity, and guilt rather than innocence.

The poem spends the vast majority of its 200 lines either observing or reflecting upon

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<sup>61</sup>Molesworth also discusses Moore’s interest in archetypes of fallenness. Given that Adam appears frequently in Moore’s poems, and “Virginia Britannia” in particular contains a number of snake images, I disagree with Molesworth that Moore “was able to address such matters without frequent resort to Biblical or explicitly religious imagery.” However, Molesworth perceptively summarizes the theme of fallenness in Moore when he writes “For her, fallenness was a condition that was best expressed in cultural terms: to be fallen was the ground, the very condition of culture. And yet nowhere was her modernism more in evidence than in her sense that in and through culture we address our fallenness and even combat it, but with no hope of conquering it in merely cultural terms” (288).

objects in gardens. Even the non-garden spaces the speaker observes—a church-yard, a university campus—tend to be, like gardens, artificially constructed outdoor areas decorated with choice bits of nature. Moore repeatedly presents gardens as places where man has reordered nature. She writes:

The Old Dominion has  
all-green grass-hoppers  
in all-green, box-sculptured grounds;  
an almost English green surrounds  
them. Care has formed a-  
mong un-English insect sounds,  
the white wall-rose. (37-43)

Typing these lines, I notice with a new immediacy how many hyphens Moore uses. Words are grafted together—“all-green”, “un-English”, “wall-rose”, even “a-mong”—and the careful reconstruction of these “box-sculptured grounds” is echoed in Moore’s reconstruction of language. In the garden, native and English elements are yoked by violence together, and nature is not pure or pristine, but rather something “care has formed.” The slowly revealed unnaturalness of the space is paralleled mimetically as “all-green,” “all-green” in two consecutive lines gives way to the hedging of “almost English green” in the next. Moore also observes the fingerprints of history in nature, for the green is “almost” a successful imitation of English landscaping, but the illusion is disrupted by the noises of surrounding native insects. The land has been reconstructed to fit the aesthetics of the colonizer, but the air is still abuzz with the repressed past.

The particular slant Moore gives to her poetic account of colonization can be seen in high relief if we compare the poem to her source materials. In 1616’s *A Description of New England*, John Smith encourages Englishmen to come to the New World because of its plenitude of goods. He argues that in England, one must pay for relaxation and enjoyment, but in America, “our pleasure here is still gaines,” and leisure itself is profitable. The fishing in particular is so good that “He is a very bad fisher, cannot kill in one day with his hooke and line, one, two, three hundred Cods...If a man worke but three

dayes in seaven, he may get more than hee can spend” (I. 347). Virginia, in Smith’s telling, has the potential to be a land of abundance and ease, and Moore too is fascinated by the region’s fecundity. She writes, “Old Dominion/ earth makes sunflower-heads grow large;/ hibiscus and so-called mimosa/ close at night; scarlet peculiarly-quilled/ pomegranate petals,/ the African violet,/ and camellia, perfumeless” (102-8). The poem contains many such catalogues of flowers and trees, and they echo the long lists of native species and resources that Smith and other propagandists for American settlement used to advertise the economic opportunities available across the Atlantic.<sup>62</sup>

Moore, however, reactivates Smith’s language of abundance not so that she may present America as an untapped Eden, but rather as a garden after the fall. Her Virginia is overflowing with a vitality that is invigorating but uncontrollable, and the continent’s potential riches promote conflict and domination rather than Adamic leisure. Virginia, Moore states, is a “Rare unscent-/ ed, provident-/ ly hot, too sweet, inconsistent flower bed” (99-101).<sup>63</sup> She knew, as Smith could not (or, perhaps, as he chose not to say), that the new continent would give up its riches only by work and by force, and that America would be “inconsistent,” a country that would “protest tyranny” even as it was “on/ the Chickahominy/ establishing the Negro” (94-6). She observes a “work-mule” and a ““strong sweet prison,”” both necessary attachments to the project of “taking the Potomac/ cowbirdlike;” that is, in the manner of a bird that does not build its own nest, but rather lays its eggs in the nests of other species (89-94). Later, Moore groups America together with other empires (and, in typical Moore fashion, a plant), writing,

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<sup>62</sup>For instance, only a few pages previous to aforementioned material about fishing, Smith writes the following paragraph: “Oke, is the chiefe wood; of which there is great difference in regard of the soyle where it groweth. Firre, pyne, walnut, chesnut, birch, ash, elme, cypresse, ceder, mulberrie, plumbtree, hazell, saxefrage, and many other sorts” (I. 342). In both Smith and Strachey, these catalogues of native plants, animals, and resources go on for many pages.

<sup>63</sup>Bonnie Costello, who does not particularly care for the poem, argues that “Though Moore...describes Jamestown as an ‘inconsistent flowerbed,’ it is really a rather consistent pattern of native and imported elements” (104). Costello has a point, though I wonder if she and Moore do not mean something different by the word “inconsistent.” Moore, I think, is fascinated by the fact that the Virginia she sees is variegated and not uniform, even if patterns can be perceived in that variation, but Costello seems further to demand randomness.



“The strangler fig, the dwarf-/ fancying Egyptian, the American, the Dutch, the noble/  
Roman, in taking what they/ pleased—colonizing as we say—/ were not all intel-/ lect  
and delicacy” (155-61). The phrase “colonizing as we say” suggests that historical  
euphemism is necessary to the construction of a national mythology, and that the original  
sin of America, the act of “taking what they pleased,” is ignored by the imprecise  
language of the “we” reading and writing the poem.<sup>64</sup> At one point, a woman sits, much  
as Moore herself did on her family vacation, in a “shaded house” overlooking “Indian-  
/named Virginia/ streams, in counties named for English lords” (133-5). Again,  
America’s originary guilt is registered linguistically, as the hybridized language of the  
region’s geography suggests a violent history that those in “shaded houses” tend to ignore  
(133-5). The suggestion, ultimately, is that in Virginia’s fall, we sinned all.

I worry that my focus on Moore’s claim that colonial America was never unfallen  
might make it seem that I am reading “Virginia Britannia” as an exercise in proto-  
politically correct hand-wringing. In fact, it is clear that Moore has a deep admiration for  
John Smith, and she repeatedly identifies and celebrates the audacity of the people and  
things that fill her poem. Smith, when meeting the Indian king, is “to/ Powhatan obliged,  
but not/ a flatterer” (34-6). A group of “jet black” flowers are “not for a decade/ dressed,  
but for a day, in/ over-powering velvet” (76-9). Reflecting on Virginia’s revolutionary  
heritage, Moore writes, “Priorities were/ cradled in this region not/ noted for humility”  
(140-2). The America Moore describes is “not noted for humility,” and pride goeth  
before the fall. Moreover, fallenness, as best portrayed in Milton, is impossible without  
freedom. Moore’s America is not a Great Satan, but it is a little Satanic, and it is fitting

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<sup>64</sup>When she revised “Virginia Britannia” for *Complete Poems*, Moore made much clearer her desire to implicate herself and her reader in colonial guilt. She writes: “Like strangler figs choking/ a banyan, not an explorer, no imperialist,/ not one of us, in taking what we/ pleased—In colonizing as the/ saying is—has been a synonym for mercy” (110-4). Overall, the import of the lines is not particularly different. The revised version is perhaps more effective sonically, in that its use of anaphora within the sentence makes for a cleaner crescendo, but its vague universality is, I would argue, less damning than the naming of names in the earlier version. Sadly, Moore provided no footnote to justify her claim that Egyptians were “dwarf-fancying.”

that the only two snake images in the poem—a “serpentine” wall designed by Jefferson and a rattlesnake who “soon/ said from our once dashing/ undiffident first flag, ‘don’t tread on /me’”—associate an archetypal image of mankind’s first rebellion with America’s rebellion (154, 136-9). To be fallen is to be sinful, but it is also to be free, and sinfulness and freedom are ineluctably connected in the colonial heritage Moore imagines. The same willfulness and energy that led colonists to “take what they pleased” would also produce, within a century and a half, a new set of “priorities.” As in “The Jerboa”, then, we have a poem where fallenness is, at least in part, fortunate, although in “Virginia Britannia” the calculus is perhaps more complicated. “The Jerboa” is, above all else, a poem about art, but “Virginia Britannia” is more ambitious, seeking to combine its ruminations on art, nature, and history into a picture of a nation whose fortunes are tied to its fallenness.

Moore’s sense that America is imperfect even in its virtues is best crystallized in two birds she describes for a stanza apiece at opposite ends of the poem. A thieving, aggressive mockingbird and a joyful, industrious sparrow are both pointedly contrasted to the lark, the famous songbird of Shelleyan Romanticism. Together, these birds form a mildly satiric but ultimately admiring metaphor for, to borrow a phrase Moore uses to describe Henry James, a “characteristic American.” James, as Moore had described him in a 1934 essay, is an American colonialist of the mind, for in spite of his transferred citizenship, she “has no scruple about insisting that he was American; not if the American is, as he thought, ‘intrinsically and actively ample,...reaching westward, southward, anywhere, everywhere,’ with a mind ‘incapable of the shut door in any direction’” (1986, 331-2; ellipses are Moore’s).

As she does with James, Moore identifies her mockingbird as an American. She introduces him by telling us to “observe the terse Virginian” (52), which makes the mockingbird, one-third of the way through the poem, the first figure to be an “American” in the present-day sense of the term. Prior to this moment, the poem is filled with people

who are conspicuously English: Christopher Newport delivers a crown from King James to Powhatan (36-7), John Smith has a coat of arms, and Sir George Yeardlery is, of course, a Sir. The only exception, Powhatan, is described as a “Rare Indian” (36), but even this appellation ties him to the colonial past rather than the American present in which speaker sits and observes “the terse Virginian.”

Moore’s mockingbird also shares with James a tendency to reach “anywhere, everywhere.” He is a “mettlesome gray” bird that, like the aforementioned cowbird, enacts a strategy of colonial eviction as he “drives the owl from tree to tree” (53-4). The mockingbird does not only steal territory; he also “imitates the call” of more mellifluous birds like the “whippoorwill or/ lark” (54-6). For a poet to use a bird-song as the exemplar of a poetic sensibility is hardly novel—the Romantic section of the Norton Anthology is practically a metapoetic aviary—but Moore’s bird is, intriguingly, an imitator. It does not sing, like Shelley’s skylark, “in profuse strains of unpremeditated art” (2000, l. 5). In fact, its imitative art is inherently premeditated, and it perches in the poem as a figure for American belatedness. It also reinforces our sense that this is a postlapsarian garden, where songs are a product of studied imitation rather than the “prompt eloquence” that characterizes the hymns of praise produced by Adam and Eve early in *Paradise Lost*, “in fit strains pronounced or sung/ Unmediated” (V. 148-9).<sup>65</sup>

John Slatin’s reading of the mockingbird stanza is by far the most thorough of any Moore critic, and he makes two important points. First, he argues that Moore identifies as “distinctively ‘American’” a “capacity for ‘imitation’” that has “so often been denounced, by writers from Poe and Emerson to Williams and Pound, as a foreign habit detrimental to American expression” (228). However, his second key point is that this is a *mocking* bird, and its specific form of imitation is parody. Slatin is particularly interested in Moore’s description of the bird “standing on tall thin legs as/ if he did not

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<sup>65</sup>Along the same lines, the mockingbird’s imitative garden-song also contrasts to the primacy of Adam’s naming of “every beast of the field” in Genesis 2: 19-20.

see,/ conspicuous, alone,/ on the stone-/ topped table with lead cupids grouped to form/ the pedestal” (63-8). Slatin observes that this passage reads like a “reincarnation, prosodically and imagistically,” of that most mocking of American birds, Poe’s raven, who sits atop a bust of Pallas much as Moore’s bird sits atop a pedestal of lead cupids. Slatin is then happy to conclude that both birds embody an “expression of a re-awakened genius of *place*” (229, italics his), but I think it is worth stopping to consider who it is that these two birds mock. Poe’s raven, of course, mocks the speaker, but Moore’s mockingbird mocks other birds and is, if anything, a double of the speaker. Given Moore’s career-long predilection for quotation and collage, the invocation of an imitative bird is highly self-conscious, and it would seem, by these definitional standards, that Moore herself is the quintessential American poet. The mockingbird is hardly beautiful—it is “lead-/gray, lead-legged,” and has a “meditative eye as dead/ as sculptured marble/ eye”—but its music, derived and parodic, is the very song of fallenness, and it therefore represents the possible poetry of the America evoked by the poem. It sits, like Poe’s raven, atop the dead remnants of European civilization, and yet, the message it carries in the context of Moore’s poem is less “nevermore” than “from now on.”

In the poem’s penultimate stanza, Moore introduces another intrusive avian companion, albeit one who is less aggressive than the mockingbird. She writes

the song-  
bird wakes too soon, to enjoy  
excellent idleness, destroy-  
ing legitimate  
laziness, this unbought toy  
even in the dark  
risking loud whee whee whee  
of joy, the caraway-seed  
spotted sparrow perched in the  
dew-drenched juniper  
beside the window-ledge;  
this little hedge-

sparrow that wakes up seven minutes sooner  
than the lark

they say. (174-88)

Compared to the gray, territorial mockingbird, the sparrow is a pleasant neighbor, although the speaker is clearly annoyed to have her “legitimate laziness” disrupted in the still-dark moments before the dawn. The sparrow is, quite literally, the early bird, waking “seven minutes before the lark,” and if he does not catch the worm, he at least catches Moore’s ear. The suggestion that this American bird has primacy over the lark is perhaps a bit of agonistic modernist one-upsmanship, but it is also, more interestingly, a comment about American industriousness. The sparrow awakens the speaker to a new day, but it is a new day where the speaker will not be allowed “to enjoy excellent idleness.” In America, it seems, even the songbirds are Franklinian, and there is no time for a Keatsian “drowsy numbness.” And yet, if the sparrow annoys the speaker by reminding her of the burden of labor, he also suggests the compensatory role of art. It is hard to imagine that a “loud whee whee whee” is the sweetest melody of the forest, but the bird, Moore tells us, finds “joy” in his song. Like the poem itself, the bird’s song recalls us to the curse of fallenness even as its aesthetic pleasures provide some compensation for imperfection.

The poem concludes by removing suddenly to a more panoramic view. Moore writes that the trees “lose identity/ and are one tree, as/ sunset flames increasingly/ against their leaf-chis-/ elled blackening ridge of green” (193-7). The shift from stanza to stanza here is disorientingly abrupt. We move from a sparrow at dawn to the forest at sunset in the space of a few lines, and the “emerald shore” of the first stanza begins “blackening.” Aesthetically, it seems an odd and not entirely coherent conclusion to a poem about the inconsistent particularities of American history and identity, but we must look to the final lines to get a sense of what Moore is trying to do. She concludes, “the redundantly wind-/ widened clouds expanding to/ earth size above the/ town’s bothered with wages/

childish sages,/ are to the child an intimation of/ what glory is” (198-204). This sudden embrace of Wordsworthian intimations of higher truth is difficult to reconcile with the rest of the poem, which, as we have seen, is deeply cynical about the romanticizing of either American history or literary creativity. The only note of the poem’s ironic sensibility that still chimes in this stanza is in Moore’s description of “bothered with wages childish sages.” The sages of Virginia, it seems, must seek wages, and thus, like the speaker awoken by the sparrow, they are not allowed the idleness that could allow a child staring at “clouds expanding to earth size” to intimate a truth that transcends this fallen dominion. Within the context of the entirety of *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, this stanza can be read, as we shall see later, as a foreshadowing of the ruminations on grace that conclude the book. Within the context of this poem, however, the stanza can best be understood as coming from a poet who was deeply cynical about man’s perfectibility, but also deeply Christian. The myth of the fall, for Moore, was a means of understanding the flaws of human virtue and perception, but it was nevertheless a myth that was contained within a larger cosmological system that moves teleologically toward a moment of apocalyptic reconciliation. Indeed, it is telling that Moore differentiates herself from Wordsworth by having her child receive an intimation not of immortality, but of “glory” itself. The clouds loom, titanic and awful, a sign in the book of nature assuring us that something, somewhere transcends the poem’s fallen garden. For a reader who stands, like myself, outside of Moore’s Protestantism, this attempt to affirm the universe seems to negate the poem itself. But perhaps that very negation can be read as the point of the conclusion: the poems of “childish sages”, like the world they seek to describe, are contingent and fallible, and eventually reach a limit point where all that remains is to imagine something that exceeds and even annihilates the conditions of their existence.

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The three poems in the middle of *The Pangolin and Other Verse* are markedly different from the two at either end. “Virginia Britannia” and “The Pangolin”, which begin and end the book, are, like “The Idea of Order at Key West” or “Directive”, Modernist varieties of the Greater Romantic Lyric. A speaker ranges intellectually over a landscape, alternating in her reflections between past and present and concretion and abstraction, and manages to conclude the poem within a few pages. In contrast, Moore’s poems in the middle of the book are shorter, and even more atypically for her, two of them are narrative. “Bird-Witted” tells the story of a female mockingbird attempting to feed her nearly-grown children, only to have to fend off the threat of an approaching cat. “Half Deity” tells the story of a small girl attempting, and failing, to catch a butterfly. Both poems, then, narrate narrow escapes, and they also continue the book’s theme of fallenness. “Virginia Britannia”, as we have seen, suggests that the ideals of America are no refuge against sin, misperception, and contingency. The next two poems are similarly demystifying, as “Bird-Witted” suggests that nature is filled with violence and the family provides only the barest of sanctuaries, while “Half-Deity” examines the rapacity lurking behind aesthetic sensitivity.

Moore returns in “Bird-Witted” to the territorial mockingbird. In “Virginia Britannia”, the mockingbird is a figure for art born of American belatedness and acquisitiveness, but in “Bird-Witted”, the same bird is used to tell a more elemental, primal story. “Bird-Witted” is *The Pangolin*’s song of innocence and experience, and it is animated by a dread of impending danger. And yet, in its first line, it hardly reads like an account of nature red in tooth and claw:

With innocent wide penguin eyes, three  
     grown fledgling mocking-birds below  
 the pussy-willow tree,  
     stand in a row,  
 wings touching, feebly solemn,  
     till they see  
     their no longer larger

mother bringing  
something which will partially  
feed one of them. (1-10)

The “innocent wide penguin eyes” of the “grown fledgling mocking-birds” are so disarming that it takes a moment to register how strange it is that these birds are “grown fledgling[s]” and their mother is “no longer larger.” Their size creates a dangerous imbalance in the nest, as the overburdened mother struggles to feed her brood, and yet, at the same time, their “innocent eyes” suggest that it would also be dangerous for them to leave the nest and enter the world. Moore’s footnote to the poem, in its entirety, reads “Sir Francis Bacon: ‘If a boy be bird-witted.’” Bacon’s phrase, “bird-witted,” describes a child who “hath not the faculty of attention,” and Moore’s decision to quote him purely in the conditional (the phrase is actually culled from a longer sentence) suggests that her poem is a meditation on the dangers that result if one has failed to acquire knowledge.<sup>66</sup> The fledglings are wide-eyed and naive, their “wings touching” as they huddle in the nest, and in spite of their size, they do not know what their mother knows about survival.

As the mother approaches the nest, the fledglings call out to her with “the high-keyed intermittent squeak/ of broken carriage-springs” (11-2). “Virginia Britannia” had playfully upended poetic conventions of bird songs, but Moore goes one further here, as she presents one of the least appealing noises ever ascribed to a bird by a major poet. The fledglings do not sing or chirp; they “squeak” like a carriage with busted shocks. Hugh Kenner notes that Moore mimics these noises with repeated “ee” sounds (162), and this sonic play on a grating vowel conveys the urgency of the birds’ hunger. The mother attempts to quiet this hunger by feeding her children, and “when/ from the beak/ of one, the still living/ beetle has dropped/ out, she picks it up and puts/ it in again” (15-20).

Kenner also reads this passage mimetically, arguing “there is affectionate mimesis in the

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<sup>66</sup>Bacon’s full sentence, from *The Advancement of Learning*: “A third [pedagogical consideration] is the application of learning according unto the propriety of the wits; for there is no defect in the faculties intellectual, but seemeth to have a proper cure contained in some studies; as for example, if a child be bird-witted, that is, hath not the faculty of attention, the mathematics giveth a remedy thereunto; for in them, if the wit be caught away but a moment, one is new to begin” (78).



awkward ‘dropped/ out’ and the businesslike ‘she picks it up and puts/ it in again’” (162). In addition to this admiration for maternal affection, however, these lines also convey the difficulty and even the mundane ugliness of survival. The specification that the beetle is “still living” underscores that in the world of the poem things live and die, and the dependence of life upon death is not a metaphysical abstraction, but a fact of existence that is seen here literally on the gut level. This is not Keats’ “immortal Bird” who “wast not born for death” (61).<sup>67</sup> Moore’s mockingbirds kill other animals, and are threatened by a scarcity of resources.

The bird face another, more daunting, threat: time. Even more than the cat who appears in the closing lines, time is the real villain of “Bird-Witted”. Moore suddenly shifts, halfway through the poem, into *The Pangolin*’s one moment of nostalgia:

What delightful note  
with rapid unexpected flute-  
sounds leaping from the throat  
of the astute  
grown bird comes back to one from  
the remote  
unenergetic sun-  
lit air before  
the brood was here? Why has the  
bird’s voice become  
harsh? (31-41)

This kind of outpouring of feeling is rare in the normally reticent Moore, but the passage thrives on its remarkable music, particularly in the phrase “rapid unexpected flute-/ sounds leaping,” where the vibrant energy of the bird’s song is reproduced in the subtle internal repetition of “p” sounds, and by the spondee (“flute-sounds”) that jauntily interrupts the otherwise trochaic phrase. But if Moore attempts to echo the bird’s music, it is nevertheless an echo of a song that is lost. Once there was a languor that allowed for beauty, an “unenergetic sun-/ lit air” in which the labor of sustaining a family was not

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<sup>67</sup>Slatin also discusses Keats in his reading of “Bird-Witted”. Slatin’s argument focuses particularly on the ways that Moore reinhabits Keats’ role as listener, even as she “call[s] attention to the particular exigencies of [the bird’s] situation in a way that does not concern Keats at all” (235).

necessary, but now that time is past. Throughout *The Pangolin*, Moore repeatedly invokes pure, unfallen bird songs which are, for whatever reason, absent. We have already seen the two mentions of the absent lark in “Virginia Britannia”, and later, in “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle”, Moore writes “‘The legendary white-/ eared black bulbul that sings/ only in pure Sanskrit’ should/ be here—‘tame clever true nightingale’” (17-20). In those other two poems the tone is primarily comic, as Moore convinces us that she is, on balance, better off without larks, and the bird singing in Sanskrit is a curious “legend.” In “Bird-Witted”, however, the mother bird has been tragically maimed by experience, and Moore presents herself with the question, “Why has the bird’s voice become so harsh?”

One answer to this question, as will become clear when the nest is threatened by a cat in the poem’s final lines, is that the mother’s voice has grown harsh because she must protect the fledglings from the dangers of the world. I want to pause, though, and set the cat aside for a moment, so we can consider what else is driving the poem’s sense of loss. The speaker recalls that the mother could still sing her “delightful note” “before the brood was here,” which suggests that the knowledge that differentiates her from her “innocent” children is sexual. Moore, of course, is famously, even infamously, “maidenly.” This is the adjective Adrienne Rich uses to disparage Moore in an essay where Rich also writes that Moore “kept sexuality at a measured and chiseled distance in her poems” (168, 171). I think that Rich is correct that Moore keeps sexuality at a distance in the bulk of her poems, which makes it fascinating that sexual knowledge should make an appearance here, however muted. As with the “still living beetle” being fed to the fledglings, the poem ripples with barely repressed horror at the necessities of existence. The mother mockingbird has literally had her voice stolen by childbirth. She has experienced the kind of suffering God promised to Eve after the Fall, when He sought to “multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Gen. 3:16).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Moore herself never had children. Indeed, if she resembles any figure in the poem, it is the “grown

At the close of the poem, it is left to the mother to protect the children she has brought forth. A cat moves alliteratively, “slowly creeping toward the trim/ trio on the tree-stem” (42-3). The fledglings show their true bird-wittedness in their utter failure to comprehend what is happening, as “Unused to him/ the three make room—uneasy/ new problem” (44-6). When the mother finally spots the impending disaster, she comes “darting down” and “wages deadly combat,/ and half kills/ with bayonet beak and/ cruel wings, the/ intellectual, cautious-/ ly c r e e ping cat” (55-60). The poem, already filled with the subtle destructiveness of everyday life, concludes in a flurry of violence. The whole narrative unfolds in a relatively domesticated space—the speaker, after all, has lived in close enough proximity to remember the bird’s earlier song—but even in a backyard, nature is fallen and dangerous, and is filled with pain, labor, and death. “Bird-Witted”, as we have seen, is one of Moore’s most sonically playful poems, but that mimetic sensibility is ironically counterpoised against the description of a music that slowly decays in the face of experience.

“Half Deity”, the next poem in *The Pangolin*, is not about beauty that has been lost, but rather beauty that cannot be grasped. The two-page poem is filled with images of hands—a “finger”, a “palm”, a “paw”, and twice a “hand”—all clutching at a butterfly who dodges them artfully and finally slips out of the poem, spirited away on the “spread out” hand of Zephyr, the wind. Moore eventually dropped the piece from her published collections, but it is by no means a bad poem, and as the center of *The Pangolin*, it forms an intriguing pivot point.<sup>69</sup> It maintains the themes of sin and violence that fill the two

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fledgling” birds that will not leave the nest. Except for the four years when she was in college, Moore lived with her mother her entire life until her mother died in 1947. A perfectly viable reading of the poem could revolve around its celebration of a strong mother who fearlessly protects her children. Moore’s mother was undoubtedly a strong influence—she edited all of her daughter’s poems, and in the dedication to 1935’s *Selected Poems*, Moore writes of her mother that “where there is an effect of thought or pith in these pages, the thinking and often the actual phrases are hers.” And yet, it took Moore to make her mother’s phrases public, which makes it even more striking that, in “Bird-Witted”, motherhood is equated with voicelessness.

<sup>69</sup> Because it was not included in *Complete Poems*, there are very few extended readings of “Half Deity”. The exception is Slatin, who discusses the poem at length in his chapter on “The Old Dominion”. Slatin’s reading, much like his reading of “Bird-Witted”, looks at the ways that Moore tropes Keats, in particular

poems discussed above, but it also prefigures the concept of grace-in-nature that animates the end of the book.

The poem begins with doubleness. After the title, “Half Deity”, the first two words of the first line, both uncapitalized, are “half worm” (1). This juxtaposition cannot help but recall “The Jerboa”, where Moore describes Jacob as “part terrestrial,/ and part celestial.” Like Jacob, Moore’s butterfly, “indifferent to/ us” and possessed of “swift majesty,” is spiritually differentiated from the speaker and the reader who do not possess its beguilingly deific qualities (60-1). “They that have wings must not have weights,” Moore announces early in the poem, and the fluttering angelic weightlessness of the butterfly accounts for both its attractiveness and its ability to evade capture (9). And yet, there is also something unsettling about this creature that is not only “half deity” but also “half worm.” Moore brightly describes a caterpillar as “the wingless worm/ that hopefully ascends the tree,” and yet, this does not dispel the clanging note produced by placing “deity” and “worm” next to one another in the poem’s first four words (3-4). Worms might sit at the opposite end of the chain of being from deities, but both are associated in the Bible with that which exists beyond our deaths. The Book of Job repeatedly references the worm that “shall feed sweetly” on the corpses of sinners (24:20), and in the Gospel of Mark, Christ describes hell as a place “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (10:44). To be part deity and part worm, then, is not only to be both more corporeal and more divine than the “we” reading the poem, but also to have an inhuman eternity.

Early in the poem, Moore describes her butterflies. She writes, “The well-known/ silk tiger-swallowtail/ of South America, with body light-/ly furred, was that bearing pigments which engrave the lower wings with dragon’s blood, weightless” (4-8). She describes another butterfly as the “peninsula-tailed one with a black/ pitchfork-scalloped edge on sunburnt zebra-skin” (10-1). Moore attends to her subject microscopically: she

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“Ode to Psyche” (236-45).

notices that a butterfly's body has fur, and she is precise enough in her metaphors to specify that she envisions no ordinary zebra-skin, but rather "sunburnt zebra-skin." Her lavish attention makes these animals seem exotic and alluring, while her imaginative leaps to images like "dragon's blood" and a "pitchfork-scalloped edge" touch them with fiendishness. As the poem continues, Moore narrates the story of a butterfly that seems coy, even knowing, as it both tempts and evades human attention. It is "the blind/ all-seeing butterfly," who, "fearing the slight/ finger, wanders, as though it were ignorant,/ across the path" (26-9). Near the end of the poem, the same cunning creature is "Deaf to ap-/ proval, magnet-nice, as it flutters through/ air now slack now fresh" (61-3). The butterfly is magnetic, and this effect is only enhanced by its utter disregard for its admirers. It is bewitching both in its unavailability and in its hints of darkness ("dragon's blood," "pitchfork," "as though"). This is not a mere nature poem, then, but a meditation on the mechanics of seduction and obsession.

Another way to think of this is that the poem is about the possessive desires and impulses that beauty triggers in an observer. In "The Jerboa", Moore considered this topic by looking at the conspicuous consumption of an entire society, but in "Half Deity", she focuses instead on a single character, named Psyche, whom we first see "Disguised in butterfly/ bush Wedgewood blue" (16-7).<sup>70</sup> Moore does not invoke Psyche in order to provide an Eliotic mythic skeleton to the poem, but the reference is nevertheless rich. Psyche is often pictured with butterfly wings, so she seems a natural addition to the poem, although it is intriguing—and I shall return to this point—that Moore sharply distinguishes the girl from the butterfly she chases. Furthermore, Moore's Psyche is an observer who seeks to "gaze informally/ on majesty," and thus she echoes the story of Psyche defying the wishes of Eros by using a hidden lamp to discover his identity (24-5). Still, the most significant resonance of "Psyche" active in the poem is the one original to

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<sup>70</sup> When she revised the poem for 1941's *What Are Years*, Moore dropped the name Psyche and instead referred to the character as "the nymph."

the modernist era: psyche as mind in its totality, including both desire and will, id and ego. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Psyche was imagined by the Greeks to be an embodiment of the soul, and thus “psyche” as “soul” remained an active English usage through the Nineteenth Century.<sup>71</sup> Since the dawn of modern psychology, however, the word “psyche” has come to be clinical rather than spiritual. It is the self, the walled off mind distinguished from the other, and thus in Moore’s poem, Psyche is not soul, but is rather mind itself, seeking to comprehend and control the world. She has, in a sense, been shorn of the butterfly wings given her by the Greeks, and now she schemes to recapture the thing she has lost.

As in “The Jerboa”, Moore’s tone subtly condemns the aesthetic possessiveness she describes. For instance, Psyche is first seen following the butterfly to “that small tree, *Micromalus*, the midget/ crab” (18-9). “*Micromalus*,” in addition to being the biological name for a crabapple tree, is also Latin for “little evil.”<sup>72</sup> Moore thus lightly chides the girl chasing her prey, and she also activates the Edenic joke buried in the scientific name of a tree that produces a sort of miniature apple. This reference to the fruit of knowledge gains in resonance a few lines later, when Moore writes of Psyche’s unsuccessful pursuit that ““it is not/ permitted to gaze informally/ on majesty in such a manner as might/ well happen here”” (23-6). “Majesty,” indeed, is a key word in the poem—later we learn of the butterfly’s “swift majesty”—and Moore uses the idea of majesty to suggest that beauty is best appreciated from afar. The danger of pursuit lies not in what might happen to the object, however, but in what the pursuing subject does to herself. This is seen in a striking passage in which, for a moment, the two protagonists lock eyes: “The butterfly’s round unglazed china eyes,/ pale tobacco brown, with the large eyes of/ the Nymph on

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<sup>71</sup> The *OED* entry for “psyche” is a complex one. Definition 1, “The soul, or spirit, as distinguished from the body; the mind,” gives entries from 1658 (Sir Thomas Browne, whose work Moore loved deeply) to 1905. Definition 1.d—the one we are familiar with—“The conscious and unconscious mind and emotions, esp. as influencing and affecting the whole person,” has its first entry in 1910, from Jung, and runs to the present. Also of interest is definition 2, “a butterfly,” for which all the entries are from the nineteenth century. Apparently there is also a genus of moths called Psyche, as detailed in entry 2.b.

<sup>72</sup> Slatin also discusses the Latin meaning of the word (238-9).

them—gray eyes that now are/ black, for she with controlled agitated glance/ observes the insect's face/ and all's a-quiver with significance—/ enact the scene of cat's eyes on the magpie's/ eyes, by Goya" (36-43). The gray eyes turning black give the game away from the start—Psyche is corrupted by her possessive "agitation"—but the Goya painting Moore references is a stark visual representation of the emotion she describes.<sup>73</sup> In the painting, three cats lurk in the darkness, their yellow and black eyes fixed carnivorously on a pet bird that a young boy has tied to a string. The cats recall the conclusion of "Bird-Witted", and much as that cat was called "intellectual," Psyche in "Half Deity" is conspicuous for her "curiosity" (34). Psyche, or mind, is driven by a quest for aesthetic knowledge, and her blackening eyes suggest that she is consumed by her own desire to consume.

As in "Bird-Witted", the pursued object escapes. The butterfly, Moore writes, "has strict ears when the/ West Wind speaks" (63-4). It listens closely because the wind, unlike Psyche, does not deploy clever traps: the wind "had no net/ of flowering shrewd-scented tropical/ device, or lignum vitae perch in half-shut/ hand" (65-8). The invocation of the Shelleyan West Wind might at first seem an incongruous choice, since for Shelley the wind is a harbinger of autumn and death, whereas in Moore it calls the butterfly to safety. What the two poet's share, however, is a sense of the wind's aesthetic grandeur. They imagine its beauty differently—Shelley speaks of the "tumult of thy mighty harmonies" while Moore calls Zephyr a "quiet young man with piano replies"—but for both writers, the music of the wind calls to those who, in Shelley's telling, would seek to "fly with thee,.../ and share/ The impulse of thy strength" (Shelley 59, 44-6; Moore 70). The irony, or course, is that in Moore's poem, the butterfly *can* "fly with thee," and it prepares to do so at the end of the poem, posing with "eyes staring skyward and chest arching/ bravely out" (73-4). And yet, if the butterfly has access to the majestic wind,

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<sup>73</sup> The painting, a portrait of Don Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga, is part of the permanent collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is where Moore likely would have seen it. It can also be seen at [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hob\\_49.7.41.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hob_49.7.41.htm).

Psyche, like Shelley, cannot know what it is like to be “The comrade of thy wanderings over heaven” (49). Shelley concludes his poem operatically, asking the wind to “make me thy lyre” and predicting the impending arrival of springtime, but Moore ends tragically, in a moment that stews in its own imperfect comprehension of the world.

Watching the butterfly listen intently to the wind, Moore writes, “His talk was as strange as my grandmother’s muff” (77). Whatever the wind says, Moore cannot hear it. The poem goes silent on the image of a voice being muffled, and as in “Virginia Britannia”, Moore refuses herself the most prominent consolations of Romanticism. Shelley tries desperately to make himself the mouthpiece of the wind, but Moore silently resigns herself to the fact that she cannot even hear its true voice. Moore, like Psyche shorn of her wings, cannot feel the wind’s power move through her, and instead watches as the butterfly, a beguiling, unattainable being, is carried off on the breeze.

The psyche, it seems, can imagine what transcendence might look like, but it cannot inhabit, understand, or produce it. As in “Virginia Britannia” or “Bird-Witted”, the fallen garden of the world shears away our innocence, tempts us to sin, and obscures our understanding in thickets of contingency. In the concluding and title poem of *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, Moore continues to look to nature. She seeks, like so many American Protestants, to find in God’s Second Book some consolatory assurance that grace still exists in the universe. Certainty will continue to elude her, but she will find hints, and those hints will be carried by the unlikeliest of heroes.

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If the universe has a creator, then the pangolin is truly one of His most bizarre constructions. It is a skinny creature, three to six feet in length, with a strong, flexible tail. It is covered in hard scales, and looks vaguely like a lizard, but is in fact a mammal, the sole member of the order Pholidota. It uses its front claws to tear open the nests of



social insects like ants or termites, and then eats them with its long, protruding tongue. When threatened, it can roll into a ball, and use its scales for protection. By anyone's standards, it is a strange looking creature. Some might even accuse it of being ugly.

In Moore's 144-line poem "The Pangolin", the word "grace" appears seven times. In a book filled with poems about greed, violence, and innocence lost, this strange mammal appears at the conclusion as the emblem of grace. What Moore means by the word "grace" is difficult to discern. She partakes of its aesthetic, social, and theological meanings, and while she finds none of these definitions satisfactory or exhaustive, her sense of the proper mixture is never fully explained. The poem's open confusion seems to suggest that the psyche cannot comprehend grace, but the eye knows it when the eye sees it.

The pangolin is, in many ways, the perfect animal for Moore. It has an odd name, it is obscure, it is decidedly strange-looking, and its armor suggests a rough-hewn self-sufficiency. Moore chose the giant pangolin as the particular subject of her poem because it is the one type of pangolin that lives both in trees and on land, and is therefore, like Jacob in "The Jerboa", part-terrestrial and part-celestial (Schulze 137). A pangolin is also, of course, the sort of animal that, like a jerboa, an elephant, or an ostrich (to take three other Moore favorites), can only be seen by an American in zoos, museums, or books. Moore was a nature poet, but she was a nature poet of the city, and she came to know nature through cultural institutions. This is not to say that the Protestant ideal of primary experience did not enter into her thinking, but rather that this ideal was refracted by an urbanite's fetishizing of nature's exotic otherness, and a modernist's sense that the subject is always necessarily grounded in culture. This sensibility, as we have seen, sits at the heart of Moore's thinking in "The Jerboa", where her removal from nature works alongside, and even underscores, her Christian sense of distance from divinity. "The Pangolin", however, moves in the opposite direction, for of all Moore's animals, it is the one most explicitly and directly compared to humankind.

The poem begins with the phrase, “Another armoured animal” (1), which might seem odd given that the animals that have heretofore filled *The Pangolin and Other Verse* have been conspicuously unarmored—indeed, in the case of “Bird-Witted” or “Half Deity”, their vulnerability is the topic of the poem. We have, however, seen one armored animal already in the book: John Smith, whose coat of arms is referenced in “Virginia Britannia”. Like Smith, the pangolin is an explorer “who endures/ exhausting solitary/ trips through unfamiliar ground at night” (20-2). It is also a “toiler” who works hard to build a “nest/ of rocks closed with earth/ from inside, which he can thus darken” (41-3). Armored and fortified, the pangolin is, in Moore’s view, not just a warrior, but an artist of self-protection, a “night miniature artist-/ engineer” and “Leonardo’s/ indubitable son” (7-9). In the preceding poems, Moore has shown us a variety of creatures, including humans, who have been threatened with violence. In these poems, beauty either thrives when it is in the service of violence, or ceases to exist when violence overwhelms it. The pangolin, in contrast, lumbers into the book bearing armor that is also beautiful. This creature is both graceful and tough; it is, in Moore’s words, “‘Fearful yet to be feared,’” ready to protect itself against the nest of ants that “retaliates and swarms on him” (50, 57).

Moore writes at the beginning of the third stanza that the pangolin has “the fragile grace of the Thomas-/ of-Leighton Buzzard Westminster/ Abbey wrought-iron vine”<sup>74</sup> (33-5), and in the next stanza she claims that pangolins are “Compact like the furled fringed frill/ on the hat-brim of/ Gargallo’s hollow iron head of a/ matador” (58-60).<sup>75</sup> Moore leaps from medieval to modernist in her two comparisons to ironwork, and in both Thomas’s iron vine and Gargallo’s iron frill, she presents an aesthetic object that, in its

<sup>74</sup>In 1293, Thomas of Leighton designed the intricate ironwork surrounding the tomb of Queen Eleanor at Westminster Abbey.

<sup>75</sup>Pablo Gargallo was a modernist sculptor whose work consisted primarily of busts and figures done in iron or marble. His ironwork was vaguely cubist, and relied on the use of open space to create a sense of lightness. When Moore refers to his “matador”, she probably means to refer to one of his busts entitled “Picador”, both of which represent a figure with an exaggerated and decorated hat-brim.

delicate intricacy, upends our expectations of a typically utilitarian medium. Like the pangolin's armor, these sculptures embody beauty hewn from terrestrial materials. On the same theme, Moore describes "The giant pangolin/ tail, graceful tool, as prop or hand/ or broom or axe, tipped like/ the elephant's trunk with special skin" (66-9). Protestant to her core, Moore finds something "graceful" in a "tool." As in the ironwork cited above, she is excited by grace discovered in something as mundane as a broom. This theme becomes clearer as she writes, "Pangolins are/ not aggressive animals; between/ dusk and day, they have the not-un-/ chainlike, machine-/ like form and/ frictionless creep of a thing/ made graceful by adversities, con-/ versities" (75-82). In a remarkably chainlike string of hyphens, Moore calls the pangolin "not-un/ chainlike, machine-/ like," once again equating the animal's beauty to well-oiled, "frictionless" human inventions. Both the pangolin and these machine-like forms are implicitly compared to poetry itself in the puns on "verse" at the end of the sentence, but more significantly, we are told that adversity is what made the pangolin graceful.

Thus, after four poems detailing the fallenness, corruption, violence, and danger of the world, *The Pangolin and Other Verse* concludes with a poem celebrating its marvels. In the midst of her description of the pangolin, Moore pauses to exclaim, "Sun and moon & day and night &/ man and beast/ each with a splen-/ dor which man/ in all his vileness cannot/ set aside; each with an excellence!" (44-9). These lines, read in isolation, are not among Moore's finest writing. They are sentimental, and they lack any real sonic inventiveness. They do exactly what Moore, in the letter discussed at the outset of this chapter, would soon tell Elizabeth Bishop to do in her poetry: they "risk some unprotected profundity of experience." Ironically, however, these lines also embody what, in the same letter, Moore admitted to be the pitfall of such a strategy, for they are precisely the type of "large scale 'substance'" that "runs the risk of inconsequence through aesthetic impotence" (1997, 391). In the context of the poem, however, they are noteworthy because they signal what will become the real topic of the poem: man. The

lines essentially create two columns, one for splendor and the other (a one-item column) for vileness, and mankind is the one thing that is both splendid and vile. Man is vile because he tries to “set aside” the splendor of the universe, but ultimately, he cannot ironize it away, not even in himself. Splendor, Moore argues, exists even in the least worthy of beings.

The heart of “The Pangolin” is its sixth stanza. Immediately following her metaphor of the pangolin’s graceful yet “machine-like” form, Moore writes:

To explain grace requires  
 a curious hand. If that which  
 is at all were not for  
 ever, why would those who graced the spires  
 with animals and gathered  
     there to rest, on cold luxurious  
 low stone seats—a monk and monk and monk—  
     between the thus ingenious roof-  
     supports, have slaved to confuse  
 grace with a kindly  
 manner, time in which to pay a debt,  
     the cure for sins, a graceful use  
 of what are yet  
     approved stone  
     mullions branching across  
 the perpendiculars? (81-96)

In this stanza, Moore claims that the eternal beneficence of creation is proven by a cryptic 12-line rhetorical question that does not suggest a logically sound answer to the problem it poses. Boiled down to its most prosaic essence, Moore’s stanza reads, “if there were no eternal order to the universe, then why would medieval monks have worked so hard to understand grace?” The question begs a skeptical answer: the monks worked because of belief, and their belief does not constitute proof of anything. And yet, if we back up from my foreshortening of the stanza, and look at its odd, rambling particularities, we see that the monks Moore describes are as befuddled by grace as we are by the stanza. Moore suggests that the monks define grace in a variety of ways, all of which only “confuse” the matter: socially (“a kindly manner”), economically (“time to

pay a debt”—a.k.a. a “grace period”), theologically (“a cure for sins”), and aesthetically (the “stone mullions” of the cathedral). I do not think that Moore is saying anything in particular about monks or even Catholicism. In fact, these monks, decorating their cathedral and racking their brains, look remarkably like stand-ins for Moore herself. The monks are artists whose central theme is spiritual, and whose vehicle is the representation of animals. They have “graced the spires/ with animals,” and now they sit, presumably on a work-break, surrounded by their creations. They muse on the relationship between earthly, mortal versions of grace and the divine ideal they can imagine and represent only imperfectly and imprecisely. They can produce grace without necessarily understanding it, and they, like the pangolin, allow Moore to show grace embodied rather than abstractly defined.

The stanza suggests, then, that grace is simultaneously observable and ineffable. It can be experienced, but it cannot be described. Moore lists a number of things that grace is not, but she never says what it is, even though she sees it everywhere. She denies that grace is merely a “cure for sins”, thus refusing the most simplified religious sense of the term, even as the poem suggests that a divine spark—“an excellence”—is shot through the world, visible if only we could see. This idea of God’s hidden-but-potentially-readable presence in the world links Moore to one of the major strands of American religious thought.<sup>76</sup> Her aforementioned description of the “splendor” of the world bears a striking resemblance to a passage in Jonathan Edwards’ “Personal Narrative”, where he writes that “God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature” (285). Moore is not only a Protestant, however, she is also a poet, and thus it is important to her that “God’s excellency” not only exist in the world, but also be accessible to humans. What sets her apart from Edwards is her

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<sup>76</sup>Obviously, the idea of God’s presence in nature is not exclusively American or even exclusively Protestant, but it is a central concept in the American tradition that was the key theological influence on Moore.

suggestion that grace can best be imagined or intuited through the mediation of art. Moore's monks do not understand grace, but the gracefulness of their aesthetic productions embody what they cannot describe. Moore's twisting attempt to understand grace is thus similar to Niebuhr's rumination on the complicated history of the concept in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, where he writes that the word "grace" denotes "the mercy and forgiveness of God," or "the power of God over man," but it also suggests "the power of God in man; it represents an accession of resources, which man does not have in himself, enabling him to become what he truly ought to be" (1943, II. 99). In the final three stanzas of "The Pangolin", Moore moves toward a concluding vision of humans desperate to feel the "power" that Niebuhr describes, driven by the Gnostic hunger that Bloom finds at the heart of American religion.<sup>77</sup> At the end of her poem, humans look skyward, seeking to become what they "ought to be."

Before that conclusion, however, Moore sticks to the ground, casting a comic eye on what we actually are. Moore returns briefly to the pangolin itself, referring to the creature by its scientific name, "the manis", and noting that it sits "on hind feet plantigrade,/ with certain postures of a/ man" (98, 101-3). She goes on:

Beneath sun and moon, man slaving  
to make his life more sweet, leaves half the  
flowers worth having, needing to choose  
wisely how to use the strength;—  
a paper-maker  
like the wasp; a tractor of foodstuffs  
like the ant; spidering a length  
of web from bluffs  
above a  
stream; in fighting, mechanized  
like the pangolin; capsizing in

disheartenment" (103-14).

As Moore describes it here, the human ability to innovate is both natural and beyond

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<sup>77</sup>"We are a religiously mad culture, furiously searching for the spirit, but each of us is the subject and object of the one quest, which must be for the original self, a spark or breath in us that we are convinced goes back to before the Creation" (1992, 22).

nature. Our innovations are similar to the adaptive characteristics of animals, and yet our singularity is shown by our ability to imitate several animals simultaneously. This is a decidedly Franklinitian moment, as Moore celebrates acts of self-invention that increase the utility of work, and yet, the catalogue ends on a discordant note. After metaphorizing various examples of “man slaving/ to make his life more sweet”, Moore finishes by describing man “capsizing in// disheartenment.” The catalogue is constructed to make us pause here. The phrase “capsizing in// disheartenment” lacks the quirky molding of vernacular that makes us smile at a phrase like “tractor of foodstuffs”, it elides the logic of simile that has driven the previous few lines, and it is split over a stanza break, forcing us to slow our reading as we skip two lines down and two inches to the left in order to read the final word. Tellingly, “capsizing in disheartenment” is the one human activity Moore does not compare to an animal analogue. Despair, it seems, is reserved especially for us. We are clever enough to remake ourselves in limitless ways, and yet the concomitant of that cleverness is that our self-consciousness makes us, as Moore writes in the final stanza, “The prey of fear” (137).

Our cleverness also makes us prone to vanity, which, Moore points out, places our imperfections in higher relief. She writes: “Bedizened or stark/ naked, man, the self, the being/ so-called human, writing-/ master to this world, griffons a dark/ ‘Like does not like like that is/ obnoxious’; and writes error with four/ r’s” (114-20). The obvious joke here is that man, the self-proclaimed “writing-master to this world,” errs even when spelling the word error, and can only describe what he dislikes in a sentence of almost Steinian opacity. The trickier item to interpret is Moore’s use of the word “griffon” as a verb. “Griffon” is the name of a Belgian hunting dog, and it can also be used as an alternate spelling of “griffin”, the half-eagle, half-lion creature of mythology—either way, it is always a noun.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps Moore means that man growls or barks his disapproval of those

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<sup>78</sup>The *OED* gives no instances in which the word “griffon” or “griffin” is used as a verb, nor does any other dictionary I have consulted.

who “like like”, or perhaps she is suggesting that this convoluted statement is as sensible as a flying jungle cat. Everyone gets tarred by the brush of error, as Moore includes both simple misspellings and pompous incomprehensibility—the mistakes of the freshman failing Basic Composition and the graduate student who fails him. In a poem about grace in all its forms, Moore implies that literary grace is a miraculous accident when visited on any clumsy human, just as theological grace is an undeserved election from above.

Moore’s final stanza is about a “he”, and while we are relatively certain that “he” is supposed to be “man” (grammatically, “man” is the pronoun referent), her constant switching between pangolin and man throughout the poem leaves us uncertain as to which one is being described:

Not afraid of anything is he,  
 and then goes cowering forth, tread paced  
 to meet an obstacle  
 at every step. Consistent with the  
 formula—warm blood, no gills,  
 two pairs of hands and a few hairs—that  
 is a mammal; there he sits in his  
 own habitat; serge-clad, strong shod.  
 The prey of fear, he, always  
 curtailed, extinguished,  
 thwarted by the dusk, work partly done,  
 says to the alternating blaze,  
 “Again the sun!  
 anew each  
 day; and new and new and new,  
 that comes into and steadies my soul.” (129-44).

Moore, in this stanza, uses man as both an object of humor and an object of study. He is “not afraid,” and yet he is “cowering forth,” expecting at every moment to find a new obstacle. Moore writes the middle of the stanza in a mock-serious tone borrowed from a science textbook, as man (and, implicitly, pangolin) is reduced to the “formula” for a mammal. Moore pries into his “habitat”, and is fascinated by his lack of gills. Having dissected man into his constituent elements, she notes his wide range of failures: he is “always/ curtailed, extinguished,/ thwarted by the dusk, work partly done” (137-9).



We have returned to dusk—to the sunset that concludes “Virginia Britannia” at the beginning of *The Pangolin and Other Verse*. In “Virginia Britannia”, the sunset suggests the awesome power of divinity, as it appears to set the whole forest aflame beneath clouds that “expand to earth size,” thus giving a child “an intimation of what glory is.” To return to Niebuhr’s definition of the two sides of grace, this is grace as “the power of God over man.” In “The Pangolin”, the sunset seems initially to perform the same function, as it has “extinguished” and “thwarted” the works of man. Once again, the sunset demarcates our limits, suggesting the powerlessness of fallen, imperfect humanity. But both poems also end with an invocation of “the power of God in man.” The child in “Virginia Britannia” receives an “intimation” of glory, and the thwarted workers of “The Pangolin” turn their gaze upward, and are reminded that the sun is an “alternating blaze” that will return “anew each day.” The sun not only “curtails”; it also “steadies my soul.” It is a sign of grace that concludes a book about fallenness; a reminder of what Moore sees as the hidden beneficence of a world riddled with sin, contingency, and unknowability. “Man” is “serge-clad, strong-shod,” ready to confront the dangers of the world, but for Moore, the only real steadying force sits above and beyond that world.

*Section Five: Conclusion*

In Moore's poetry of the mid-1930's, Modernism's celebration of the numinous power of the work of art is, at various points, either uncomfortably married to or messily divorced from a Protestant sense of the inherent and essential fallenness of humanity and the world. The poems of this period crackle with life, and with complication, because she cannot make a religion of art coexist comfortably with a religion of salvation. The former revels in the things of this world and in human creativity, while the latter looks to and through the world in the hope that the world might be transcended through the intervention of divine creativity. These poems—especially "The Jerboa" and "Virginia Britannia"—succeed because of the remarkable skill and artistry Moore must display in order to keep both of these balls in the air. At the end of "The Pangolin", as Moore celebrates the capacity of man to seek transcendence in spite of the withering evidence of the world, she finally decides to drop the ball of Modernism. Ignoring Nietzsche, ignoring Freud, ignoring Pound, she insists on a divine truth that precedes, succeeds, and exceeds us. She shows that art cannot unravel the riddle of grace, but she insists at the same time that grace is a fact. She has found, in faith, her solution to the major problem posed in her poetry for the past two decades. Moore lived until 1972, but *The Pangolin and Other Verse* was the last book in which she allowed herself to be tugged by an undercurrent of doubt, and it contained the last great poems of her career.

## Chapter Three

### Wallace Stevens and the Unfinished Project of a Secular Poetics

#### *Section One: Introduction*

Theories of secularization proffered by literary critics have almost always been theories of continuity. Typically, these arguments hold that traces of the symbolic or rhetorical structures of an older religious tradition can be seen in newer, secularized literary works or genres. One example of this type of analysis is my above chapter on Henry James, but in that piece I tread down a well-worn critical path. For instance, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, perhaps the most famous work on secularization in literature, M.H. Abrams argues that after the French Revolution, the genre of Christian spiritual autobiography mutated into a Romantic narrative of sublime transformation that fused the story arc and experiential rhetoric of prior religious forms with a newly secular content. The same basic story appears in a multitude of literary fields: Sacvan Bercovitch on American literature up to the Civil War; Barry Qualls on the Victorian novel; or Michael Gilmore on the romances of the American Renaissance, just to name a few.<sup>79</sup> All of these critics make arguments about continuity in which they claim that various forms of religious narrative, experience, or self-understanding were transformed by poets or novelists into secular versions that in some way paralleled religious forms even as the content was changed.

Wallace Stevens is intriguing, and even a bit paradoxical, because his own religion of art is so rabidly discontinuous from religion. Many of Stevens' major influences—the Romantics; the French Symbolists; Santayana; Whitman—had voiced their own theories

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<sup>79</sup>My own work, of course, has been deeply influenced by the thoughts of a number of Rutgers Professors on this topic, but especially by Marcia Ian's work on the "invisible religion of continuity" in late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Century American culture, and by Michael Warner's Spring 2003 seminar on Secularism.

of the secular spirituality of poetry, and it is these writers, rather than any theologian, scriptural text, or pious relative, that sit behind Stevens when he writes that poets are “the peers of saints” (1951, 51). Stevens is a second or even third-generation secularist, and in his poems on the religion of art, he does not grapple with Protestantism, like Moore, or even with more broadly conceived American ideas of religious experience, like James. He grapples with humanism, or, to be more specific to the language of our critical moment, he grapples with the texts and ideologies of the humanities, and he seeks to answer a question which the academics of early Twenty-First century have largely abandoned: can humans provide for themselves an object or idea capable of satisfying a spiritual craving that did not disappear along with God?

Mostly, he answers this question in the affirmative. Indeed, Stevens is, at times, the most triumphant secularist in all of American literature. More than Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, more than the New Critics at the highest tide of their veneration for the well-wrought urn, more even than his friend and mentor Santayana, Stevens believes that art and imagination can suffice as a source of spiritual experience. In a 1940 letter, Stevens writes, “The idea of God is a thing of the imagination. We no longer think that God was, but that he was imagined. The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination, as the highest objective of the poet, appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and, for that matter, greater, if the idea of God is only one of the things of the imagination” (1996, 369).

Through much of his work and most of his career, it is largely true that Stevens is discontinuous from religious traditions, and decidedly confident that the modern poet has a new role to play as a secular seer. It is thus with a true spirit of willful perversity that I focus the first half of my chapter on Stevens’ encounter with the mystical poetic theories of a French priest, and the second half of my chapter on a long poem that wonders whether the religion of art can be adequate to the spiritual demands placed upon it. The major texts that define Stevens’ secularizing project—the essays of *Necessary Angel*, the

poem “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”, his letters to biographer Hi Simons—were written in the early 1940’s. I look instead at poetry written in the years immediately before and the years after these texts. In my first section, I examine the lecture “The Irrational Element in Poetry” and the poetry collection *Ideas of Order*, both of which were written in the mid-thirties. I argue that, in these texts, Stevens secularizes the theory of “pure poetry” propounded by the Abbé Henri Brémond, who argued that the irreducible essence of poetry was not words on the page, but the ineffable, mystical experience of the poet immediately prior to writing the poem. Stevens finds much about the concept of pure poetry compelling, but he finally rejects it in *Ideas of Order* as producing a poetic imagination that is too self-enclosed. In the chapter’s final section, I analyze the 1944 long poem “Esthétique du Mal”. Here, Stevens asks whether the aesthetic imagination can help us to comprehend or compensate for the pain and evil inherent in existence. I argue that while the poem is not Stevens’ finest artistic achievement throughout, it is a fascinating opportunity see him take up his own argument about the value of poetry in a secular world as a hypothesis still to be proven, even to himself.

Taken together, these snapshots of two turning points in Stevens’ career show him to be one of the great self-questioning, self-ironizing poets in the English language. In the thirties, Stevens latches onto a theory which justifies poetry as an epiphanic substitute for religion, only to express clear misgivings about the artistic and ethical consequences of an excessively inward poetics. Then, in the forties, he announces in his essays that poetry can create a sense of order in a chaotic world, only to wonder in his poetry whether art can be an ontologically plausible or psychologically satisfying substitute for religion as a response to pain and evil. The poems I examine make clear just how far Stevens pushes his poetic “supreme fiction” as a secular correlative to religion, but they also show his sense of the difficulty of the central project of his career, which is to convince us that the imagination left alone to comprehend reality will be up to the task.

*Section Two: Pure Poetry, Ideas of Order, and the Problem of Poetic Solitude*

In 1936, Wallace Stevens tried his hand at one of the more difficult feats in American letters: he attempted to analyze a book of poetry by Wallace Stevens. In the dust-jacket blurb to the second edition of his 1935 book *Ideas of Order*, he concludes:

The book is essentially a book of pure poetry. I believe that, in any society, the poet should be the exponent of the imagination in that society. *Ideas of Order* attempts to illustrate the role of the imagination in life, and particularly in life at present. The more realistic life may be, the more it needs the stimulus of the imagination. (1989, 223)

This dust-jacket is, with the exception of a few brief reviews, the first prose statement on poetics Stevens had published in a career that was already two decades old. The passage is not particularly remarkable as a piece of literary criticism, but it is representative of the shifts that were taking place in Stevens' poetic terminology. For instance, when Stevens describes the "realistic" character of "life at present," he signals a newfound desire to write about social and political issues, even as he also implicitly responds to claims made by leftist literary critics that his poetry is overly sensuous and escapist.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, his argument that poetry should mediate between reality and the imagination anticipates his far more famous essays of the forties, which argue that the poet can and should create a sense of order in a disenchanted world.

However, for all the passage suggests about Stevens' present and future, a perceptive reader in 1936 might have been struck by the dust-jacket's invocation of a term that was, for many in the world of American poetry, coming to be viewed as not just past but passé. When Stevens claims that *Ideas of Order* is "essentially a book of pure poetry," he uses a term which was starting to lose currency, but which had, during the twenties, been

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<sup>80</sup>The most famous attack on Stevens from the left—famous primarily because Stevens responded to it in the poem "Owl's Clover"—is Stanley Burnshaw's *New Masses* essay "Turmoil in the Middle Ground". For the most thorough critical history of Stevens' reception by the left, see Alan Filreis' *Modernism from Right to Left*.

the topic of many widely disseminated essays in America, England, and, most famously, France. The concept of “pure poetry” has its roots in the work of Poe and Baudelaire, but in the modernist period, the discussion widened to include writers as varied and significant as Paul Valéry, Henri Bremond, George Moore, T.S. Eliot, Robert Penn Warren, and Benedetto Croce. Broadly defined, pure poetry denotes the element of poetry that is irreducibly poetic, or to put it another way, the aspect of a poem that communicates poetically rather than prosaically, that moves the reader with beauty or “art for art’s sake” rather than content or ideas.<sup>81</sup> But this broad definition is misleading because there were many different and often conflicting theories of what in a poem was essentially or absolutely poetic. For some writers, as we shall see, poetry was most pure when most objective, when it was burned clean of the personality of the poet and focused on the outside world of things or the contained world of form. For other theorists, however, pure poetry had to be subjective, irrupting from moments of inspiration or mystical experience. When Stevens applies the term “pure poetry” to *Ideas of Order*, then, he tosses his latest book into choppy critical waters.

Indeed, the waters were so choppy that Stevens himself gives conflicting opinions about whether the term “pure poetry” is appropriate to *Ideas of Order*. In an October 1935 letter to his publisher Ronald Lane Latimer, written only a few months prior to the dust-jacket discussed above, Stevens states that his work of the twenties could be classified as “pure poetry”, but in recent years he has tried to write poetry that is more invested in “life”. In response to the claims of many critics that his poetry is “essentially decorative”, he writes:

...I was on the point of saying I did not agree with the opinion that my verse is

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<sup>81</sup>D.J. Mossop’s *Pure Poetry*, which is probably the best overall history of the competing theories of pure poetry, presents the following general definition of the term: “...it denotes samples of poetry which are or *appear* to be unusually free from non-artistic values and the sort of artistic value which poetry can share with prose” (21). Robert Penn Warren notes that the one factor all theories of pure poetry share in common is hostility to the inclusion of “ideas” in poetry (247).

decorative, when I remembered that when *Harmonium* was in the making<sup>82</sup> there was a time when I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together. I then believed in *pure poetry*, as it was called.

I still have a distinct liking for that sort of thing. But we live in a different time, and life means a good deal more to us now-a-days than literature does. In the period of which I have just spoken, I thought literature meant most. Moreover, I am not so sure that I don't think exactly the same thing now, but, unquestionably, I think at the same time that life is the essential part of literature. (1996, 288).

As in the *Ideas of Order* dust-jacket, Stevens is anxious in this letter about the social role of the poet during the Depression, but I am more interested in the different meanings he gives the term "pure poetry" in each text. In this letter to Latimer, "pure poetry" means solipsistic aestheticism removed from life, but in the dust-jacket the term denotes a poetics in which "imagination" and "life" can provide a mutual "stimulus" to one another. Indeed, Stevens argues in the letter that his poetry has incorporated "life" only as he has begun to evolve away from pure poetry, but in the dust-jacket, the accommodation of "life" to "the imagination" is at the heart of what he means by pure poetry.

These dissonant uses of the term "pure poetry" are instructive. Stevens' confusion reflects the fact that the writers who had used and debated the term had defined it in murky and conflicting ways.<sup>83</sup> More significantly, in the mid-thirties, Stevens is in a moment of transition. His work is evolving from the aestheticism and playfulness of *Harmonium* to the re-enchanting, cosmological aims of *Ideas of Order* and "Owl's Clover," and his attraction to the term "pure poetry" must have been related to the fact that it was used at various times by various critics to describe both of these types of poetry. The term was a nodal point that encompassed both his past and his future.<sup>84</sup> A.

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<sup>82</sup> *Harmonium* was published in 1923.

<sup>83</sup> A. Walton Litz's essay "Wallace Stevens Defense of Poetry: *La poesie pure*, the New Romantic, and the Pressure of Reality" gives an excellent account of Stevens' knowledge of the field.

<sup>84</sup> See also Joseph Carroll, who argues that, "The lingering note of hedonistic aestheticism in his definition of [pure poetry] harks back to the outlook of his earliest work. At the same time, the definition contains suggestions of a religious purpose for poetry, and though these suggestions are as yet tentative and ambiguous, they point the way ahead" (14).



Walton Litz, discussing the letter I quote above, notes that “It is as if [Stevens] delighted in teasing the ambiguities out of the word ‘pure,’ a process which helped him to define his own aims” (118). I agree with Litz here, though I am not sure that, in the letter and dust-jacket, Stevens is “teasing” so much as stumbling through these ambiguities.

In December of 1936, however, in his lecture “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” Stevens is much more deliberate in his use of the term “pure poetry.” His lecture deals at length with the theory of pure poetry articulated in the mid-twenties by French scholar Henri Bremond. Bremond’s frequently-attacked theory was based on a connection he drew between poetry and mysticism, and Stevens distances himself from Bremond’s theism even as he relies on Bremond’s ideas about poetic creativity to support his claim that poetry can be a secular equivalent to the sacred. For most American poets and critics, the debate over pure poetry registered as little more than a passing fashion, an import from Paris that was all the rage for a season, but for Stevens, the concept catalyzed the development of his theory and poetry in the mid-thirties. In this section, then, I want to use Stevens’ interest in the concept of pure poetry as a context for reading the many poems in *Ideas of Order* that dramatize the aesthetic in terms borrowed from religious experience. It is particularly significant that Stevens embraced Bremond, rather than another of the many theorists of pure poetry who were far more reputable and admired, but this is only clear if we look first at the critical history from which the arguments of both Bremond and Stevens had emerged.

By all accounts, the concept of pure poetry originated in Edgar Allan Poe’s 1850 essay “The Poetic Principle”, in which he attacks what he calls “the heresy of *The Didactic*,” or the belief that “the ultimate object of all poetry is Truth.” Poe instead argues that the most “supremely noble” poem is the one “which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem’s sake” (1435-6). Like everything else in Poe, the value of this essay was first appreciated by the French, and although Poe himself does not use the term “pure poetry” in his essay, Baudelaire and Mallarmé cited him as

the progenitor of their own conceptions of *poesie pure*. Baudelaire, like Poe, advocated “ridding poetry of reasoning aimed at truth,” and also felt that pure poetry should “exclude certain types of emotive value” which were deemed too “vulgar” in favor of the expression of privileged moments of aesthetic insight or vision (Mossop 83). Mallarmé also felt that the purest poetry “made no concessions to the non-artistic values of truth and morality” (Mossop 111), but he added a new dimension to the theory, and laid the groundwork for one of the central tenets of modernism, when he argued that the pure *poet* must be impersonal, and disappear behind his work. In his essay *Crise de Vers*, Mallarmé writes, “If the poem is to be pure, the poet’s voice must be stilled and the initiative taken by the words themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision. And in an exchange of gleams they will flame out like some glittering swath of fire sweeping over precious stones, and thus replace the audible breathing in lyric poetry of old—replace the poet’s own personal and passionate control of verse” (40-1).

The major ideas that Baudelaire and Mallarmé amended to Poe’s argument—a demand for impersonality and a valuation of irrational moments of aesthetic insight—cast a broad shadow over modernist conceptions of pure poetry. Mallarmé, along with the intermediating influence of Eliot’s early essays, clearly impacted the major text on pure poetry written in English in the 1920’s, George Moore’s introduction to his 1924 anthology *Pure Poetry*. Moore defines pure poetry as “something that the poet creates outside of his own personality” (22), and he uses this definition as the theoretical justification for his anthology’s anti-Victorian revision of the canon (Gautier and Poe in; Keats and Tennyson<sup>85</sup> out). His introduction shows how deeply the post-war generation had imbibed the ideal of impersonality, as he insists that “the time has come for somebody to ask if there is not more poetry in things than in ideas, and more pleasure in

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<sup>85</sup>Keats, according to Moore, was “a pussy cat on a sunny lawn” (25), while Tennyson “was beguiled and yielded himself to moralities and mumbled them ‘til he was eighty” (32). Both examples are fairly representative of Moore’s tone.

Gautier's 'Tulip' than in Wordsworth's ecclesiastical, political, and admonitory sonnets" (10).

Paul Valéry also extended the association of pure poetry with impersonality by arguing that the poet "is a pure technician" whose concern should not be the exposition of ideas, but rather an absolute and self-enclosed aestheticism that willfully elides meaning (Mossop 199). However, he was also careful to note that an absolutely pure poem was an impossibility. In an essay published in the *New York Herald-Tribune*<sup>86</sup> in 1928, Valéry states, "I regard the idea of pure poetry as being essentially analytic. It is, in short, a fiction deduced from observation, which is intended to help in defining our idea of poems in general" (1). Pure poetry in this sense is less an aesthetic program than a theoretical limit case that allows a critic to differentiate poetry from "the most direct and most insensitive expression of a thought" (1). He goes on to note that, in the terms he is using, music is far more "pure" than poetry because musical notes are an abstract, non-referential language that can be defined and reproduced in a "constant and identical fashion," whereas "for the poet there has been no constructor of scales; he has no tuning fork or metronome. No certainty exists in his realm; his only rude instruments are grammar and the dictionary" (8).

The first major strand of the theory of pure poetry, then, involved impersonal and even objective conceptions of poetry that were suggested by Poe's argument that a poem should be "written solely for the poem's sake." However, a much more subjective tendency was also lurking in Poe's essay in his fascination with what he calls the "Poetic Sentiment", or the flash of irrational insight occasioned in the poet or the reader by encounters with "supernal Loveliness" (1437).<sup>87</sup> These aesthetic flashes are "pure"—they

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<sup>86</sup>While it is tempting to imagine that Stevens might have read this essay—and certainly we have no proof that he did not—the evidence suggests that he was not deeply interested in Valéry at this phase of his career. In two different letters to two different correspondents written ten years apart, in 1935 and 1945, Stevens admits to having read almost nothing by Valéry in spite of owning several of his books (1996, 290, 510-1). In the last few years of his life, however, he began to read Valéry voraciously, and even wrote the introduction to the Bollingen Foundation's 1956 translation of Valéry's *Dialogues*.

<sup>87</sup>"It has been my purpose to suggest that, while [the Poetic] Principle itself is, strictly and simply, the

are free of didactic or moralistic content—but Poe’s claim that poetry stems from “an elevating excitement of the soul” hints at the possibility of a theory of pure poetry that would be experiential rather than objective.<sup>88</sup> In the twenties, the most significant theory of the *experience* of pure poetry was that of the Abbé Henri Bremond, a French literary scholar famous for his six-volume history of French Religious Literature. Bremond’s conflation of mysticism and poetics catalyzed the modernist discussion of pure poetry, and certainly guided Stevens’ understanding of the term.

Bremond took the idea that poetry ought not to be didactic to mean that truly pure poetry must not present ideas, and, on an even more fundamental level, that the most purely poetic aspects of a poem have nothing to do with rational communication: “To say that poetry cannot be didactic is to say that the poet as such is not, and cannot be, a man who endeavors to communicate his ideas” (74). Poets, he argued, should “pursue ineffable experience, clinging to the mane of their ancient Pegasus, intoxicating themselves at their ancient fountain” (79). Bremond’s fascination with irrational moments of inspiration is nothing new in poetic theory, of course, but his singularity lies in how many aspects of poetry he declared to be inessential to inspiration, and therefore impure. Not only didacticism, but also the sonic, imagistic, or symbolic qualities of a poem are impure, since all of these can be explained by rational analysis of a poem (Decker 19). Indeed, Bremond’s sense of the fundamental impurity of language led him to conclude that “la poésie pure est silence” (xxi). And yet, this does not mean that Bremond felt that pure poetry did not exist. Instead, he argued that pure poetry was a non- or pre-linguistic mystical state experienced by the poet immediately prior to writing a poem, or by the reader during an encounter with a poem. As Henry Decker notes, for

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Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty, the manifestation of the Principle is always found in *an elevating excitement of the Soul*—quite independent of that passion which is the intoxication of the Heart—or of that Truth which is the satisfaction of reason” (Poe 1452-3).

<sup>88</sup>For a lengthier consideration of the argument that pure poetry involves “two apparently conflicting preoccupations”—one objective and concerned with technique; the other subjective and concerned with inspiration—see Decker (93-8).

Bremond “the poetic effect of poetry, reaching far beneath our surface faculties, is thus the stirring of that *zone profonde* where inspiration is engendered. What in a poem does not have this effect, is not essential to it as poetry.” (20) “True poetry,” Bremond argues, somehow bypasses all the normal denotative effects of language and effects us “in a region in which intellectual curiosity has nothing to do” (58). The essentially poetic matter of a poem impacts the reader “up to the central zone, the access of which is forbidden to all didacticisms, however eloquent; the poet’s *Anima* stimulates this deeper self of the reader, elevates it, and associates it with the poet’s own experience” (159). It is important to note that the connection Bremond draws between poetry and religious experience is not a metaphor, but rather an argument of identity: pure poetry is a mystical experience that is of the same type, but finally less profound than, a true religious experience: “the poet in the last resort is but an evanescent mystic whose mysticism breaks down” (188-9).

Bremond’s arguments set off a widespread debate in French literary circles that even reached America when his chief rival, Paul Souday, wrote in *The New York Times* that Bremond is an “extremely chimerical” theorist who “treats reason like a personal enemy” (9).<sup>89</sup> By the thirties, however, the furor had subsided, and many critics expressed open disdain for the era of debates over pure poetry. Speaking at Oxford, Benedetto Croce noted that, if “ideas” are to be excluded from poetry, then Homer, Sophocles, Dante, and Shakespeare would not qualify as “pure poets” (703). He worried, furthermore, that poetry that followed the dictates of pure poetry “would be nothing but a voluptuous thrill leading only to satiety, and comparable...to barren sensuality, bearing no fruit in the life of the soul. It could receive nothing from thought or will and could give them nothing” (704). In America during the Depression, leftist critics tended to dismiss pure poetry as part of the excessive solipsism and aestheticism of the twenties. Max Eastman argued

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<sup>89</sup>By far the most thorough account of this particular chapter in the debate on pure poetry can be found in Henry Decker’s *Pure Poetry: 1925-1930*.

that, while pure poetry had some artistic value, it had led in the Twenties to a “Cult of Unintelligibility” (92). Malcolm Cowley similarly wrote in *Exile’s Return*, his 1934 memoir of the Lost Generation, that pure poetry was symptomatic of the ways that even the most brilliant modernists had carried the idea of art for art’s sake to ultimately “futile” extremes of “anti-human” obscurity and aloofness (141-5).

When Stevens begins to discuss pure poetry in the mid-thirties, then, he is a few years late to the party. The advantage of his belatedness, however, is that he had no rhetorical obligation to position himself along a rigidly drawn party line, but could instead freely borrow and amend the ideas he found useful. In his lecture “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” Stevens uses Bremond’s mystical poetics to help formulate his own secular conception of poetry commensurate to spiritual experience.<sup>90</sup> The lecture, delivered at Harvard in December 1936, has generally been disparaged by Stevens’ critics—Litz, for instance, argues, “it is diffuse, rhetorical, and somewhat anxious in tone” (115). Stevens himself even seems to have sensed this diffuseness when he notes in his conclusion that “I use the word irrational more or less indifferently, as between its several uses” (1989, 232). Part of what he means by “irrational” is “unconscious,” and a large portion of his time is spent ruminating on Freud and the role of the unconscious mind in poetic creativity. Stevens turns to Brémond, however, in order to help him answer a question much closer to his own heart: “Why does one write poetry?” (227). Stevens writes, “In his discourse before the Academy, ten years ago, M. Bremond elucidated a mystical motive and made it clear that, in his opinion, one writes poetry to find God” (227). While Stevens admits that he does not share Bremond’s overtly theological concerns, he cites Bremond extensively as he explains his own reasons for writing poetry:

M. Brémond proposed the identity of poetry and prayer, and followed Bergson in relying, in the last analysis, on faith. M. Brémond eliminated reason as the

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<sup>90</sup> Stevens was decidedly nervous about the lecture. He wrote to Ronald Lane Latimer that “This is something that I have never done before and I look forward to it the way one must look forward to one’s first baby” (1996, 313).

essential element in poetry. Poetry in which the irrational element dominated was pure poetry. M. Brémond himself does not permit any looseness in the expression pure poetry, which he confines to a very small body of poetry, as he should, if the lines in which he recognizes it are as precious to his spirit as they appear to be. In spite of M. Brémond, pure poetry is a term that has grown to be descriptive of poetry in which not the true subject but the poetry of the subject is paramount. All mystics approach God through the irrational. Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational. If we descend a little from this height and apply the looser and broader definition of pure poetry, it is possible to say that, while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in the harmonious and orderly. (1989, 227-8)

Stevens begins this passage talking about “faith,” and a leap of poetic faith is where the passage ends, as he proffers the counterintuitive proposition that embracing “the irrational” will allow the poet to “approach...the harmonious and orderly.” Certainly Stevens is playing fast and loose when he invokes Plato, for whom the discovery of harmony and order was most assuredly not the result of an irrational process (or, for that matter, a poetic process). Indeed, Stevens’ use of “the Platonic good” as a replacement for the divine vision of Bremond’s pure poet is a surprising choice. In *Republic*, Socrates argues that the form of the good is so ideal that it cannot be experienced or described directly, and its general nature can only be comprehended through an analogy drawn from geometry, wherein truth or beauty are to the form of the good as a diagonal drawn by hand is to the abstract concept of a diagonal (506-511). Stevens and Bremond, like Plato, attempt to imagine how one could comprehend something that is indescribable (pure poetry, the form of the good), but for Stevens this comprehension is the result of an irrational epiphany rather than dialectical reason. When Stevens suggests, then, that the poet finds “the Platonic good” through something akin to a religious experience, he mystifies Plato even as he secularizes Bremond.

However, in spite of the fact that Stevens back’s away from Bremond’s theology, it is nevertheless apparent that he shares with Bremond a belief that the language of religious

experience can be a vital terminology for poetic theory.<sup>91</sup> For instance, Stevens claims that we can “find in poetry that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane” (1989, 228). Poets, Stevens argues, search for “a freedom not previously experienced, a poetry not previously conceived of, [which] may occur with the suddenness inherent in poetic metamorphosis. For poets, that possibility is the ultimate obsession. They purge themselves before reality, in the meantime, in what they intend to be saintly exercises” (231).

The final sentence of this passage is befuddling, even by the considerable standards of the debate on pure poetry, and I am not sure it is possible to state definitively what Stevens means. When he invokes “saintly exercises,” he continues the metaphorical linkage between poetic revelation and mysticism that fills the essay. Indeed, the link the sentence draws between ascetic self-denial and the hope of otherworldly insight has a Catholic bent to it that suggests the degree to which Brémond colored Stevens’ thinking. But beyond those readily apparent readings, the passage is murky. What does it mean to say that poets “purge themselves before reality”? The idea that writing can be a sort of pouring forth is not terribly unusual, but the “purging” Stevens describes is not pure poetry, since in his account it happens “in the meantime,” while the poet waits for a sudden “poetic metamorphosis.” “Reality” is perhaps the word most in need of parsing. Although Stevens discusses Plato in this lecture, by “reality” he does not seem to mean the Platonic real, but its opposite: the prosaic or everyday. Earlier in the essay, Stevens elucidates “the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet” by describing how a fairly mundane scene of a Hartford winter (a cat running on some snow) became for him a “pretext” for a poem (224). If reality, then, is the everyday, purging oneself before it would seem to denote a sort of ascetic focus on the facts of the world undertaken in the hopes that some flourish of imagination will result.

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<sup>91</sup>Milton J. Bates similarly argues that Stevens uses Brémond’s religious ideas as a “stalking horse” for his own secular ideas. See especially pp. 130-2 (1985).



There is a stimulus-response logic governing how Stevens thinks about reality and imagination in this lecture (elsewhere he talks about a Rimbaud poem that was inspired by an American circus) that is, in and of itself, not especially interesting, and is a mere cartoon of the complex relationship between the world and the aesthetic depicted in his best poetry. What is significant about this lecture, however, is that it is a pragmatic revision of Bremond's ideas about poetic revelation. I use "pragmatic" here partly to echo its philosophical sense, but I primarily mean it in its everyday sense. Bremond, after all, was a theorist and historian, but Stevens is a poet, and he is trying to explain how actual poems actually get made. "Reality," then, gets introduced into the essay as a sphere of mundane things that can spur the poet to create, but in his next section, he shifts to reality as a political or historical category, and argues that political reality can be both a stumbling block and source of obligation: "The pressure of the contemporaneous from the time of the beginning of the World War to the present time has been constant and extreme. No one can have lived apart in a happy oblivion" (229).<sup>92</sup> If "happy oblivion" is impossible in the modernist era, then the pure poet's "momentary existence on an exquisite plane" must be a more complicated, or even morally dubious, thing to achieve. Stevens states that "reality"—the external world of objects, events, and ideas—is as essential to poetry as imagination. From Bremond's perspective, "reality" as Stevens defines it would be impure, but Stevens insists that poetry emerges from both imagination and the "pressure of the contemporaneous." Stevens' secularization of Bremond is perhaps best exemplified when he differentiates poets from priests in a manner that even Whitman, trumpeter of the claim that poets are the new priests, most likely would have appreciated: "The poet cannot profess the irrational as the priest professes the unknown. The poet's role is broader, because he must be possessed, along with everything else, by the earth and by men in their earthy implications" (232-3). In short, then, Stevens argues

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<sup>92</sup> The phrase "pressure of the contemporaneous" presages the phrase "the pressure of reality," which Stevens uses repeatedly in his better-known 1942 essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words."

that poets must have some converse with the “mystical and irrational” experience of pure poetry, but he also makes a case that poetry cannot be absolutely pure.

And this brings me back to *Ideas of Order*, the book Stevens had published a year prior to this lecture, and which, in the various documents quoted at the beginning of this section, he identifies as both a book of pure poetry and a book that has evolved beyond pure poetry. In my estimation, *Ideas of Order* is actually far more complicated and interesting than Stevens suggests in either of these readings. *Ideas of Order* is not, by any of the definitions discussed above, a book of pure poetry—indeed, its claim to be a book of “Ideas” already violates Poe’s cardinal rule. What it is, however, is a book *about* pure poetry which repeatedly dramatizes its misgivings about and even its inability to be pure poetry. Over and over again, Stevens either speaks of pure poetic expression as a hypothetical ideal, hedged about with words like “may” and “perhaps”, or he places the speakers of the poems outside of and looking in upon the subjective space of “mystical and irrational” aesthetic experience. When he attempts to describe more directly something akin to the experience of inspiration that so fascinated Poe and Bremond, he tends to meditate on what he calls, in “The American Sublime”, “The empty spirit/ In vacant space,” with a particular emphasis on the emptiness and vacancy of creative solitude. In *Ideas of Order*, Stevens is fascinated, as was Bremond, by the idea that poetry in its essence is not linguistic—repeatedly he imagines poetry as pure sound, pure experience, a pure channeling of the world—but the speakers of his poems do not actually produce this non-linguistic poetic ideal. They stand apart from their object of study, framed in Stevens’ measured language, and meditate ambivalently on the idea of a comprehension that goes deeper than language.

Part of what makes *Ideas of Order* so amenable to Bremond’s terminology of intense subjective experience is that it is a deeply lonely book. A significant number of the poems present a speaker who stands by himself and describes a static natural landscape,<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>By my count, 13 of 36 poems in the book fit this description (slightly more than one third), although since

but even when Stevens moves to ostensibly social spaces, they tend to be either abandoned, like the old casino in “Academic Discourse at Havana”, or alienating, as in “Farewell to Florida”, where urban crowds are first described as “a slime of men,” then as a tide “moving as the water moves” (1990, 118). The obvious exception to this rule is the book’s most exceptional poem, “The Idea of Order at Key West”, but even there, the speaker’s turn to address “Ramon Fernandez” feels more like a stage direction in a closet drama than a moment of naturalistic intersubjective connection. For the most part, this Stevensian solitude is not leavened by the humor that makes the reader feel like a more welcome overhearer of the lyrics in *Harmonium*, or the discursive, essayistic tone that makes his later, longer poems seem less hermetically sealed. This, I think, has something to do with why Stevens’ critics have tended to rate *Ideas of Order* below many of his other books—certainly it lies behind Roy Harvey Pearce’s complaint that the reader of *Ideas of Order* is “essentially an onlooker” to Stevens’ various observations and is never called upon “to face his own special human predicament” (390).

And yet, the solitary speakers depicted in these poems evince, with a directness atypical of Stevens, his anxiety about the nature of poet’s calling in a disenchanted world. Stevens is not alone in his poems about nature in the same way that the Romantics were alone. Wordsworth, transfixed before a vertiginous cliff-face in Book One of *The Prelude*, feels the “Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!” as the “fellowship” of Nature helps him feel “A grandeur in the beatings of the heart” (1850, I. 401-14). It is immediately apparent in the opening stanza of “Botanist on Alp, No. 1” that Stevens experiences a different sort of nature:

Panoramas are not what they used to be.  
 Claude has been dead a long time  
 And apostrophes are forbidden on the funicular.  
 Marx has ruined Nature,  
 For the moment. (1-5)

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this number is based on my assesment of what poems by Stevens are “about,” others might arrive at a different number.

Stevens is frequently praised for his lyricism, but looking at this stanza, one is reminded that his best lines are often deadpan rather than musical. There is an obvious comic disconnect when such ponderous, epochal declamations involve a word as jarringly unpoetic as “funicular,”<sup>94</sup> and I hope that Stevens meant for us to smile as we puzzled over the word “on” (are we forbidden to write an “Ode: On the Funicular”, or are we forbidden to write an Ode while on the funicular?). And yet, for a poet as steeped in Romanticism as Stevens, the world must seem diminished when panoramas, apostrophes, and nature can exist only as fodder for slight ironies of tone. This theme of diminishment appears again in “Autumn Refrain”, where Stevens describes the Keatsian nightingale, inspiration for “measureless measures,” as being “not a bird for me/ But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air/ I have never—shall never hear” (5-7).

But “Autumn Refrain” does not end on these lines bemoaning poetic deafness. Instead, the second half of the fourteen-line poem turns to describe a far more complicated account of a hearing beneath hearing. Stevens writes:

And yet beneath  
 The stillness of everything gone, and being still,  
 Being and sitting still, something resides,  
 Some skreaking and skittering residuum,  
 And grates these evasions of the nightingale  
 Though I have never—shall never hear that bird.  
 And the stillness is in the key, all of it is,  
 The stillness is all in the key of that desolate sound. (7-14).

Anthony Whiting has noted the thematic link between this and Stevens’ other famous lyric about barrenness, “The Snow Man” (1990, 63), but it is striking how much more replete, with its “junipers shagged with ice” and “spruces rough in the distant glitter/ Of the January sun” (5-7), is that poem of winter than this poem of autumn. In “The Snow Man”, the world’s apparent visual blankness nevertheless reveals something undeniably beautiful to the sufficiently attentive poet, but in “Autumn Refrain”, the idea of aural

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<sup>94</sup>A funicular is a short cable railway built on a steep incline which gains its propulsional capabilities from the gravitational force of counterbalanced ascending and descending cars. I rode one once in Pittsburgh.

blankness brings a sadness, even a terror, that can be felt in the phrase that, repeated twice, becomes a sort of dread chorus: “I have never—shall never hear.” The turn in the poem’s second half suggests, though, that even in the “stillness of everything gone,” the speaker hears something. The something he hears is not pleasant—a “skreaking and skrittering residuum”—and it is also, significantly, a “residuum,” not an actual sound but a clanging memory of the “The skreak and skritter of evening gone” produced by grackles just before nightfall in the first line of the poem. The poem ends, then, with the speaker alone in the night, remembering the bare traces of a song and tuning it to the stillness of the world—solipsism set in the key of solitude. This conclusion can be read either as a frightening vision of the sterility of a pure poetry of subjective experience, or as a sort of minor victory, where the modern poet willing to resign himself to the song that will suffice survives and continues to sing to a disenchanted world, unlike Keats’ speaker, who sinks into oblivion under the weight of too much abundance. Harold Bloom once described Stevens’ “fear of his own capacity for solipsistic transport,” and that fear, I think, accounts for the ambivalence of this poem, where the speaker is not transported but fixed (though not, importantly, transfixed) as he imagines a moment of aesthetic experience that is pure precisely in Bremond’s sense that “la poésie pure est silence.”

Where “Autumn Refrain” is an ironically musical title for a poem that meditates on silence, “The Reader” takes place in an unlit room at night, and the action it describes can hardly be called “reading” in any typical sense of the term:

All night I sat reading a book,  
Sat reading as if in a book  
Of sombre pages.

It was autumn and falling stars  
Covered the shriveled forms  
Crouched in the moonlight.

No lamp was burning as I read,

A voice was mumbling, "Everything  
Falls back to coldness,

Even the musky muscadines,  
The melons, the vermilion pears  
Of the leafless garden."

The sombre pages bore no print  
Except the trace of burning stars  
In the frosty heaven.

The "book" this reader reads, like Bremond's pure poetry, is not in any way linguistic. In the final tercet, we discover that there are no words on the page, but instead the reader is reading "the trace of burning stars/ In the frosty heaven." These lines recall the Protestant practice of reading the world as God's second book, but here the text of the world reveals a vacant cosmos. Stevens' reader observes a "frosty heaven" looming over a world of "shriveled forms" where an ostensibly prophetic voice does not declaim but "mumbles" the message that "Everything/ Falls back to coldness." This is not a poem about an idea of order, but an idea of entropy. Bremond, as discussed above, enthusiastically endorsed the "ineffable experience" which he felt poetry could produce when it goes beneath our rational faculties and into what he called the "central zone" of subjectivity. Stevens lets us feel the allure of this type of experience when he has the mumbling "voice" of revelation speak in four lines filled with lush imagery and overt alliteration that contrast to the austere tone of the rest of poem. However, the poem ends with austerity in its invocation of a "frosty heaven," and we are left to understand that the ineffable experience of the reader is ineffable because it signifies nothing beyond itself. This does not mean this experience is without value—even in a frosty heaven, the stars are "burning," and if this cosmos is empty, it nevertheless has a chilly beauty in Stevens' presentation. But the poem, in spite of being in the first person, feels distant from the pure poetic experience it describes, as though Stevens is observing himself observing, and probing the possibilities and limitations of a metaphysics centered on aesthetics.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>For more on the dynamic of Stevens observing himself observing, see Alan D. Perlis' "Wallace Stevens"

“Mozart, 1935”, another poem about the spiritual uses of art, is as energetic as “The Reader” is subdued. It is also very different from the poems discussed above because, instead of dramatizing (and to some extent idealizing) the creative mind in isolation, Stevens thinks about the artist’s place in the tattered social fabric of the Depression.<sup>96</sup> However, as in “Autumn Refrain” or “The Reader”, Stevens imagines poetry that, at least in the first three lines, does not aspire to signification. The poem begins:

Poet, be seated at the piano.  
 Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo,  
 Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic,  
 Its envious cachinnation.

If they throw stones upon the roof  
 While you practice arpeggios,  
 It is because they carry down the stairs  
 A body in rags.  
 Be seated at the piano.

These two stanzas describe very different things—the music within, the mob without—but the word “cachinnation” is the pivot point that holds the poem together. Aurally, “cachinnation” seems initially to be of a piece with the nonsense jazz terms in the preceding lines, but unlike “hoo-hoo-hoo” or “ric-a-nic,” it is an actual word, meaning “laughter.” Specifically in this line, it is “envious” laughter, and the spectre of envy hangs over the poem as we turn to the angry mob in the next stanza. The tone of the second stanza aims at calming the apprehensions of the “poet” Stevens has summoned. Stevens assures the poet that the cacchinating “they” are throwing stones at the roof not because they are out for his blood, but rather that of the corpse being borne down the

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Reader Poems and the Effacement of Metaphor”, which examines several poems in which Stevens depicts readers, and concerns itself specifically with the ways that the introduction of a “plurality of systems” into the poem complicates the process of reading.

<sup>96</sup>“Mozart, 1935” was one of the later poems Stevens composed for *Ideas of Order*, and unlike “Autumn Refrain” and “The Reader”, which were written earlier in the thirties, this poem’s consideration of the question of the relation of high art to politics shows Stevens moving toward the interest in “reality” that animates 1936’s “The Irrational Element in Poetry” and his subsequent long poems of the late thirties, “Owl’s Clover” and “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” For an interesting reading of the significance of the temporal groupings in which the different lyrics of *Ideas of Order* were composed, see Bloom’s chapter on the book in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*.

stairs, and therefore there is still an opportunity to “Be seated at the piano.” This visceral fear of angry, dispossessed hordes is also registered in the other poem in *Ideas of Order* that deals overtly with the Depression, “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz”:

There are these sudden mobs of men,  
 These sudden clouds of faces and arms,  
 An immense suppression, freed,  
 These voices crying without knowing for what,  
 Except to be happy, without knowing how,  
 Imposing forms they cannot describe,  
 Requiring order beyond their speech.

There is something decidedly patrician in the claim that the masses require “order beyond their speech,” and reducing suffering people to “sudden clouds of faces of arms” does not necessarily suggest sympathetic fellow-feeling. But before I give my reading over entirely to pot-shots at Stevens’ moral failings, it is worth examining what he thinks are the responsibilities of the pure poet who is compelled by circumstances to “play the present,” and in order to do that, I need to give Stevens a chance to say his piece. This is what he requests of the poet seated at the piano in “Mozart, 1935”:

Be thou the voice,  
 Not you. Be thou, be thou  
 The voice of angry fear,  
 The voice of this besieging pain.  
 Be thou that wintry sound  
 As of the great wind howling,  
 By which sorrow is released,  
 Dismissed, absolved  
 In a starry placating.

Stevens’ proposed response to suffering is catharsis; specifically, a musical or lyric catharsis, wherein the poet produces a primeval sound “As of the great wind howling” that channels and even “placates” the collective “howling” of the masses. This is literally the precise opposite of Bremond’s dictum that the purest poetry is silence, and yet this



“wintry sound” does seem to be free of ideas and completely given over to emotion. Stevens suggests, then, that the refined artist (figured here as a classical pianist) has been interrupted from the pursuit of art for art’s sake by external events, but he can now offer to the world something that, while it is not art for its own sake, is not really art for any practical purpose either, except that it grants people the experience of being collectively stirred. Stevens wants to imagine a way that a poetry that makes nothing happen can nevertheless heal people. He shifts, then, from his major theme, the secularization of solitary spiritual experience, to the secularization of collective religious experience, a topic which, as we shall see in the next section, becomes much more important to Stevens during the forties.

Two of Stevens’ most perceptive readers of the last fifteen years have approached “Mozart, 1935” very differently. Mark Halliday feels that the poem evinces a lack of interpersonal sympathy, as he argues, “We notice that [the poet’s] achievement of a starry placating is not to involve any attempt to change the social conditions that have brought others’ pain to Stevens’ attention. Sorrow is not to be remedied, nor even alleviated, but ‘released/ Dismissed, absolved...’ We should wonder why suffering should need absolution—is it sinful?” (16) Alan Filreis takes a different approach, and argues that Stevens is attempting to salvage the lyric for a decade where lyric solitude seemed increasingly impossible: “[The return to lyric] was to be accomplished not by shutting out of one’s lyric the streets full of cries, fear, and anger and the throwing of stones, but rather by giving voice to these elements within a lyric that had made a theme of its own potential loss” (215). I think both critics make valid points. It is clear that Stevens’ response to economic troubles is as much fear of the dispossessed as it is fear for the dispossessed, and I do not think it is unfair to see something cynical in the idea that the masses require “placating.” What Filreis points to, however, is how much Stevens’ fear is really a fear for the future of poetry. Both in the general sense that massive poverty made the cloistered lyric poet seem like a privileged anachronism, and in the more direct

sense that modernism, pure poetry, and Wallace Stevens himself all came under attack from literary critics during the thirties, Stevens felt in a new way the need to reimagine what his poetry could do. “Mozart, 1935” insists that poetry has to engage the world on some level, but it cannot engage it too journalistically or ideologically or it will cease to do what poetry does. If poetry is escapist—if it “releases” or “absolves”—it is because Stevens felt that the world needed escaping from, and ultimately all that he could offer the rest of us was the chance to escape with him.

Thus far, I have looked at a set of poems in which Stevens figures poetry as something that, in its abstract essence, either evades or exceeds the use of actual words. In “The Reader”, the reader reads a book with nothing written in it; in “Mozart, 1935”, the speaker encourages the “poet” to create a cacophony that detaches itself from the signifying capacity of language. In some poems, then, Stevens figures a poetics of silence, in others a poetics of music, and thus he recalls the metaphors used to describe pure poetry in Bremond and Valéry, respectively. Where his emphasis differs from these writers, however, is in his sense of the limitations of a pure poetics. Whether in the poems that evince a terror of creative solitude, like “The Reader” or “Autumn Refrain”, or the poems that try to enunciate a way that poetry could engage with politics or history, like “Mozart, 1935”, the speakers of *Ideas of Order* recoil from an absolute surrender to the aesthetic. Stevens always argued that poetry could reshape the reader’s perceptions and thus give order to a chaotic world, but the sense of order he tries to invoke, particularly in this book, is contingent upon keeping an analytic distance from aesthetic experience. Nowhere in *Ideas of Order* would a speaker ever ask, as Keats does, “Do I wake or sleep?” Stevens is always wide awake, and more even than his critique of the solipsistic tendencies of the poetic subject, or his concern that poetry must engage with political reality, it is his insistence on speakers who anatomize and discern that accounts for the inadequacy of the terminology of pure poetry to his actual poems.

“The Idea of Order at Key West” resembles the above poems in that its speaker

stands apart from a work of art (specifically, a song sung by a woman on a beach) so that he can appraise and categorize its aesthetic qualities. Through the first five stanzas of the poem, if any experience of pure poetry is taking place, it is only in the experience of the singer who “Knew that there never was a world for her/ Except the one she sang, and, singing, made” (41-2). In these early stanzas, even as the speaker seeks to define the singer’s solitary experience, he does not ever share it. The rhetoric of these early stanzas is characterized by assertions of fact and questions which the speaker posits and then answers with a series of logical deductions. However, the poem shifts tonally in its final two stanzas, which describe the disorientation of the speaker’s senses after he has heard the singer’s song. These lines might seem to describe some sort of accommodation to subjective aesthetic experience, but I hope to show that they actually present a compelling case for why Bremond’s language of pure poetry could never satisfy Stevens. The aesthetic experience Stevens valorizes in these lines does not cycle through a closed circuit in the mind but is instead charged by a synthetic relationship between the creative energies of the artist and a secular yet re-enchanted world. In short, the poem stands apart from pure poetry in its first half by being detached and rational, and in its second, it imagines a variety of aesthetic experience that is impure in its synthesis of subjects and objects. In the closing lines, concepts and figures that had been sharply delineated from one another throughout the poem suddenly clang together, suggesting a poetics that is impure because its demarcations are ghostly rather than sharp. Before I can demonstrate why it is interesting that Stevens mixes things together in the poem’s denouement, however, I need to show the ways that he holds things apart in the opening stanzas.

The speaker’s insistence on differentiation is apparent in the poem’s first line, “She sang beyond the genius of the sea.” This line is certainly easy to remember, with its crisp declarative sentence written in an understated pentameter, but Stevens’ placement of “she” as the subject of the opening sentence elides the fact that the first stanza is primarily about the sea. Stevens continues,

The water never formed to mind or voice,  
 Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
 Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
 Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,  
 That was not ours although we understood,  
 Inhuman, of the veritable ocean. (2-7).

This first stanza gives us the complete *dramatis personae* of this meticulously blocked poem: “she,” the singer on the beach; “the sea,” which competes sonically with the singer; and “we,” the speaker of the poem and his silent companion, who observe the scene. The speaker here places the sea on center stage, presenting it as “Inhuman,” a “body wholly body” that seems, with its “empty sleeves,” to be only torso, a brute muscular force without the dexterity (or the ability to be a “maker”) afforded by limbs. It is the “veritable ocean,” a palpably real thing that makes meaningless noise in the form of a “constant cry” that “never formed to mind or voice.” The ocean, then, is alien from the other actors in the poem, the speaker and the singer, due to its absolute thingness, and it is also a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of pure poetry, as the noise of its “constant cry” is devoid of content. The sea as imagined by the speaker is estranged from us, anthropomorphized in a manner so visceral, corporeal, and even amputated (“body wholly body”, “empty sleeves”, “constant cry”) that the stanza seems calculated to short-circuit the very impulse toward the pathetic fallacy that often motivates poetic anthropomorphizing. By the end of the poem, Stevens will give us reason to read suspiciously the speaker’s categorical insistence that there can be no interpenetration between himself, the singer, and the natural other. But initially, our experience of the poem is governed by the speaker’s severe logic of division.

The predominant tone of the first half of the poem is rhetorical, if by rhetorical we mean that it lays out an argument and tries to convince us of it, and yet this rhetorical tone feels, at times, a bit out of step with how metrically and aesthetically wrought the poem is. In the second stanza, the speaker states, “The song and water were not

medleyed sound/ Even if what she sang was what she heard,/ Since what she sang was uttered word by word” (9-11). This tercet buried within the poem is so tightly crafted, with its parallel construction that places “song”, “sang”, and “sang” in each line ahead of “sound”, “heard”, and “word”, that its artistry might tend to distract a reader from its argument, which boils down to a claim that although the singer and the ocean both produce “sound,” the singer’s song is “uttered word by word,” and thus is distinct from the ocean’s meaningless noise. As he puts it in the third stanza, “she was the maker of the song she sang./ The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea/ Was merely a place by which she walked to sing” (15-7). In these stanzas, Stevens picks up a question he raises elsewhere in *Ideas of Order*, specifically in “Academic Discourse at Havana”, where he asks “Is the function of the poet here mere sound,/ Subtler than the ornatest prophecy,/ To stuff the ear? (IV, 1-3) Stevens concludes that poem by answering himself that the poet is no mere ear-stuffer, but rather is possessed of the power to “reconcile us to our selves” with “dark, pacific words” (IV, 9-10).

In “The Idea of Order at Key West”, the issue of poetic ear-stuffing seems, on its surface, to be resolved with the speaker’s repeated claims that the maker’s song, with its verbal content, is different from the attention-grabbing but ultimately meaningless noise of the ocean. And yet, this poem does not lack for sonic theatrics, most notably at the close of the second stanza, where the speaker adds a caveat to his broader argument: “It may be that in all her phrases stirred/ The grinding water and the gasping wind;/ But it was she and not the sea we heard” (13-5). A critic should be careful not to go overboard with an instrument so blunt as mimesis, but it seems clear to me that the poem evokes waves crashing on the beach in the heavily stressed alliteration of “the grinding water and the gasping wind.” That the speaker does this precisely at the moment when he states that he “may” be wrong in drawing a sharp line between art and nature is a prime example of how slippery this poem is. The speaker of the poem is, at least in his early stanzas, trying to make a reasoned argument about aesthetics in the form of a lyric poem,

but in these particular lines his lyricism is more appropriate to his reservations than to his stated purpose. Do we, then, read Stevens' sonic evocation of the ocean as a moment in which the speaker playfully acknowledges the limits of the sharp division he wants to draw between art and nature? Or is that Stevens is using the sound of his verse to suggest that we ought to read his speaker suspiciously?

Many prominent readers of the poem have gone even farther, arguing that the poem's mix of lyricism, rhetoric, and irony renders it virtually impenetrable. A passage that has been cited more than once in subsequent critics (not least, I suspect, because it throws down the gauntlet) comes from Bloom, who argues that "the *Key West* poem has its desperate equivocations and its unresolvable difficulties, more perhaps than even so strong a poem can sustain. In some respects, it is an impossible text to interpret, and its rhetoric may be at variance with its deepest intentionalities" (1976, 93). As is typical of a Bloomian reading, he imagines a Stevens who is willful and ingenious, but not entirely in control of his self-contradictions. Helen Vendler, on the other hand, describes Stevens as a calculating prankster:

The structure of the poem is ostensibly one of logical discrimination, but actually the complicated progressions...simply serve to implicate the various alternatives ever more deeply with each other so that the sea, the girl, the water, the song, the wind, the air, the sky and cloud, the voices of the spectators, all become indistinguishable from one another, as Stevens wants them to be...Stevens uses logical form here not as a logician but as a sleight-of-hand man, making assertion appear in different guises and from different angles, delighting in paradoxical logic, and sometimes defying logic entirely. (175)

The general idea that the stated argument of the poem is at odds with its poetic treatment continues into readings from more recent schools of criticism, as when Aaron McCullough states in his Deleuzian reading of what he calls the poem's "schizophrenic" nature that "This disjunction between intention and meaning keeps [the poem] vital" (99).

I quote the above critics because I largely agree with their shared sense of the poem's internal tensions, and in particular I am convinced by Vendler's account of Stevens as a

“sleight-of-hand man,” which strikes me as more attuned to the puzzles and pleasures of his poetry than does the high-blown bombast of the Bloomian crisis lyric. Another thing these three critics have in common, which might not initially seem notable, is that they refer to the speaker of the poem as “Stevens”. This is not, of course, an outrageous approach; Stevens wrote little in his career that could be called a dramatic monologue in the classic sense of the term, and where there are named characters in his poems, they tend not to be given speaking roles. But I want to argue that it is useful, as a thought experiment if nothing else, to think of the speaker of the poem emphatically as “the speaker”, as an aesthetic construct with a voice separate from the poet’s who is simply one character among several characters in the poem, and whose point of view should not be taken definitively to be that of Stevens. This approach has the virtue of providing a critical lever that can help make some artistic sense of the fact that the analytical rhetoric of the speaker does not seem entirely appropriate to the Stevensian lyricism in which it is voiced. Indeed, the two registers often function as counterpoints to one another. At one point in the poem, Stevens states that, for the woman, “The sea was not a mask”, and while I do not think that the speaker is a mask for Stevens—at least not in the sense that Tennyson’s Ulysses or Eliot’s Tiresias are masks—the speaker is a pose for Stevens, a pose to which I imagine he is at least partially sympathetic, but a pose which he assumes so that he can think through and beyond its limitations.

One moment in the poem where critics would benefit from reading the speaker suspiciously is when he asks at the end of the third stanza, “Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew/ It was the spirit that we sought and knew/ That we should ask this often as she sang” (18-20). Part of the problem here is simply that these lines are confusing, since “this” lacks any clear grammatical referent (it seems to mean the song, or perhaps the pure poetic essence of the song). The more substantial issue, though, is that the speaker has a naive certainty in “the spirit” as a replete, locatable essence of an object or a person. This sense of the word “spirit” is very much at odds with the way that

“spirit” is used elsewhere in *Ideas of Order*. In the next poem in the book, “The American Sublime”, Stevens concludes:

But how does one feel?  
 One grows used to the weather,  
 The landscape and that;  
 And the sublime comes down  
 To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,  
 The empty spirit  
 In vacant space.  
 What wine does one drink?  
 What bread does one eat? (11-20)

The speaker of “Key West” imagines both spirit and space to be charged. They both have, as he states in the first line, a “genius”, and even if the sea is a “body wholly body”, it is also, just a few lines later, “ever-hooded, tragic gestured.” Throughout Stevens, though, from early poems like “Sunday Morning” and “The Snow Man” to later ones like the works I have discussed in this section, the world is a spiritual tabula rasa, vacant of any meaning until we put it there, and our own spirits are fundamentally “empty”, not a thing to be sought but a thing to be constructed. As Stevens states in another *Ideas of Order* poem, “Evening Without Angels”, “Air is air,/ Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere./ Its sound are not angelic syllables/ But our unfashioned spirits realized/ More sharply in more furious selves” (3-8). In the final stanzas of “Key West”, the poem moves to this idea that the spirit is not essential, not a discoverable transhistorical essence, but a projected and particular product of the imagination. Early in the poem, though, Stevens has the speaker give voice to a set of naive assumptions about what he ought to be seeking in the singer’s song. His assumptions, I might add, are decidedly Bremondian, inasmuch as they are based in a belief that art reveals rather than constructs the spirit. In these early stanzas, he is similar to James’ narrator in “The Figure in the Carpet” inasmuch as both are incapable of a demystified reading of their chosen aesthetic object because of their unexamined faith in art as religious experience. Stevens’ speaker



also shares with James' narrator a comic self-seriousness, particularly when the speaker says that he and his companion plan to "ask this often as she sang," apparently so engrossed in talking about the song that they plan to talk through it rather than actually listening.

The heart of the speaker's logical rhetoric appears in the literal center of the poem, its fourth stanza, where he answers his own question, "Whose spirit is this," with an elaborate bit of deductive analysis (note in the following stanza the "ifs", the "but", and the implied "then"):

If it was only the dark voice of the sea  
That rose, or even colored by many waves;  
If it was only the outer voice of sky  
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,  
However clear, it would have been deep air,  
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound  
Repeated in summer without end  
And sound alone. But it was more than that,  
More even than her voice, and ours, among  
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,  
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
Of sky and sea. (21-33)

This is the stanza Vendler has in mind when she argues that Stevens uses "logical form" without actually being a logician, and one can see her point, particularly in the way that "it" becomes untethered from the subject it refers to ("the spirit") as this lengthy stanza unwinds itself. "It" grows more rather than less mystified because the poem's mixture of logic and lyric causes the speaker to run his pronoun through so much verbiage that "it" becomes hard to track. Note, for instance, how the rhetorical structure of "if-then-but" requires a dutiful examination of sequential clauses, while simultaneously the aesthetic requirements of lyric poetry demand a flourishing of figures ("sunken coral water-walled"; "the heaving speech of air") that tend to obfuscate rather than clarify. With a couple careful readings, it is easy enough to paraphrase what the

stanza means: “if the spirit of the song were just nature, then it would have been merely noise, but it was more than that.” However, anyone who reads the above stanza will see that this paraphrase gives no sense of the befuddlement and the pleasure that comes from wading through the speaker’s lines. Indeed, the speaker’s tendency to let his lyricism run away from his logic is most clear at the end of the stanza, where, after dismissing nature as “sound alone” and not the source of the spirit he is seeking, he promptly launches into a hyperbolic, almost mock-Shelleyan four-line account of “The meaningless plungings of water” that moves through “Theatrical distances,” “high horizons,” and “mountainous atmospheres.” In short, on the level of argument or content, our speaker is trying to stand apart from the singer’s song and analyze it carefully as a pure poetry that exists without debt or reference to nature. On the sonic and metaphorical registers, however, as the speaker hears the song, he recklessly gives voice to an undifferentiated aesthetic experience that encompasses both art and nature.

Indeed, the representation of various surrenders to aesthetic experience becomes the dominant topic of the poem as the singer takes center stage in the final stanzas. As he turns to describe the singer, the speaker leaves behind the clanging language of “mountainous atmospheres” from the previous stanza, and instead declares, “It was her voice that made/ The sky acutest at its vanishing./ She measured to the hour its solitude./ She was the single artificer of the world/ in which she sang” (33-7). There is a calm beauty in these lines that is different from either the dodgy tonal complexities of the early stanzas or the operatic exclamations of the poem’s conclusion. The singer, described here as “the maker,” exudes to the speaker a confident certitude that “when she sang, the sea,/ Whatever self it had, became the self/ That was her song” (37-9). Many critics have read the singer as Stevens’ double in the poem (Baeten 31; Gelpi 159), but as I have shown with “Autumn Refrain” or “The Reader”, Stevens is never comfortable with the pure poetic solipsism that the singer embodies as she “Knew that there never was a world for her,/ Except the one she sang and, singing, made” (41-2). The speaker in his logical

obtuseness and the singer in her confident self-sufficiency embody possible forms of aesthetic imagination. Stevens revolves and examines these possibilities in the poem, but he finally stands apart from both of them.

Only twelve lines from the end of the poem, the speaker's companion is finally given a name:<sup>97</sup>

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,  
Why, when the singing ended and we turned  
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,  
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,  
As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (43-50)

The poem contains two questions, "Whose spirit is this," which receives the previously discussed answer that takes up almost a third of the poem, and this question posed to Ramon, which is never answered. Instead, the question hangs in the air as the speaker tries to puzzle through why the world around him seems so changed. His earlier claim that the singer's song created a hermetically sealed world sufficient unto itself is not able to account for the fact that the objective world appears different after the experience of her song.<sup>98</sup> The world is enchanted, which is perhaps made most clear in the remarkable leap between two lines as the speaker moves from "The lights in the fishing boat at anchor there" to "As night descended, tilting in the air" (46-7). These

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<sup>97</sup>Bloom compares Ramon's sudden appearance here to the way that "we are startled to find late in *Tintern Abbey* that Wordsworth is accompanied by Dorothy" (1976, 96). Of course, one difference is that Wordsworth presumably did at some point visit Tintern Abbey with Dorothy, whereas Stevens is inventing his story, regardless of whether you believe his letters claiming that he made up the name, or the multitude of scholars who claim that Stevens is referencing the French literary critic Ramon Fernandez.

<sup>98</sup>The opposed reading to this, expressed by Robert Friend, among others, is that "it is the singer, also called the maker, who imposes order on reality. For singing as she walks by the inhuman sea, she makes meaning out of its 'meaningless plungings of water and wind,' an ordering that extends mysteriously when the poet and his companion, who have been listening to the song reach the harbor of the town" (629). I am less convinced that she orders reality in her song so much as she creates an order next to reality. In the stanza under discussion here (the Ramon stanza), when the sky suddenly seems arranged and deepened, they no longer hear the singer's song, but rather remember it. The momentary feeling of order occurs not during the song, but after it, when their memory of it meshes with images of the outside world, suggesting that the aesthetic experience Stevens wants to evoke is not purely aesthetic but synthetic.

lines are joined aurally by their rhyme and visually by the similarity between the boat lights and the stars, and yet we jump here from the mundane, a fishing boat at anchor, all the way up to the music of the spheres evoked beautifully in the idea that night is “tilting” in the sky as it falls upon the world. And yet, the fishing boats are not dwarfed by the spheres, for it is indeed the lights of the boats that “Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,/ Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles” (48-9). The interaction between an everyday human creation and nature in its highest “emblazoned” constellations creates a feeling that the world has been synthesized and “arranged” in a new way. Perhaps, then, the question to Ramon is not answered because the question as the speaker phrases it contains its own answer. Significantly, this answer suggests a very different understanding of the relationship of art to nature than does the speaker’s earlier argument that the two should be understood as sealed off from one another.

The poem ends with its famous five-line exclamation that, as J. Hillis Miller notes, does not even hold together grammatically as a sentence (1996, 206):

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
 The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,  
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly starred,  
 And of ourselves and of our origins,  
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. (51-5)

I admit that I have gone the long way around in order to bring this reading back to a discussion of pure poetry, but these lines demonstrate why Bremond’s theory of pure poetry, even in a secularized form, would never be satisfactory for Stevens. Bremond, of course, demanded that experiences of poetic creation and reception be spiritual, internal, and utterly purified of the world. Here, though, everything that had been held apart in the speaker’s earlier argument—sea and she, “sounds” and “words,” subjects and objects—clangs impurely together. The lines recall Stevens’ argument in “The Irrational Element in Poetry” that the poet must be attentive to reality, but here we see that, for Stevens, the poet should attend to reality not from a sense of social obligation, but because the most

resonant, remarkable, and re-ordering aesthetic experiences are made possible by dealing simultaneously in the real (“the sea”), the subjective (“ourselves”), and the ineffable (“fragrant portals, dimly starred”). The speaker’s exclamatory revelation, which unlike his earlier stanzas does not in any way allow for paraphrasing, describes an aesthetic experience that is not unlike the “evanescent mysticism” of Bremond’s pure poetry, but which trades in silence and solipsism for “keener sounds” and a world newly demarcated.

As such, this concluding stanza is a bridge between the two halves of Stevens’ career, as it combines the fascination with riotous aesthetic experience that fills his lyric poems of the twenties and thirties with the cosmological, re-enchanting goals of his essays and long poems of the forties. As we shall see in the next section, one of these poems, 1944’s “Esthétique du Mal”, lacks the polish of the best poems of *Ideas of Order*, but it continues Stevens’ project of testing and questioning his own aesthetic self-justifications.

*Section Three: “Esthetique du Mal” and “the great poem of the earth”*

If you throw a dart at the table of contents of Stevens’ *The Collected Poems*, you have a good chance of hitting a poem that contains some version of the idea that aesthetic experience—specifically, in Stevens, the experience of observing the world with a poet’s eye, or of imagining that world anew—can provide an experience of the numinous that replaces religion even as it is most easily understood in terms and metaphors borrowed from religion. This idea could form the basis of an entirely reasonable reading of an early poem like “Sunday Morning”, and it is also relevant to the last line of the last poem of Stevens’ last book.<sup>99</sup> However, the texts that have been most significant to the critical understanding of Stevens’ secularist spirituality come from a narrow window in the middle of his career. In 1942 and 1943, Stevens gave two lectures—“The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” and “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet”—which argue that the poet should create the supreme fictions that will “express the human soul” and provide a sense of order and meditative calm in a chaotic, post-religious world (1951, 30). Concurrently, he published “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” in a small run for the Cummington Press. In that poem, as he wrote to Hi Simons six months after its publication, Stevens was “trying to create something as valid as the idea of God has been, and for that matter remains” (1996, 435). Taken together, Stevens’ major works of 1942 and 1943 constitute one of the most audacious theories of the post-religious spiritual vitality of literary writing ever produced in America. Poetry for Stevens is not a fountain of Arnoldian moral improvement or well-intentioned ideological inculcation—as he says in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”, “In this area of my subject I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the

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<sup>99</sup>“It was like/ A new knowledge of reality.” (17-8) The poem is “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself”.

poet. He has none” (1951, 27). Poetry for Stevens is also not the medium of a not-exactly-religious but-nevertheless-mystical connection to something beyond the self, as it seems to be for figures as wide-ranging as Shelley, Whitman, Ginsberg, or Charles Wright. Instead, the role Stevens imagines for the poet can best be described as exemplar of the capacities of the imagination: “the role of the poet is to help people to live their lives. He has had immensely to do with giving life whatever savor it possesses. He has had to do with whatever the imagination and the senses have made of the world” (30).

Passages like this have allowed critics to assert, in one of the standard lines of scholarship on Stevens, that “Stevens is a good example of the way in which a secular spirit seeks transcendence where it may be found—if not in a religious tradition, then in a radically humanist tradition” (Burtner 44). I am largely in sympathy with this argument, but my desire in this chapter is to show that the “secular spirit” was for Stevens a complicated and vexed phenomenon which required him to work through of a long series of doubts and questions about his own *ars poetica*. Thus, in the first section of the chapter I argued that the language of “pure poetry” which Stevens uses in the mid-thirties to describe subjective aesthetic experience is so extreme that he begins almost immediately to reconsider the implications of such a solipsistic aesthetic project. In this, the second section, I look at “Esthetique du Mal”, a long poem published in 1944, immediately subsequent to the texts discussed in the previous paragraph. I argue that, in this poem, Stevens tests the ideas he had outlined in the preceding years by asking whether the “supreme fiction” that is “as valid as the idea of God” could compensate for or help to explain the existence of evil and pain in the world. Suffering might not pose the same set of theodical problems for secularism that it would for religion—there is no need to justify the ways of God to man if there is no God—but if poetry is supposed, in some measure, to do what religion once did, then part of its mission must be to make our lives better even in our deepest sadness and agony. In this poem, Stevens is pushing his aesthetic theories to a new level of ambition. “Esthetique du Mal” has repeatedly failed

at convincing most critics that it succeeds at its ambitions, and frankly, it fails to convince me as well. But in the best moments of the poem, Stevens displays remarkable candor and emotional honesty in his attempt to test the modernist religion of art against difficult, intractable questions.

The difficult question of how poetry can respond to evil and pain is dealt with more explicitly in “Esthetique du Mal” than it had been two years earlier in the more highly regarded “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”, but I want to look briefly at “Notes”—in particular, at the epilogue to “Notes”—to discuss how the problem was beginning to revolve in Stevens’ mind. At the outset of the poem, Stevens writes “The death of one god is the death of all” (1990, 381), but he sees secularization as a new opportunity to embrace reality: “Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was/ A name for something that never could be named....The sun/ Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be/ In the difficulty of what it is to be” (381). “Notes” is an almost impossible poem to sum up in a few sentences, but its general aim is to argue that poetry has the potential to replace the original “supreme fiction” of God with a new supreme fiction, an “abstraction blooded” (385), which both attends to and imaginatively re-orders reality. Much of the poem is spent ruminating on various ways that one could describe moments of aesthetic order coming into existence, and near the end of the poem Stevens finally insists that this order does not occur spontaneously, or through some sort of divine visitation, but through the effort of flesh-and-blood artists in the actual world. Thus, the climax of the poem occurs when the speaker does the precise opposite of invoking the muse—indeed, one might say that he revokes the muse—and announces, “Angel,/ Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear/ The luminous melody of proper sound” (404).

Much of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is celebratory and even a bit giddy (I have not, for instance, even touched on the incomparable Canon Aspirin), but the poem concludes oddly, with an epilogue addressed to an unnamed Soldier. Stevens writes that “there is a war between the mind/ And sky” that is fought by the poet, and while the



soldier's war will conclude, the poet is engaged in "a war that never ends" (407). Stevens asserts not only that poets and soldiers are engaged in similar enterprises, but furthermore that "The soldier is poor without the poet's lines" because, as he writes in the poem's concluding tercet, "How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;/ How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,/ If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech" (408). Stevens, as he attempts to address his supreme fictions to the real world of 1942, asserts that the heroism of soldiers in the field is motivated in part by the fictions of heroism invented by generations of artists. There is perhaps a grain of truth to this, but I have always found these lines unpersuasive, largely because I have a difficult time imagining that any soldier I have ever met would take the equivalence Stevens draws between poetry and war in quite the spirit intended. More specifically, the soldier's war is filled with death and suffering, which is not for the most part true of what Stevens calls the poet's "war that never ends."

The soldier-figure of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is silent and passive, but two years later Stevens' attention was grabbed by an aggressively opinionated soldier who had written a letter to John Crowe Ransom. The Spring 1944 issue of the *Kenyon Review*, a journal which both championed and published Stevens, quotes at length a letter written by an unnamed reader in the military:

What *are* we after in poetry? Or, more exactly, what are we attempting to rout? The commandos of contemporary literature are having little to do with Eliot and even poets of charming distemper like Wallace Stevens (for whom we all have developed a considerable passion). Not necessarily a poetry of time and place, either. The question of poetry as in life (and in the Army) is one of survival, simply...Men like Karl Shapiro (his "Anxiety", in *Chimera* recently, is notable), John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz transcend the aesthetic of poetry—thank God! I find the poetry in *Kenyon Review* lamentable in many ways because it is cut off from pain. It is intellectual and it is fine, but it never reveals muscle and nerve. It does not really matter whether poetry of men in war, or suffering the impact of communiques, has a large or small "frame of reference." It must, I feel, promise survival for all who are worth retrieving—it must communicate a lot of existence; an overwhelming desire to go on. (There's a hell of a lot of work yet to do—postwar—even if one doesn't resolve as a poet).

I'm waiting for an American poem of the forties called "The Quip at the Heart of the Debacle." Not magnificent in its "orchestration of themes," Ransom! Dialectics and self-appointed emendators of the poem will have to go by the board. The condition for approach to the poem will be baptism by fire. I believe there are minds and emotions ripe for that poem. Will they be found in the editors and readers of the *Review*? (276-7; ellipses in Ransom's quotation)

Shortly after reading this passage, Stevens wrote to Ransom, who had asked him to submit a poem to the *Review*. Stevens notes that "What particularly interested me [in your last issue] was the letter from one of your correspondents about the relation between poetry and what he called pain. Whatever he may mean, it might be interesting to try to do an *esthetique du mal*. It is the kind of idea that it is difficult to shake off. Perhaps that would be my subject in one form or another" (1996, 467-8).<sup>100</sup> In these last three sentences, we can hear the wheels creaking into gear as Stevens thinks his way into his new poem, but what is even more striking is how selectively he describes the soldier's letter. Stevens elides the fact that he himself is one of the targets of the soldier's ire, and in focusing only on what the soldier says about poetry and "what he called pain," Stevens ignores the call for a poetics of brutal realism that is actually the focus of most of the letter. In the letter writer's mind, in order not to be "cut off from pain" poetry must be, for lack of a better word, militarized. It will "rout" something, it will be written by "commandos", it will "reveal muscle and nerve", it will be understood only by those who have undergone "baptism by fire", and it must "promise survival." While the soldier's call for a more energetic and realist poetry stirred Stevens to write, it did not stir Stevens to write the type of poem the soldier had in mind. "Esthetique du Mal" is about pain, but it is not visceral and it is not direct. If anything, it is more opaque and disjointed than a typical Stevens poem, and it is less about actual pain than it is about the idea of pain as a problem for Stevens' idea of order. It is impossible to know if Stevens ever considered using the title the soldier suggests—"The Quip at the Heart of the Debacle"—but it would not really have fit "Esthetique du Mal" anyway, since Stevens' poem is far more

<sup>100</sup>I am certainly not the first critic to discuss Stevens' response to this letter. For more on the texts in question, see especially LaGuardia (100), Trzyna (168), and Cook (192).

“The Debacle at the Heart of the Quip”, or, put differently, it is a poem that ruminates on whether pithy modernism formulations of the role of the imagination in a post-religious world can respond to an era in which terrors and debacles seemed to demand more than a “supreme fiction” could offer.

Before I dive headlong into Stevens’ poem, I want to pause and describe the critical tradition surrounding “Esthetique du Mal”, which is akin to the criticism on Melville’s *Pierre* or Hart Crane’s “The Bridge” in that critics tend to see the poem as something of a problem text. “Esthetique” has generated critical readings on the wide array of topics one would expect from such a large and complicated poem (the sublime, World War II, Nietzsche, Romanticism, comparisons to other Stevens poems), but it has also produced an impressive diversity of opinion on the more fundamental question of whether or not the poem is any good. Certainly, it has its champions. Henry Weinfeld, for instance, declares that “Esthetique du Mal” is “among the two or three greatest poems that Stevens ever wrote. In its finest passages, it demonstrates that Stevens is one of the greatest masters of the blank-verse sublime mode in English poetry, the legitimate heir to Milton and Wordsworth” (27). The larger and louder critical chorus, however, has been negative. Vendler, in an oft-quoted sentence, argues that “Esthetique du Mal” “is at once the most random and the most pretentious of Stevens’ long poems” (206). She goes on to conclude that “‘*Esthetique du Mal*’ seems a poem enumerating old themes or else applying itself to a new theme—evil and pain, explicitly so named—without a corresponding energy of new perceptions” (217). Joseph Carroll feels that the poem is “disconnected and obscure” in its attempts to outline a metaphysics of the imagination (187). Most critics tend to praise the poem faintly, or only in parts, as when Halliday argues that “‘Esthetique du Mal’ is a disjointed and somewhat evasive poem and thus disappointing as a whole, but in some of its oddities Stevens breaks free from the sleek ensoulings of his habitual manner” (84).

The poem’s detractors have often compared it unfavorably to two other long poems

of the early forties that take up similar topics, and are widely held to be two of the major poetic achievements of the Twentieth Century.<sup>101</sup> One of these is Stevens' own aforementioned "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", and the other is Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which is, like "Esthetique du Mal", a response to the Second World War. But I contend that part of what makes those poems so successful is that they are considerably less challenging undertakings, or, put differently, they are less taxing on the resources of their respective poets. "Notes" plays to every strong suit in Stevens' poetic hand: it is written in tercets, his best stanzaic form; it moves through a series of small anecdotes or parables centered on oddly marionette-like (and oddly named) characters, which had been a central technique of many of his most successful poems from "The Emperor of Ice Cream" forward; and it functions by setting up a series of abstract philosophical or aesthetic propositions which it then tests from a variety of angles (thus resembling poems as disparate as "Of Modern Poetry", "The Man With the Blue Guitar", and "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself"). "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", then, is played on Stevens' home turf, and it does not address at length any question so intractable as whether aesthetics can compensate for the inherent pain of existence. *Four Quartets*, of course, does endeavor to respond to this question, but for Eliot, the problem of theodicy is not really a problem. He draws upon a two-thousand-year-old theological tradition that provides him with the basic framework of how to give meaning to an era of suffering. When Stevens writes to Ransom that he wants to compose an "esthetique du mal", it is telling that he describes the poem as something that "it might be interesting to try to do" (1996, 468). Stevens is pushing himself beyond his comfort zone. Pain and evil are powerfully real—not just figures on the page or of the imagination. He is seeing

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<sup>101</sup>See, for instance, Vendler's assertion that the poem has "the awkwardness of experiments" and thus "seem[s] in fact to be a regression after the self-confident finish of *Notes*" (206). Joseph Carroll also compares the poem unfavorably to "Notes" (187). Milton J. Bates admits in a recent essay that although he is one of the foremost Stevens scholars in the world, when the September 11 terrorist attacks took place he had his students read and discuss Eliot's "Little Gidding", and never considered assigning the comparatively "emotionally unsympathetic" "Esthetique du Mal" (2003, 169).

how the supreme fictions he had outlined a couple years earlier will fare when he tries to make them account for and respond to suffering, and his ambition accounts for both the successes and the failures of the poem.

The French “mal” connotes both “evil” and “pain”, and thus, as David LaGuardia points out, its use in the title gives Stevens a wider range than he could get from any English word (100). As the poem unfolds over the course of its fifteen sections,<sup>102</sup> it deals mostly with pain, and occasionally with evil, but the first section of the poem begins, surprisingly enough, with a man who is having a “pleasant” time:

He was at Naples writing letters home  
And, between his letters, reading paragraphs  
On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned  
For a month. It was pleasant to be sitting there,  
While the sultriest fulgurations, flickering,  
Cast corners in the glass. He could describe  
The terror of the sound because the sound  
Was ancient. He tried to remember the phrases: pain  
Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,  
Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.  
The volcano trembled in another ether,  
As the body trembles at the end of life. (1990, 313-4)

The letter-writer Stevens describes here is studying pain with an air of academic detachment, and as he watches Vesuvius erupt in the distance, he is only able to describe “the terror of the sound *because* the sound was ancient.” Stevens’ readers in 1944 would have instantly remembered that Vesuvius had erupted earlier that year,<sup>103</sup> and yet, the man we see here does not experience the eruption directly, but only in “phrases” remembered from other books, or in the “fulgurations” (flashes of light) that are reflected in the glass. Stevens presents the scene in a manner calculated to create an air of aestheticized torpor—note, for instance, how slowly we have to drift through the phrase “sultriest fulgurations, flickering”—that contrasts markedly to what we might expect

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<sup>102</sup>“Esthetique du Mal” is composed of fifteen sections of 20 to 30 lines apiece, which vary widely in their stanzaic forms. Although the poem is not in perfect blank verse, the lines never stray far from pentameter.

<sup>103</sup>For more on Stevens’ interest in the 1944 eruption of Vesuvius, see Cook (191) and, especially, Allison Rieke.

from a poem that begins with the rebirth of history's most famously lethal volcano. This languor continues into the first three lines of the next stanza, where Stevens writes, "It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human./ There were roses in the cool cafe. His book/ made sure of the most correct catastrophe." Bates asks of these lines, "Why would Stevens risk beginning a poem about human suffering on this flippant note?" (172) I agree with Bates that there is tonal gamble in this first section, but the tone is part of an attempt by Stevens to make clear that the title "Esthetique du Mal" is more than anything else a problem to be solved. The rarefied scholar observes the accoutrement of lunch, and his comic inability to think about pain as anything other than a relic of ancient tomes underscores the difficulty of convincing anyone that those obsessed with beauty can speak convincingly about "mal." The seeming disconnect in Stevens' title resembles the trick Baudelaire performs with the title *Fleurs du Mal*, but even there, flowers have a range of darker connotations—sexual, venereal, funereal—that make the leap to "mal" less treacherous than the leap from the dry abstraction "esthetique." The opening stanza of the poem, then, suggests the lazy imprecision of an aesthetic imagination that forestalls actual experience in favor of a reliance on received wisdom about the relationship between beauty and pain (in this case, the received wisdom of Burke's theory of the sublime<sup>104</sup>).

The final lines of the first section pull back from the cafe to a wider view of the scene. Stevens writes:

Except for us, Vesuvius might consume  
 In solid fire the utmost earth and know  
 No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up  
 To die). This is a part of the sublime  
 From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,  
 The total past felt nothing when destroyed. (314)

This, then, is what Stevens meant earlier in the stanza by "Pain is human." The way he has set up the stanza, we might tend to ignore the significance of "pain is human" the

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<sup>104</sup>For a reading of the poem as a parodic attack on Burke's sublime, see Trzyna.

first time we read it, since it seems to be ironically deflated when it is wedged between “It was almost time for lunch” and “There were roses in the cool cafe.” But the final lines of the stanza break away from the satiric lunchtime portrait, as Stevens suggests that the lesson of Vesuvius is that the forces in the world that are larger than us do not notice us at all. A volcano will not feel pain, and when it interrupts lunch to consume us, our pain will go unnoticed.<sup>105</sup> Whatever there is to be said about human suffering must be said by humans, because nobody else suffers, and nobody else cares.

In the second section of the poem, Stevens presents the flip-side of the same idea, writing “It is pain that is indifferent to the sky/ In spite of the yellow of the acacias, the scent/ Of them in the air still hanging heavily/ In the hoary-hanging night” (315). With Vesuvius, Stevens had shown that the world is indifferent to our pain, and here, he notes that when we are in pain, we are indifferent to the beauty around us. But the second section ends by cryptically intoning that pain, “in/ Its own hallucination never sees/ How that which rejects it saves it in the end” (315). These are not easy lines to parse, and are even a bit nonsensical, as they personify pain and then turn it loose in an unmoored pronoun. I think that Stevens means that the tangible, real world can “save” pain because that tangible world can provide other sensory experiences besides pain, specifically aesthetic pleasures like “the yellow of the acacias,” that allow us to see the world from a perspective other than the blindered vision of pain’s “own hallucination.” The first two sections of the poem end with the vague hope, which the poem will return to in later sections, that an aesthetic appreciation grounded in observation of the world rather than bookish rumination might widen our understanding and thus “save” us from pain, or at least make that pain more bearable. I do not think Stevens means to convince us here; the lines are too strange to accomplish that. Instead, the forward-glancing intonation of “in the end” invites us to see if Stevens can find a way, by the end of the poem, to describe

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<sup>105</sup>For a clever analysis of how Stevens deploys words related to eating in the first section, see LaGuardia (101).

how the aesthetic imagination can speak truthfully about pain and suffering.

When the first section of “Esthetique du Mal” rejects the Burkean sublime, it establishes a central theme of many of the poem’s sections, namely the repudiation of a variety of models of comprehending and attempting to salve pain and evil, particularly when those models involve a distortion or evasion of reality. Indeed, aside from the few sections where Stevens outlines what he sees as a better approach, large portions of the poem can best be understood as a catalogue of failed solutions. Unsurprisingly, Stevens moves very early in the poem to attack his old enemy, religion. In Section Three, Stevens argues that the Christian myth of God living and dying as a man keeps people from appraising with clarity and honesty the reasons why they suffer:

The fault lies with an over-human god,  
Who by sympathy has made himself a man  
And is not to be distinguished, when we cry

Because we suffer, our oldest parent, peer  
Of the populace of the heart, the reddest lord,  
Who has gone before us in experience.

If only he would not pity us so much,  
Weaken our fate, relieve us of woe both great  
And small, a constant fellow of destiny,

A too, too human god, self-pity’s kin  
And uncourageous genesis. (315)

Christ as described here is “over-human” in the sense that he is “too human”, but he is also “over humans” in terms of his power. When Stevens writes that god “is not to be distinguished, when we cry,” he suggests both that we cannot find god when we suffer, but also that god is not to be singled out for praise when we suffer. For a writer as thoroughly in the Emersonian line as Stevens, however, it is the idea that god “has gone before us in experience” that is truly damning. In dying for us on the cross and thus sealing the fate of humanity, Christ deprives humankind of the responsibility to understand our own suffering and make something new of it. Instead, the reliance on an



“over-human god” causes mankind to cry out to an indistinguishable divine force. This, then, is why Stevens wishes that, in the Christian mythos, God “would not pity us so much.” This “too, too human god” of Christianity is both “self-pity’s kin” (engendered by the same forces that engender self-pity), and self-pity’s “uncourageous genesis” (the reason that we cry out to god when we suffer). These are some of the least forgiving lines Stevens wrote about religion in his entire career. Often in his poetry and essays he seems nostalgic for the assurances of faith, or he at least admires the inventiveness of religious narratives, but here he makes a Nietzschean argument that religion is a source of delusional weakness.<sup>106</sup> The section ends, however, with the evocation of an alternative:

It seems  
As if the health of the world might be enough.

It seems as if the honey of common summer  
Might be enough, as if the golden combs  
Were part of a sustenance itself enough,

As if hell, so modified, had disappeared,  
As if pain, no longer satanic mimicry,  
Could be borne, as if we were sure to find our way. (315-6)

The “as if” that dominates these lines is a classic bit of Stevensian hedging. It allows him both to present an alternative and to acknowledge the incredulity his alternative is likely to engender. Is the world enough? Can pain be borne if we do not have a mythological system to help us make sense of it? The concluding phrase, “as if we were sure to find our way,” evokes Dante “in the middle of life’s way” at the beginning of *Inferno*. The allusion suggests the loftiness of Stevens’ ambitions, but it also helps to underscore the central drama of the poem, which is that he, and we, are deep in the woods of uncertainty as we attempt to comprehend suffering in a secular world where hell has “disappeared” and God has not “gone before us.”

Religion is not the only evasion of reality that Stevens attacks in the poem. Section

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<sup>106</sup>For a more extensive reading of the poem’s allusions to Nietzsche, see Bloom 1976, 228-9.

Eleven is an attempt to show that lazy, sentimental art also comprehends pain through a form of false consciousness. The section consists of four stanzas. Stanza three structurally echoes stanza one, but turns the contents of stanza one into overly arranged, artificial versions. Meanwhile, stanzas two and four comment obliquely on the other two stanzas. Stanza one opens the section with a series of eerily dream-like images that together form a phantasmagoria of traumatic events:

At dawn,  
 The paratroopers fall and as they fall  
 They mow the lawn. A vessel sinks in waves  
 Of people, as big bell-billows from its bell  
 Bell-bellow in the village steeple. Violets,  
 Great tufts, spring up from buried houses  
 Of poor, dishonest people, for whom the steeple,  
 Long since, rang out farewell, farewell, farewell. (322)

The image of the falling, mowing paratroopers was suggested to Stevens when his friend Barbara Church told him about one of her dreams (Bates 2003, 176). However, his interest in the link her dream made between paratroopers and mowing must have been motivated by a desire to echo the literary convention, most famously manifested in Marvell, of battle as the mowing of a field. The dream-like nature of the stanza continues in the next section with the bizarre image of a boat sinking in “waves/ Of people” while its bell somehow rings out in the steeple of a village church. Stevens clearly means to surprise us with the twists of dream-logic here, as every odd maneuver the stanza performs happens after a line break. Thus, we get “as they fall/ they mow the lawn”; “in waves/ Of people”; “its bell/ Bell-bellow in the village steeple.” This jagged, leaping quality in the line-breaks is counterpoised against a series of sonic repetitions, as we get “fall” twice in five syllables, “bell” four times in eight syllables, and then a triple “farewell”, which sonically combines the previous two repeated words. The stanza is carefully structured, but Stevens has structured it in such a way that the bursts of imagistic and sonic content cause the reader to feel disoriented. We scramble to

assemble the meaning of the stanza, but we cannot help but be distracted as “bell” keeps ringing in our ears. And the meaning of the stanza is, in fact, quite grim. It is a catalogue of tragic deaths: paratroopers descending into hell on earth, a boat sinking as its passengers bob on the waves, and empty poverty shacks reclaimed by nature.

The second stanza consists entirely of a single couplet:

Natives of poverty, children of malheur,  
The gaiety of language is our siegneur. (322)

LaGuardia argues that this “deceptively playful” couplet “indicates the power of words to rescue man from his forlorn condition” (107-8). I sympathize very much with the descriptor “deceptively playful,” but I am not sure that the poem endorses “Gaiety of language” as fully as LaGuardia believes. The third stanza, as we shall see, has a good deal more gaiety of language than the first, but Stevens rejects it as falsifying reality. The word “seigneur”, meaning “lord”, is also problematic: Stevens did not mean for us to get rid of God only to replace him with another omnipotent father-figure. But the largest problem is tonal. Stevens rarely uses couplets, and when he does, he tends to use the couplet-form’s tendency toward aphorism and sloganeering to produce a mock-serious effect (think, for instance, of the two couplets in “The Emperor of Ice Cream”). These lines sound trumpeted from on high, which does not fit a poem which is largely meditative and self-questioning. The couplet uses an entirely different voice from the rest of the poem to promise that “gaiety of language” can save us from poverty and “malheur.” The third stanza, however, shows this promise to be false:

A man of bitter appetite despises  
A well-made scene in which paratroopers  
Select adieux; and he despises this:  
A ship that rolls on a confected ocean,  
The weather pink, the wind in motion; and this:  
A steeple that tip-tops the classic sun’s  
Arrangements; and the violets’ exhumo. (322-3)

The “man of bitter appetite” refers back to an assertion at the beginning of the section

that “Life is a bitter aspic.” Thus, the man of bitter appetite is, counterintuitively, a man with a taste for life. This makes more sense when we see that the things he despises are artful evasions of the realities of life. Each item described in the stanza is a “well-made” or “confectured” revision of the death-scenes presented in the first stanza. Thus, the paratroopers “select adieux,” the ship does not sink but “rolls,” and everything appears under the guise of “the classic sun’s / Arrangements.” Stanza one is not necessarily any clearer than stanza three—if anything, it is less so—but its representation of pain in disorienting dream images rather than pink confections speaks to me more authentically of the experience of trauma. In the final stanza of the section, Stevens describes the consumption of the false, confected images as “hunger that feeds on its own hungriness.” Like the aesthete in the cafe in the first section of the poem, the man of bitter appetite is ready to dine, but the confected art produced by the “gaeity of language” gives him nothing substantial to consume.

Sections Three and Eleven, which attack religion and sentimental art, stick to relatively familiar Stevensian territory, but in Section Fourteen, Stevens moves to politics and argues that revolutionary ideologies are also a delusional response to suffering. Stevens says early in the section that “Revolution/ Is the affair of logical lunatics,” and he goes on to conclude that the revolutionary leader is “the lunatic of one idea/ In a world of ideas, who would have all the people/ Live, work, suffer, and die in that idea/ In a world of ideas” (324-5). What little we can glean from Stevens’ letters suggests that he found Reinhold Niebuhr dull (1996, 467-8), but these lines show that Stevens shared in the general tendency of mid-century American liberals (Niebuhr and Moore, of course, were others) to reject revolutionary leftist ideologies as recklessly utopian. What is interesting in the case of Stevens, though, is that the cardinal sin of the “lunatic of one idea” is to walk beside a lake and yet “not be aware of the lake” (1990, 325). For Stevens, the problem of the revolutionary is that his focus on one idea causes him to ignore the world of things as well as the “world of ideas.” Compared to other parts of the poem, Section

Fourteen is mediocre: the poetry is underwhelming, and Stevens is certainly no political philosopher. But the section crystallizes a key theme of the entire poem, which is that Stevens rejects any “one idea”—religious, scholarly, aesthetic, or political—that ignores the tangible world of things. Our salvation from suffering, should it exist, must lie for Stevens in a pragmatic, receptive, and imaginative attitude toward a fluid, complicated world.

Stevens’ call for this aesthetic sensibility lies at the literal center of the poem, in Sections Eight and Nine. In these sections, Stevens eulogizes the supreme fictions of earlier eras, paying heed to the stories of metaphysical beings helped people understand and give meaning to pain and suffering. But he then calls for a “realist” who will produce “another chant” that will call forth “the imagination’s new beginning.” Four years later, Stevens would state in a lecture that “the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written” (1951, 142), but the attempt to produce that poem of the earth is already apparent in these central sections of “Esthetique du Mal”.

Section Eight begins:

The death of Satan was a tragedy  
 For the imagination. A capital  
 Negation destroyed him in his tenement  
 And, with him, many blue phenomena.  
 It was not the end he had foreseen. He knew  
 That his revenge created filial  
 Revenges. And negation was eccentric.  
 It had nothing of the Julian thunder-cloud:  
 The assassin flash and rumble...He was denied. (319-20; ellipses are Stevens’)

The opening sentence might not contain all the pith of Blake’s famous lines about Milton’s party affiliation, but Stevens performs a clever update when he considers the state of the imagination in a post-Satanic world. The central topic of Stevens’ poem is how “esthetique” can help us understand “mal”, so he of course revisits Satan, who has been at the heart of Western literature’s conception of evil from *Genesis* to *South Park*.

The Satan of Stevens is distinguished primarily by his befuddlement. He is not destroyed by a “thunder-cloud” or an “assassin,” but simply by a “negation.” As Stevens dryly notes, “It was not the end he had foreseen.” The most obvious tragedy of Satan’s death is that he is lost as an antagonist for future Miltons and Goethes, but the other problem is that “many blue phenomena” die along with Satan. “Blue” here is a loaded word, suggesting among other things depression, a musical genre, and indecency. Satan was useful because he fit into stories that helped to explain why we sinned, or why we were in pain, and he allowed people to imagine their own lives as dramatic battles with demonic forces. When Satan dies, many of our imaginative mechanisms for understanding evil die with him. Indeed, the most compelling idea lurking in this section is that Satan’s death is as profound a moment of secularization as the more famous death of God. A faith based on God without Satan might still allow for a cosmology and a sense of transcendence, but the resultant supreme fictions lose much of their narrative punch, as can be seen in the comparative fates of Unitarian and Fundamentalist church attendance.<sup>107</sup>

For a moment, Stevens seems panicked by the tragedy he has detailed, as he writes, “Phantoms, what have you left? What underground?/ What place in which to be is not enough/ To be? You go, poor phantoms, without place/ Like silver in the sheathing of the sight/ As the eye closes” (320). The intricate detailing of the blink of the eye in which the phantoms vanish is a remarkable bit of poetry, but the obvious attention-grabber here is the allusion to *Hamlet*. Stevens reimagines “to be or not to be” as an address to a disappearing ghost, and then he rephrases the line such a way that we have to strain to make any sense of it at all, but are left finally to the knowledge that phantoms no longer have the option “to be.” With ghosts no longer present, Stevens is now left to conclude the section by focusing on the “reality” they have left behind:

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<sup>107</sup>See Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, for actual attendance figures.

How cold the vacancy  
 When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist  
 First sees reality. The mortal no  
 Has its emptiness and tragic expirations.  
 The tragedy, however, may have begun,  
 Again, in the imagination's new beginning,  
 In the yes of the realist spoken because he must  
 Say yes, spoken because under every no  
 Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken. (320)

There is no conscious verbal echo of the concluding lines of *Paradise Lost* here, but Stevens' description of the moment when "the shaken realist/ First sees reality" strikes me as a secular version of Adam and Eve departing Eden as "The world was all before them, where to choose/ Their place of rest, and Providence their guide" (XII, 646-7). Stevens' shaken realist, like Adam and Eve, will have to create a "new beginning" in a world of cold vacancies, but he will have to do so without a prophetic narrative that gives meaning to his labors. Stevens suggests that the goal of the "imagination's new beginning" is to figure out how to find a new tragedy after the "mortal no" has eliminated the original tragic hero, Satan. Stevens is trying to imagine how cold realism can be more than the "no" that denies mythological knowledge, or, put differently, how this clear-eyed vision can create an idea or a story worth saying yes to.

Section Nine follows this hope for a new imaginative realism with the phrase, "Panic in the face of the moon" (320). The panic, it turns out, stems from the fact that the moon no longer carries the mythological weight it once did, and now when one looks at it, "nothing is left but comic ugliness/ Or a lusted nothingness" (320). To no longer have access to the moon as a figure for romantic and symbolic invention is, for Stevens, a genuine loss, for "he/ That has lost the folly of the moon becomes/ The prince of the proverbs of pure poverty" (320). For a poet who, earlier in his career, repeatedly identified his work as "pure poetry", the idea that one could be left only with "pure poverty" is obviously troubling. For all his bluster that "bare earth is best" in "Evening Without Angels", Stevens is no ascetic, and his greatest fear, as we see in the ensuing

lines, is a destitution of the imagination:

To lose sensibility, to see what one sees,  
 As if sight had not its own miraculous thrift,  
 To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone,  
 As if the paradise of meaning ceased  
 To be paradise, it is this to be destitute. (320-1)

The economic logic of this section is intriguing. To see the world through utterly demystified eyes is a form of impoverishment, but sight, Stevens argues, is capable of a “miraculous thrift” that we will never experience if we choose only to “see what one sees.” I read this idea of the “thrift” of sight not as a cheapness of the senses, but as a storing up of sensory input. Sight is thrifty because it is capable of gathering a sufficient wealth of imagery to provide for the imagination. Sight is thus vital to what Henry James, in “Is There a Life After Death?”, calls the “accumulation to the very treasure itself of consciousness.” The ear, too, can help to build a “paradise of meaning” if we are willing to let it move beyond hearing “only what one hears, one meaning alone.” Stevens, then, does not want to be subject to inherited ideas or mythic falsehoods, but he also does not want to be a dispassionate sensory instrument so tightly calibrated that he cannot invent a “paradise of meaning” as he encounters the world. The logic of this passage is murky, but the ideal of a sensorium that can see and hear beyond the initial empirical data in order to produce a fund of multiple connotative sensations is arguably the inevitable result of Stevens’ constant refrain that the poet must find some way to combine reality and the imagination.

One could legitimately ask what any of this worry about the richness of senses has to do with pain or evil, but Stevens tries to work his way back to his main topic as Section Nine concludes:

This is the sky divested of its fountains.  
 Here in the west indifferent crickets chant  
 Through our indifferent crises. Yet we require  
 Another chant, an incantation, as in  
 Another and later genesis, music



That buffets the shapes of its possible halcyon  
 Against the haggardie ... A loud, large water  
 Bubbles up in the night and drowns the crickets' sound.  
 It is a declaration, a primitive ecstasy,  
 Truth's favors sonorously exhibited. (321)

The problem, as in the first section about Vesuvius, is a world that is “indifferent” to our “indifferent crises.” Section Nine, however, is not really about human crises in and of themselves so much as it is about the ways in which heightened attention to the world can help to alleviate our distress. Stevens turns to art, imagining “Another chant, an incantation.” This chant will produce “Another and later genesis,” suggesting that the world can begin anew if we can see it anew, in the “primitive ecstasy” created by the poet. The last four lines of the section are particularly important, because they suggest what the world looks like when seen through the more receptive sensibility that Stevens has called for. After implying initially that the crickets were the only thing one could hear in the western night, Stevens turns in the last four lines to announce that there is something more to hear, a “large, loud water” that “Bubbles up in the night and drowns the crickets' sound.” He thus has the Section perform the “paradise of meaning” that he claims will result if we do not “hear only what one hears, one meaning alone.” The sound of the water is, in Stevens' summation, “Truth's favors sonorously exhibited.” The actual, tangible world does not have to be the “cold vacancy” seen by the “shaken realist” in Section Eight. The cold, truthful world has favors to exhibit as well, and Stevens argues here that the chants and incantations of poets will point us to the compensations of reality.

This is perhaps why critics tend not to like this poem much. Stevens announces large ambitions for himself at every stage of the poem's execution—in his letter to Ransom, in his title, even in the poem's opening sections. But here, at the core of the poem, his most fundamental idea about how poetry can help us when we suffer seems to be that poets can remind us to notice the sound of a stream. This is not, on its face, much of a comfort, and it is certainly not as titanic a response to pain and evil as *Paradise Lost*, *Four Quartets*, or

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”. For that matter, it is not even as titanic a use of the idea that water can be a spur to the imagination as his own “The Idea of Order at Key West”. “Esthetique du Mal” pales to all of those poems in many respects, but there is something to be said for Stevens’ honesty. For all his bluster in his essays about supreme fictions that will replace religion, this, truly, is what poetry can give us: a heightened awareness of the “primitive ecstasy” that comes from hearing a brook. Not an enchanted, purifying, sanctifying brook—just water making noise. Stevens’ point, I think, is that water is what we make of it, and if we channel it through “Another chant” of the poetic imagination, this does not have to be a small thing.

I want to move now to examine the sections of the poem where Stevens tries in various ways to respond to pain by enacting the ideals he expresses in the more theoretical sections discussed above. Sections Five and Seven celebrate human mercy and tenderness, and it is strong evidence of Stevens’ limitations as a poet of interpersonal relationships that these are probably the most frequently-attacked sections of the poem. Section Five deals with familial love in a time of grieving:

Softly let all true sympathizers come,  
Without the inventions of sorrow or the sob  
Beyond invention. Within what we permit,  
Within the actual, the warm, the near,  
So great a unity, that it is bliss,  
Ties us to those we love. (317)

This goes on for a while, but the above lines give a general sense of the section, which is tonally the quietest in the poem. This quiet obviously feels very different from the evocation of “loud, large water” in Section Nine, but in both places, Stevens insists that “the actual” is replete. The world that is “near” contains warmth and opportunities for “unity”, and as he writes a few lines later, “these minutiae mean more/ Than clouds, benevolences, distant heads” (317). Stevens implies (though I am not sure I agree) that it is people, not grand abstractions, that we turn to when we suffer.

Section Seven also deals with grief, but here Stevens addresses, for the only time in this poem about pain, the sufferings of war. The section begins:

How red the rose that is the soldier's wound,  
The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all  
The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,  
The soldier of time grown deathless in great size. (318-9)

This, perhaps unsurprisingly, is the stanza that has come in for the most critical flogging. Halliday finds the rose metaphor “repellent” (41), and Vendler argues that the section is “pious” and a “betrayal of Stevens’ most ambitious aesthetic” (209).<sup>108</sup> I understand and even to some extent agree with these criticisms, but I think it is worth considering that Stevens is not betraying his aesthetic sensibilities here so much as he is pushing them to their limit. This becomes clearer at the end of the section, where the dead soldier “breathes a summer sleep, // In which his wound is good because life was. / No part of him was ever part of death. / A woman smoothes her forehead with her hand / And the soldier of time lies calm beneath that stroke” (319). One can disagree with the idea that “his wound is good because life was,” but it is consistent with the hope Stevens expresses in Section Three that the world should be enough. And it is worth noting that pain does not really disappear in these sections. Instead, Stevens suggests that human contact, and the words that convey that human contact, can bring calm to moments of suffering. Eleanor Cook, I think, gets closest to what Stevens wants to accomplish here when she reminds us of his poetic models. Cook suggests that Section Five is a secular rewriting of the hymn to marital love from *Paradise Lost*, and that Section Seven is an attempt to bring the calming spirit of some of the best poems of Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* to the Second World War (200, 204). The downside for Stevens in conjuring up these

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<sup>108</sup>The section also has its defenders. Bloom feels that Section Seven is “poignant”, and, unlike me, feels that it would not be out of place in *Drum Taps* (1976, 232-3). Weinfeld makes a more complicated argument, claiming that Stevens “has obviously boxed himself into a corner in which the submergence of ethics in aesthetics has the opposite effect of producing real ugliness” (33). Thus, while the section’s palliative aesthetics are in “bad taste,” they do have the virtue of going “to the root of the matter” and forcing us to acknowledge that, when we invest poetry with the power that Stevens recommends, we are reminded “why the poets were thrown out of *The Republic*” (33-4).

texts is, of course, that the comparison is not necessarily flattering. Recalling Whitman makes it clearer that Stevens wants to accomplish something that Whitman does exceptionally well, which is to reach out to the reader by producing a feeling of personal and even tactile contact. Very few poets have ever been as good as Whitman at creating a sense of intimacy both within the poem and between poet and reader, particularly in Civil War poems like “The Wound-Dresser”. Stevens fails here at creating that Whitmanic intimacy because he does not make us feel the soldier’s wound as a wound, and he does not consider in any depth what might be going in the woman’s mind as she smooths her forehead. The irony of “Esthetique du Mal” is that it contains brilliant and stimulating ruminations on the abstract ideal of a poem that, without recourse to the supernatural, can compensate for suffering and evil, but Stevens’ actual attempts to write that poem are less convincing. Partly, this is a sign of how high Stevens sets the bar for himself, but the problem also stems from the fact that he is quite often a prickly and distanced poet. The best proof we have that Stevens saw the modernist religion of art as an ongoing project rather than an accomplished ideology is that he was willing to test it, as he does here, against vexing, difficult questions to which he does not always have the answers.

Section Fifteen closes the poem by returning to many of the main themes that have run throughout the poem, most notably the hope that “the world might be enough” if only the imagination can make poets and readers more receptive to reality. In the first stanza of the section, Stevens writes:

The greatest poverty is not to live  
 In a physical world, to feel that one’s desire  
 Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,  
 After death, a non-physical people, in paradise,  
 Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe  
 The green corn gleaming and experience  
 The minor of what we feel. The adventurer  
 In humanity has not conceived of a race  
 Completely physical in a physical world.

The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals  
Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat,  
The rotund emotions, paradise unknown. (325)

We begin by returning to Section Nine's worry about imaginative destitution, and Stevens again asserts that true poverty is "not to live/ In a physical world." He adds, moreover, that it is an additional form of poverty to experience one's own desire as a form of despair. Stevens is a decidedly odd aesthete, as he extols throughout his work an openness to all the pleasures of the senses, but for the most part the only pleasures he describes are hearing and eating. Philosophically, he is something of a libertine, but in his work, desire is always cathected through aestheticized channels. However, he insists here that his aestheticism is linked to reality, unlike the "metaphysicals" sprawled in the August sun dreaming of a "non-physical" paradise. Bloom reads the line about the metaphysicals as a shot across the bow of Eliot and the Agrarians (1976, 237), but beyond that, it is clearly a broader attack on any form of idealism or dualism that posits a truer reality outside of or beyond this reality. Stevens argues that if there are "non-physical people in paradise," they do not know the "paradise of meaning" that the world provides in its "gleaming" complexity. He continues to push this idea through the final stanza of the poem:

One might have thought of sight, but who could think  
Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?  
Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound,  
But the dark italics it could not propound.  
And out of what one sees and hears and out  
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,  
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming  
With the metaphysical changes that occur,  
Merely in living as and where we live. (326)

The poem ends, strangely enough, with a case against the argument by design. Stevens argues that the world contains "so many sensuous worlds" that are so "swarming" with life that the whole affair could not possibly have been thought of by a

single consciousness. If we think back for a moment to the self-enclosed aesthetics of “pure poetry” that had so interested Stevens a decade before, it is clear that a major evolution has taken place. Stevens has moved from examining subjective experience to imagining the objective world of things, and this process will only accelerate over the last decade of his career. The last sentence of the poem is quite the crescendo, as it tumbles across six lines and uses the momentum of phrase piling upon phrase to evoke the multiplicity of the everyday, and the glories of “what one sees and hears.” When Stevens mailed the poem to Ransom to be published in the *Kenyon Review*, he acknowledged that, grammatically, the poem should end with a question mark, but “I have punctuated it in such a way as to indicate an abandonment of the question, because I cannot bring myself to end the thing with an interrogation mark” (1996, 469).

Stevens’ reference to the poem as “the thing” lets me hope that he, like me, finds it frustrating. I noted earlier that Stevens’ critics have made this poem something of a problem text, and by now it should be clear why. In its worst parts the poem is clumsy, nonsensical, and perhaps even a bit offensive, but the best parts of the poem—the passage on the death of Satan; the satirical portrait in the first section; the stately, direct concluding stanza—are aesthetically delightful in a manner that is typical of the best of Stevens, and moving in a way that, frankly, is not. The letter to Ransom is also intriguing due to Stevens’ indication that the final section of the poem marks “an abandonment of the question.” The final stanza never comes to any conclusion about pain or evil. “Esthetique du Mal” thinks about the “mal” of its title in a variety of ways: through the mythological figures that have represented evil; through the pain of natural disasters; through grief; through the philosophical theories and literary texts that have described pain and suffering. None of these ruminations, however, lead to any sense of how aesthetics can “solve” pain. When Stevens abandons the question, he leaves us with a stanza that does not tell us that we must change our lives, but rather that there are “metaphysical changes that occur,/ Merely in living as and where we live.” If this is a

religion of art, it is a decidedly quietist religion of art, though it is, to be sure, a sonorous quietism.

*Section Four: Conclusion*

In all three chapters of this dissertation, I discuss fiction or poetry that James, Moore, and Stevens wrote in the months or years following an extended absence from their work. James had been writing for the theater in the early 1890's, and believed that he had been ignoring the real work of producing fiction. From 1925 to 1932, Moore was the editor of *The Dial*, and did not publish a single poem. After the publication of *Harmonium* in 1924, Stevens dedicated most of his time to his job at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Corporation, and did not publish another volume of poetry until after he was promoted to vice-president in 1934. This dissertation captures all of these writers at a moment when they are, in a sense, returning to the fold. The impulse these writers feel to question their own assumptions about the sacralization of art must stem in part from the fact that they were no longer novices. There is a sort of mid-career crisis in all of these chapters, as writers who have already produced major works question their own tendency to celebrate the ineffable experience of creative solitude. With the notable exceptions of "The Figure in the Carpet" and "The Idea of Order at Key West", none of the texts I analyze in this dissertation are generally considered "major" works, but their significance lies in the fact that, in them, we see already-eminent American Modernists raising questions about the sanctification of literature. There are perhaps more questions than answers in these poems and stories, but the questions they raise about the ethical and artistic results of the sacralization of literature are finally questions about the core assumption of both American Modernism and American Protestantism that authentic spiritual experience must be private. The work of James, Moore, and Stevens could not have existed without that impulse toward internality, but in the middle of their careers, they paused and surveyed the difficulties produced by their own desire for ineffable aesthetic experience.



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### Publications

“‘Better than faith or works’: The Religion of Art in James’ ‘The Altar of the Dead’”.  
*Autopoetica: Representations of the Creative Process in Nineteenth-Century  
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