

Athenaeum *Review*

Issue 8 • Spring 2023

THE FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES

Ashley C. Barnes

Erin Greer

Rainer Schulte

Ming Dong Gu

Thomas Riccio

Eric Adler

Benjamin Storey

Jordan Poyner

Karen Hamer & Cedric Martin

David Patterson

Journal of the HARRY W. BASS JR. SCHOOL OF ARTS, HUMANITIES, AND TECHNOLOGY
and THE EDITH O'DONNELL INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY
at THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS



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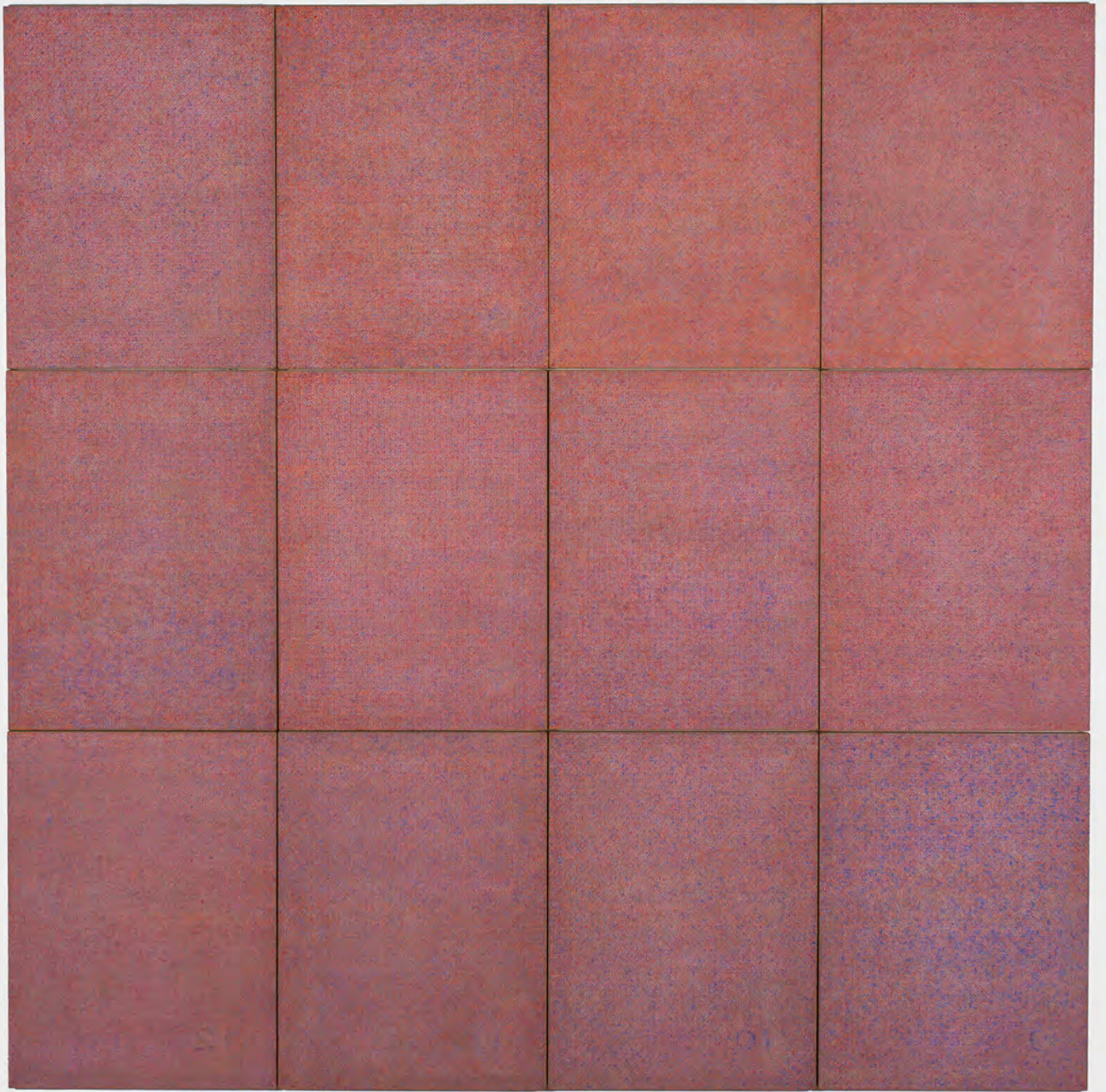
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Front and Back Cover: John Wilcox, *Paradise*, 1989, acrylic on twelve canvases, each 32 x 24 in. (overall 96 x 96 in.), image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

Untitled: Paradise, which John Wilcox painted in 1989, consists of twelve rectangular canvases arranged in three rows of four to make a perfect square. When he showed the painting in 1992, however, Wilcox reconfigured its parts in two rows of six, revealing his understanding of the multipart works as modular, relational, and open to change. See page 189 of this issue.

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Contributors

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**THE FUTURE
OF THE
HUMANITIES**

Insider Exile

Secular Critique and the Future of the Humanities

Ashley C. Barnes

IN THE MID-1850S, AFTER NOVELS LIKE *MOBY-DICK* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852) had chased away most of his readers, Herman Melville turned out a series of short stories for magazines. These included “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the tale of a resistant clerk narrated by his baffled boss, who ends the story by throwing up his hands: “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” Another story from this period ends on a similar note of helpless wonderment: “Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! And oh! Tartarus of Maids!” This closing exclamation, like that of “Bartleby,” is delivered by a comfortable man for whom the world’s mysteries are a little too much.

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” details its narrator’s travels from a lawyers’ dinner club in London, a haven for bachelor connoisseurs, to a paper mill in rural Massachusetts, where immiserated unmarried women produce the blank sheets that will record men’s doings. What makes the story apt for a reflection on the humanities is its portrayal of the failure of secular critique. As Edward Said defined it, secular criticism is intellectual traveling: a generative condition of exile, of standing outside what feels like home.¹ As a form of skepticism or irony, secular critique discovers the often sordid manmade facts behind a phenomenon billed as supernatural. In Melville’s story, the narrator at first succeeds as a secular critic. He rightly uses his status as a guest to query the material conditions of the bachelors’ heavenly equanimity. But when confronted with the maids’ misery, the narrator projects cosmic forces at play. He makes himself comfortably helpless, a spectator on the outside of what he

¹ Said, “Introduction: Secular Criticism,” in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), esp. 6-8.

repeatedly calls an “inscrutable” system.² I read the story as a cautionary tale for secular critics in the humanities, a warning of what goes wrong when a productively self-aware distance collapses into a self-protective insistence on one’s outsider stance.

For Said, writing in 1983, secular criticism was necessarily “oppositional” but also aspirational: such “criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and opposed to every form of tyranny.” Since then, both secularism and critique have been productively subjected to scholars’ ironic distancing. (I treat “criticism” and “critique” as largely synonymous in practice, but the latter term generally signals a more skeptical stance.) In 2004, Bruno Latour asked “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” and found his answer in the intellectual arrogance of critics who diagnosed everyone but themselves as dupes. In *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski turned this line of argument toward the discipline of literary criticism, seeing its interpretive methods as skewed by an aggressive will-to-power.

Whether or not “secularism” and “critique” are explicitly named as twin targets in such arguments, they are a matched pair, because critique is the intellectual tool that empowers secularism by claiming to sort the rational actors from the credulous who need to be enlightened. The case that secularism is a not a liberating disenchantment from primitive religion, but rather a massive and ongoing effort to generate the categories of rational versus credulous, began in such groundbreaking works as Talal Asad’s *Formations of the Secular* (2003) and Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007). A 2007 symposium at Berkeley brought the terms together by posing the question, “Is Critique Secular?”, with Asad and Saba Mahmood detailing the ways that secularism has served as a cover story for Western imperialism. For many scholars across the humanities, secularism is now understood as Protestant biopolitics, disciplining the unruly adherents of other faiths into heteronormative capitalist consumers.

The exposure of secularism as a political-economic program disguised as universal objectivity has produced valuable analysis in multiple disciplines. But the scholars critiquing secularism are, to my mind, practicing secular critique. Far from proving secular critique to be a compromised tool, they are doing exemplary work with it. Such scholars, like Said’s secular critic, practice a form of insider exile by using intellectual skepticism to question the institutional power granted to intellectual skepticism. Seeing how one’s own privileged tools of thought have developed that privilege can generate the analytical leverage to show how faith in secularism has abetted imperialism abroad and justified a knowing elite.

The problem that Melville’s story helps us see is how unstable this outsider vision is, how readily secularism’s power to demystify provokes the urge to re-mystify. “Paradise and Tartarus” dramatizes both

2 Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” in Peter Coviello, ed., *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 219–241.

the strengths and limits of secular critique in a way that is especially salient for my own field of American literary studies but applicable to the study of the humanities more broadly. This story of heaven and hell demonstrates not only how secular critique goes wrong but also the potential for its proper functioning. Such critique would hold secularism accountable for its promise to dismantle, not to prop up, transcendental justifications for oppressive regimes. One of those regimes would include the university itself, an institution historically clothed with the power of secularism and still our most dependable site of knowledge production. Practicing a renewed secular critique would require scholars working inside the system of higher education to step outside of it without mystifying it, either for good or ill.

Secular critique done properly does not mistake exile for innocence.

In the “Paradise” half of Melville’s story, we see the power of secular critique to hold secularism accountable. At first, the narrator is charmed by the bachelor lawyers’ table talk. The conversation is that of liberal arts faculty chatting before a meeting: they discuss life as a “student at Oxford,” “Flemish architecture,” “Oriental manuscripts,” “a funny case in law,” work on “translating a comic poem of Pulci’s.” But the narrator takes a turn. The bachelors’ bonhomie begins to strike him as morally blinkered. He sees that they use their status as “men of liberal sense,” their “ripe scholarship,” and their “capacious philosophical and convivial understandings” to justify their own leisure. The narrator shrewdly observes that because their capacious understanding depends on their freedom from responsibility to “wives or children”, they cannot understand the suffering of those who are free. Voicing the bachelors’ incredulity, he writes: “how could they suffer themselves to be imposed upon by such monkish fables? Pain! Trouble! As well talk of Catholic miracles. No such thing.” The narrator’s irony here underscores the power of his judgment: the bachelors’ secular humanist virtues, their capacity to be exiles, have enabled their glib denial of evil as a primitive superstition.

Yet when the narrator travels back to Massachusetts, his power of secular critique fails him. Confronting the noise and heat of the paper mill, witnessing the factory workers’ pain and trouble, he treats it as something on the order of a fable or a miracle. He first orientalizes the women workers as “mutely and cringingly” serving the machinery “as the slave serves the Sultan,” then casts them as Christianized martyrs, the “agony” of their faces printed on the paper like that of Jesus’ “on the handkerchief of Saint Veronica.” Watching

pulp become foolscap in nine minutes exactly, he is “filled” with a “curious emotion... not wholly unlike that which one might experience at the fulfillment of some mysterious prophecy,” an emotion he dispels by telling himself it’s only a machine. That is a secular explanation: it’s not a demon, only gears and cogs. But his secular critique stops short of seeing the profit-seeking that built the machinery. Instead, he reads the technology as destiny. He is, after all, at the mill to purchase supplies for his business. He fails to notice (even as Melville lets us see) that his secular faith in rational progress has led him to mystify the barbarity of progress as divine will. His concluding line, “Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! And oh! Tartarus of Maids!” is a lamentation for what he prefers to read as two realms separated by cosmic decree. Melville wants us to see the division between consumers and producers as manmade. The narrator’s exclamation makes an implicit claim to be outside of both paradise and hell. But as Aaron Winter points out, the story suggests that we all, reader and author included, belong to this system.³ In the moment of reading, at least, we are consuming not producing.

Melville shows this narrator as someone whose secular critique is just strong enough to needle the professional class but too weak to do more than lament the plight of labor. His unwitting theodicy, his apologia for capitalism, reveals the potential for secular critique to be practiced in bad faith. But because Melville’s narrator does see the interlocking global system of consumer and producer, the story has been taken as inspiration for American literary studies’ turn toward transnational critique. On this reading, because it shows us how to “trace the interconnected flow of capital and ideas in the global economy,” the story points toward a “literary and cultural criticism that aims to be as global as its objects of analysis.”

That optimistic vision of global critique does not account for the fragility of secular critique, the way it lures us to outsider innocence by making it easy to shift from productive internal exile to self-defensive spectatorship. Robyn Wiegman finds that tendency in the Americanist turn toward transnationalism. The urge to think outside America, as Wiegman sees it, manifests the discipline’s “refused identification” with its object of study—not literature as much as American culture writ large—even as it enables the discipline to claim a planetary mission.⁴ Americanist scholars may wishfully locate themselves outside the university by identifying with a “grassroots global resistance.” This is certainly preferable to Melville’s narrator’s flight from the laboring class. Such a stance can be a valuable form of solidarity. Wiegman specifies that refused identification (what I am calling exile or outsider-ness) is not “a mistake or a failure” but the source of “a critical subjectivity that is one of the most important, seductive, and gratifying ends of [American studies] disciplinary disposition.” But Wiegman also observes that by claiming this “deeply

3 Winter, “Seeds of Discontent: The Expanding Satiric Range of Melville’s Transatlantic Diptychs,” *Leviathan* 8.2 (2006).

4 Wiegman, “The Ends of New Americanism,” *New Literary History* 42.3 (2011), 386.

comforting” outsider status, we risk equating “critical noncomplicity with historical noncomplicity” and forgetting that American studies “has been institutionalized” to function as a site of resistance. By telling a story of our discipline as endlessly resistant, we tell a story that keeps our field institutionally secure.

That goal is worthy: scholars of American literature and culture need institutional security if we are going to teach our students to be secular critics themselves. But for any humanities scholar, outsider-ness taken too far, as a badge of innocence, will mystify its objects. (Said notes that exile is not the same as escape.) Mystification can cast laborers as victims, as Melville’s narrator does in the paper mill, or as heroes, like the “prophetic organization” that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney find in the academic workforce they call the undercommons.⁵ Such heroizing can serve a necessary corrective purpose and make plain the unequal conditions under which people labor in the university. But the heroic outsider position is a tempting one to claim for scholars who refuse identification with the university. Heroizing labor may also get some facts wrong: as Megan Wadle points out in her reading of “Paradise and Tartarus,” at least some of the women who were employed in antebellum New England factories registered their preference for waged labor over unpaid domestic work.⁶ Likewise, some of our overworked graduate students might prefer to see themselves not as underground prophets but as developing professionals who should be compensated accordingly. Finally, the outsider’s innocence needs a villain. That can mean hyperbolizing a factory or the university into an inscrutable evil force, making it harder to see the human motives, including our own vested interests, that keep it running.

“Paradise and Tartarus” finally answers the questions “Has critique run out of steam?” and “Is critique secular?” with a “no” and “yes.” Melville’s secular critique reminds us that the mysteries of the world, both good and ill, both fiction and factory, are manmade, not transcendent. As Jenny Franchot argues, Melville devoted himself to a globe-trotting effort to get outside of America and to demystify the Protestant God by making that God travel. His work shows how efforts to demystify trigger contrary efforts to re-mystify. Deconstructing one’s own god simultaneously “incite[s] a religious impulse to assign transcendent meaning—a contradictory gesture resolved by

5 Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text* 79 22.2 (2004), 102.

6 Wadle, “Rightly Enough Called Girls: Melville’s Violated Virgins and Male Marketplace Fears,” *American Literature* 90.1 (2018).

supplanting theological and anthropological mystery with that of literary mystery.” As scholars and critics, we perpetually whet our own appetites for literary mystery by restlessly undermining it. The trick is not to deny that appetite for mystery in our zeal to practice the salutary demystification of secular critique. I don’t mean to call here for postcritique or for critical humility. What I have in mind, for professors of literature, is a willingness to toggle between recognizing the inexhaustible provocations of a text like Melville’s, and candidly acknowledging how such texts have kept the professoriate, though fewer and fewer of us, earning a living.

Secular critique done properly does not mistake exile for innocence. It does practice the outsider-ness that reexamines familiar truths from unfamiliar angles. Humanities scholars can teach that skill to others. We can bring the outside inside, “educating and including in [our] research ranks those historically excluded by virtue of caste, class, religion, region, race, ethnicity, gender, and body,” as Wendy Brown writes.⁷ At the broadest level, if we are to maintain the public university as a public good, we cannot seek innocence—universities “cannot be held to a standard of purity,” as Brown says, since they “will always be engaged in some compromises with their sources of survival”—but we can maintain the “modest distance” of a “*relative* autonomy from markets,” one that enables “*uncontracted*” “inquiry.” That distance will inform our efforts to halt what Brown rightly sees as the drift toward aligning higher education with the needs of business. For UT-Dallas, where I work, that drift, ironically, heads in the direction of its origin, its founding in 1961 by Texas Instruments as a workforce training institute. But if any university is going to promote “the learning appropriate to free people, those capable of self-government,” it must be able to distinguish between what is good for citizens versus what is good for rankings and to direct its energy toward the former.

To make that distinction, we need secular critique to catch ourselves mythmaking (which includes making myths about secularism itself), so that we can see more clearly where we stand in the system. Secular critique neither denies mystery nor proclaims one’s immunity to it. What it can do is help us distinguish self-justifying myths from the mythical-seeming hopes that should be made real—above all, the possibility of humanities scholarship to make a freer world. ■

7 Brown, “The Vocation of the Public University,” in Debaditya Bhattacharya, ed., *The Idea of the University: Histories and Contexts* (London: Routledge India, 2018), 56.

Dark Posthumanism and the Novel

Zadie Smith's *NW* and our possible futures

Erin Greer

THE PHILOSOPHER ROSI BRAIDOTTI HAS DECLARED THAT the future of the humanities will be posthumanist, owing to forces of both virtue and necessity. “Posthumanism” names an array of conditions and intellectual positions that have challenged ideas stemming from the classic humanist conviction that man is the measure of all things. Its many points of origin include theoretical critiques of the illusory rational and autonomous “man” central to some articulations of humanism, as well as arguments that humanistic ideals have been (mis-) used to justify colonialism, racism, sexism, and exploitation rooted in liberal capitalism. Its origins also include new technologies that supplant traditional functions of human thought and labor, algorithms that make decisions for us and devices that augment and transform our bodies. Its reality manifests in escalating climate crises—droughts and hurricanes, fires and winter storms, vanishing coastlines and water shortages that should make clear that centuries of unthinking anthropocentrism might lead to the end of the so-called Anthropocene. With Braidotti and others urging updates to our ethical and political outlooks, I think the future of the humanities will indeed be posthumanist, for better or worse.¹

The academic humanities have long known that “man” is a questionable concept and historical actor, of course, and a habit of critiquing our own presuppositions has prepared the humanities to help our world meet its posthumanist future.

¹ Braidotti is prolific on this subject, but for a concise articulation of her key claims on this forum's topic, see Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman humanities.” *European Educational Research Journal* 12.1 (2013): 1-19.

The ironies and difficulties of this prospect are more than semantic, however. One follows from the fact that the future of the humanities is most immediately threatened by neoliberalism, which is itself a “dark posthumanism” in its premise—as the political theorist Wendy Brown has noted—that “markets do everything better than humans do.” Neoliberalism tautologically validates this premise, Brown suggests, through aggressive economic deregulation and disinvestment in the institutions that ostensibly improve human performance, like universities. Readers are likely familiar with the view that neoliberalism poses both material and cultural threat to the humanities, as its prioritization of profit rationalizes the withdrawal of material resources and cultural prestige from anything tangential to the growth of capital. Neoliberalism is often named as the force behind the dwindling numbers of majors in the humanities, the stripping of public support from nominally public institutions, and the crisis in academic working conditions, which increasingly reflect the wider, precarious “gig” economy. Yet if we think of neoliberalism as dark posthumanism, we can perceive that traditional humanist arguments about truth, beauty, and intellectual freedom are not only ineffective retorts to neoliberalism, in practical terms; they are intellectually inadequate, as well. To be sure, neoliberal politicians and administrators are unlikely to find such arguments moving. But neoliberalism is not the only force to raise doubts about our humanistic convictions, and if there is to be a posthumanist future to the humanities, we must counter “dark posthumanism” without uncritical nostalgia for a happy humanist past.

The present essay explores these issues as mediated by a work of literature: Zadie Smith’s 2012 novel *NW*, which I’ll argue draws together ambivalent ideas about humanism, literature, and neoliberalism’s darkly posthumanist tendencies. Set in 2010 in the racially diverse, working class, and gentrifying area of northwest London to which its title refers, *NW* is comprised of five sections and cycles through numerous stylistic modes, each associated with different stages in the development of novelistic prose in English. One section is narrated in the intimate, free indirect style of literary realism associated with the 19th-century ascendancy of the English novel. Another reads as a fragmentary *bildungsroman*, or “novel of development.” Others combine stream-of-consciousness narration with concrete poetry (in which letters are arranged on the page to evoke images), a chapter that parodies Google Maps directions, and chapters that oscillate between tight closeness to a central character and clinical, opaque detachment.

That James Joyce is one of Smith’s literary models is no surprise. As in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the stylistic shifts in *NW* invite us to reflect on the history and futures of narrative literature, evoking common convictions among literary critics that the novel, as a genre, has both formal and chronological kinship with liberal humanism,

for reasons I explain below. Also like *Ulysses*, *NW* conspicuously breaks familiar narrative conventions. In *NW*'s case, the breakage suggests that neoliberalism's posthumanist tendencies necessitate new conventions if novels are going to formally suit our contemporary world. My central proposition is that *NW*'s stylistic restlessness at once critiques neoliberalism and rebuffs nostalgia for older humanistic and novelistic norms. I draw forth its implicit outlook on the past and present of the novel genre in hopes that its insights are applicable more broadly, as we envision how humanistic scholarship and education remain essential—while also changeable—in conditions both excitingly and alarmingly posthumanist.

NW centers on two women in their mid-thirties, friends since childhood on a public housing estate. As the novel repeatedly reminds us, they came of age alongside neoliberalism. Leah, who's white, works in low-level public service, is agonized by social inequality, and ambivalent about her loving but rather dishonest marriage to a black French-Caribbean immigrant. Natalie, originally named Keisha, is black, and whereas Leah's preoccupation with inequality interferes with her willingness to commit to the middle-class values and privileges that nonetheless contour her life, Natalie embraces an ethic of brutal individualism and defiant consumerism. She works critically but willingly within the constraints of racism and sexism, transforming herself from Keisha into Natalie, a lawyer (who files no charges when a senior attorney gropes her) married to a wealthy, cosmopolitan banker. Natalie has two children and a wide circle of brunching, dinner-partying, sophisticated friends, who express relief when she swaps her public service legal career for one representing multinational corporations.

As the novel opens, Leah is drowsing in a hammock in her backyard. We soon learn that she discovered that morning she's pregnant and called in sick to work. Several chapters later, she will get an abortion, having told no one about the pregnancy, not even (or especially not) the husband who believes they are trying to have children. Leah is reflecting on a phrase she heard on the radio, which recurs again and again in the novel as an ironic motif: *I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me*. "A good line," she thinks, then tries to write it on the pages of a magazine. It is not a "good line," of course: it's banal and ambiguous and false, but its ethos drives and haunts the novel's characters. In any case, the words won't stick to the magazine's glossy pages.

This opening vignette brings together two of *NW*'s preoccupations: the matching of literary forms to norms of personhood (a dictionary versus the various forms the novel samples), and the

uneasy individualism central to neoliberalism. The theorist I mentioned earlier, Wendy Brown, encapsulates neoliberalism's ethos as one of individual "responsibilization," the "idea and practice" that "forc[es] the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider."² In part, Brown explains, responsibilization is essential to 21st-century neoliberal governance because of the evisceration of welfare and stable, well-paying jobs. When there is no social safety net, you must self-invest and self-provide. This evisceration of welfare is a running theme and scenic backdrop in the novel, but *NW* shares the view expressed by theorists like Brown, who builds on Foucault and others, that neoliberalism is more than an economic philosophy, that it extends the logic of "investment" into all relations and activities—the workplace and the home, exercising, dating, raising children, cultivating friendships, and developing any identity at all.³ For theorists like Brown, there is a crucial difference between the ideal human subject of neoliberalism and the ideal subject of classic economic and political liberalism. Individual self-interest, converging in a marketplace of goods or ideas, is no longer deemed sufficient to the needs of capital. Following financialization and the escalating risks of unregulated markets, neoliberalism requires downgrading the individual person, disciplining the naive self-interest we think of as "desire" and replacing our very sense of self with the sense of having or being a *portfolio of assets*. Brown's neoliberal subject is a portfolio seeking investors, and activities previously thought of as taking place outside the market are "transmogrified," as she puts it, "according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics." Specifically, she argues in *Undoing the Demos* (2015), all spheres of existence and activity become measured in terms of how they enhance or diminish the value of the portfolio self.

Regardless of the accuracy or scope of this account of neoliberalism, it articulates *NW*'s own implicit theory, developed via its investigation of converging aesthetic and social problems. As I mentioned above, there is a conventional story in literary studies according to which the genre of the novel has both formal and historical affinity to liberal humanism. A strong version posits that the novel—especially in its 19th-century realist apogee—at once reflects and cultivates the norms of liberal culture, training readers in what Elaine Hadley calls the "liberal cognition" suited for economic and political institutions in liberal societies.⁴ Private reading reinforces the ideals and skills of reflection, individual autonomy, and judgment, while also cultivating sympathy for others in our community who must have vivid inner lives, just like characters in novels. The novels of 18th and 19th century Britain, America, and Europe additionally stress the primacy of individual personhood by building plots around individuals driven by ambitions and desires they must learn to temper with reason

² Brown discusses "responsibilization" at length in chapters 3 and 4 of *Undoing the Demos* (Zone Books, 2015).

³ For a reading of the novel's interest in neoliberal austerity politics, see David Marcus, "Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity," *Dissent* 60.2 (2013): 67-73.

⁴ See Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

and moral virtue. This account of the novel's history has been challenged on several fronts, including its Eurocentrism and its reduction of an assorted literary past to a focused *telos*. Nonetheless, *NW* raises a question consistent with this account, extended into the 21st century: what happens to literary realism when a society's ideal person is no longer an individual actor seeking to balance self-interest against other obligations, but rather a portfolio seeking to win investors? What updates are required of the novel—a technology allegedly designed as a vehicle of liberal humanism—in the era of dark posthumanism?

It is *NW*'s third section, which follows Natalie's progression from childhood to the present, that most overtly links the norms of neoliberal subjecthood to the issue of narrative style. This section evokes the classic subgenre of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of development, which is commonly theorized as exemplifying the mutual reinforcement of novelistic and liberal humanistic norms. It follows Natalie as she progresses, like a classic hero of the *Bildungsroman*, from humble beginnings through education and wider experience, up socio-economic and cultural ladders. As Joseph Slaughter writes of the *Bildungsroman*, Natalie's plot of individual development is also a "plot of incorporation" into a social "whole," which is comprised of strenuously distinct individuals.⁵ She joins the 21st-century ruling class of bankers, lawyers, and other professionals who boastfully complain about how hard they work and the consumerist pressures they actively reproduce. But if *NW* alludes to many conventions of the classic *Bildungsroman*, it conspicuously breaks others. The chapters detail stages of Natalie's life in chronological, linear sequence, but they differ dramatically in length, tone, and perspective. Some are a single sentence long, while others offer extended descriptions of single moments. Some chapters summarize entire cultural eras or offer ironic quips about popular culture. The cumulative effect is that of a shattered, jolting, uneasy *Bildung*, the aesthetic matching Natalie's own uneasiness.

Here, then, the novel offers one answer to the question regarding the fates of literary realism and the novel in the era of dark posthumanism. Natalie is an acolyte of self-making in the turbo-charged, "responsibilized" mode of neoliberalism, described from an early age as "crazy busy with self-invention" and wracked with worry that, in truth, she "ha[s] no self to be," no "personality at all." She wonders if the "self" she busily invents is "only the accumulation and reflection of all the things she had read in books and seen on television." In college, she ditches her boyfriend from home for a cosmopolitan aristocrat named Frank de Angelis, suffering pangs of self-consciousness (if not conscience) owing to the "gaping socioeconomic difference" between the two men. She marries Frank, despite lacking respect for him. When they begin having children,

⁵ See Joseph R. Slaughter, "Enabling fictions and novel subjects: The *Bildungsroman* and international human rights law." *PMLA* 121.5 (2006): 1405-1423.

she considers reproduction another labor necessary for accumulating and reflecting values she cannot identify as her own. The conventional *Bildung* of 18th and 19th century European fiction imagines the linear, progressive development of an autonomous and stable individual, a thinking and feeling human. Natalie's *bildung*, in contrast, imagines the self as the accumulation of a portfolio, accruing (capital) interest rather than cultivating (human) interests.

What updates are required of the novel —a technology allegedly designed as a vehicle of liberal humanism—in the era of dark posthumanism?

Indeed, the novel never lets us lose sight of the fact that her coming of age coincides with that of neoliberalism. For instance, a chapter after she has married Frank asserts that “only the private realm existed now. Work and home. Marriage and children.” The ghost of Margaret Thatcher lingers, whispering that there is no such thing as society, only men, women, and families. Another chapter, titled “the end of history,” describes a so-called “revolution” without politics, evoking Francis Fukuyama's declaration that “history” has concluded with the triumph of capitalism over socialism. Fukuyama may have intended to declare the victory of *liberal* capitalism, but in the (in) famous essay and book of that title, he also ambivalently affirms the neoliberal view that, after history, human affairs are dictated by markets and technocracy rather than political deliberation and conflict. In the chapter titled after Fukuyama's essay, we read variations on these post-historical sentiments: “what could go wrong, now we were all friends?” and, a beat later, “anyway, it was all already decided.”

The name of Natalie's husband, Frank De Angelis, carries a Dickensian ring that almost too perfectly reflects the character's function as something like an “angel investor” in Natalie's portfolio. His family wealth is instrumental to her *Bildung*: he convinces his mother to finance her legal training, explaining that he told his mother, “even if I didn't love her, it doesn't make sense to let this kind of ability go to waste for the lack of means—it doesn't make *economic* sense.” They marry shortly after. A chapter reflecting on their relationship imagines it from four angles: it might be a “loving relationship,” an example of a “low-status person with intellectual capital but no surplus wealth [who] seeks high-status person of substantial surplus wealth,” the result of reproductive urges, or simply selfish genes running the show. Natalie seems uncertain which to believe. Later, she conceptualizes Frank and herself as “a double act that only speaks to each other when they are on stage,” and later still, as “incorporated. An advert for themselves.”

Natalie's portfolio self proves to be as unstable, as risky, as the stock futures Frank trades at work (recall that the novel's "present," toward which Natalie's section progresses, is the immediate aftermath of the financial crash of 2008, itself a retort against the neoliberal faith in unregulated markets). The instability of the former is evidenced not only by Natalie's recurrent anxieties that she has "no self to be" and her marriage is theatrical, but also by a risky, compulsive habit she develops shortly after marriage, when she begins perusing the "listings" —her evasive word for a website on which people advertise for casual sex. She creates an account, using the name Keisha, and eventually arranges several unsatisfactory threesomes. The section of the novel I read as her fragmentary *bildung* ends with Frank's discovery of this mostly-virtual alter ego.

What happens to literary realism when a society's ideal person is no longer an individual actor seeking to balance self-interest against other obligations, but rather a portfolio seeking to win investors?

The narrative voice in Natalie's section marks a stark contrast to that of the section that immediately precedes it. While tracking her life's progression, the narration leaves her subjectivity opaque, never representing with psychological depth the self whose existence she questions. In the preceding section, *NW* follows a minor character named Felix using the intimate narrative style of free indirect discourse, the style perfected in the era when both realist fiction and liberal humanism were culturally dominant in England, in which third-person narration borrows the idiom and preoccupations of characters and grants representational depth to their mental and emotional states. Felix is a hardworking optimist with clear goals and plans, a man whose relationship to experience is suited to a narrative style associated with individual agency and authenticity. He dies at the end of his section, however, as if Smith wants to rebuke readers for indulging in the pleasures of a narrative form suited to an outdated fantasy of psychological unity and depth. That Felix is black is perhaps a subtle rebuke, as well, to the historical exclusions of British realism, affording narrative complexity to a character whose social "type" was excluded from the terms of both humanism and realism in the 19th century. He is only included in *NW* under brief and ambiguous terms, his death an item on the news at the end of the first

section and a subject of conversation in the novel's final pages. His section differs stylistically not only from Natalie's fragmentary *bildung*, but also from the first section of the novel, which tracks Leah using a stream-of-consciousness style that similarly blends proximity and psychological distance.

The contrast emphasizes *NW*'s refusal to give the same depth of representation to its protagonists. It conspicuously rebuffs the inclinations of readers who wish to empathize or identify with characters, calling into question long-running associations between novels and empathy—and by extension, between novels and humanism. Here, *NW* contributes to a larger reconsideration of narrative ethics that has developed in both critical and creative works in recent decades in the wake of theoretical challenges to liberal humanist visions of the self. Dorothy Hale argues in a recent book that contemporary authors, including Smith, embrace a “new ethics” for narrative fiction.⁶ Whereas it was once common for authors and critics to assert the value of narrative fiction based on its alleged exercise of our empathetic capacities and its cultivation of faith in common moral salience beneath surface differences—the philosopher Martha Nussbaum remains a proponent of this view, using it to link novels and liberal humanism—many today are rethinking the value of empathy. According to the “new ethics,” Hale explains, we do not need to empathize with others, but rather to learn that the other is *other*, inaccessible to our imagination: this humility is the starting premise for ethical relations. Along similar lines, Tammy Houser has argued that *NW* thematizes the selective and pointless distribution of empathy among the privileged.⁷ Readers are invited to empathize with Felix, who dies, unsaved by readerly affect in a world where violence and racism exert a cruel, unjust toll. Leah, moreover, thinks of herself as “so flooded with empathy,” which the novel links to her depressive lethargy rather than effective political work to address the injustices that trouble her.

But if *NW* resists classic assumptions linking novels and empathy, it also reminds us that empathy is absent from the darkly posthumanist ethos of responsabilization. This point is made powerfully clear in the novel's final pages, in which Natalie visits Leah, who is once again reclining in her hammock, despondent and distracted. They have a disappointingly shallow conversation, but in its course Leah offers the nearest explanation we find in the novel for her emotional state, saying to Natalie, “I just don't understand why I have this life”—a line that seems to point equally to the limitations of her life, its foreclosures of alternative possibilities as she ages and is pressured from all sides to begin having children, and also to the relative privileges of her life compared to those of others, including “that poor bastard,” Felix, whose death is a piece of her media backdrop. Natalie's immediate response is exemplary “responsibilization”

6 See Dorothy Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford University Press, 2020). She focuses on Smith's earlier novel, *On Beauty*, where the querying of humanism and antihumanism is mediated by the story of an art history professor.

7 See Tammy Houser, “Zadie Smith's *NW*: Unsettling the Promise of Empathy,” *Contemporary Literature* 58.1 (2017): 116-148.

dogma: “because we worked harder,” she says, “we were smarter and we knew we didn’t want to end up begging on other people’s doorsteps.” As an explanation for why they are alive and another person is dead, this is incoherent as well as callous, especially given *NW*’s sensitive depiction of Felix. As a justification for inequality, it also falls short, not only ethically and politically but conceptually, as the novel has repeatedly demonstrated that neither hard work nor “wanting” are straightforward.

NW thus prompts us to rethink the assumptions these two characters represent: Leah exemplifies empathetic identification and suffering in the face of inequality, a model some might call liberal humanism, embedded in classic defenses of novels and the humanities.⁸ In her case this leads to nothing useful. Natalie exemplifies harsh, unforgiving individualism, and her anxieties and risky behavior caution us about its personal toll, while her wrongheaded response to Leah shows its ethical and conceptual void. Here, then, is my reading of the curiously proximate-yet-distant quality of the narrative voice in its depiction of the two protagonists, a reading that differs somewhat from the “new ethics” reading: the narrative style conspicuously suits dark posthumanism, for different reasons stemming from the same neoliberal soil. Whereas the opacity of Natalie’s inner life reflects its evacuation to make way for portfolio interest, in Leah’s case, the narrative voice reflects the effects of her despondent, apolitical empathy in the face of the inequality that accompanies brutal “responsibilization.” If we believe we live after “the end of history,” after everything has been decided, the novel warns, we might meet inequality with feelings rather than action. The stylistic restlessness thus enacts a critique of neoliberal responsibilization, while simultaneously refusing—in the representations of both Leah and Felix—to retrench in older humanistic ideals.

IN THIS REFUSAL, THE NOVEL SUGGESTS THAT THE FUTURE of the novel genre will not be its past. We cannot counteract dark posthumanism with Victorian-style fiction or its implicit values. By extension, we cannot defend the humanities with nostalgic humanism, visions of the integrated self that at best are naïve and at worst have been mobilized for imperial, anthropocentric, exploitative purposes. But neither can we embrace the darkly posthumanist present. By this reading, *NW* reflexively theorizes its function as a diagnostic rather than therapeutic or revolutionary tool. Literature, it insists, will not make us more empathetic, better people—or if it does, this is hardly enough. Literature can, however, formally innovate and develop narrative styles that clarify—by reflecting and resisting—the stakes of

8 On a related subject, John Plotz has drawn insightful attention to a “there but for fortune” motif in nineteenth century realist fiction, through which the privileged ostensibly learn that their good fortune is random enough they may as well empathize with those less blessed by fickle fate. John Plotz, “Is Realism Failing? The Rise of Secondary Worlds.” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 50. No. 3. Duke University Press, 2017.

our current trajectory. If, as my students report, *NW* is a difficult, aversive novel because its characters remain opaque, frustrating, and damaged, it can call us to an aversive view of the values subtly and unsubtly shaping these characters and, perhaps, ourselves.

From this standpoint, the futures of the novel and the humanities *do* resemble their intertwined pasts: attuning us to our conditions but refusing to rest, refusing to allow even their own tools—narrative voice, conventional plots, aspirational pictures of the “human”—to ossify into timeless ideals. Aesthetic form and ideology are historical, contingent, and thus changeable as our world changes. Aesthetic form can resist as well as reflect the changing norms of our world, partly by urging us to perceive complicities between aesthetic forms and societal norms. Many futures of the novel, and the humanities, remain to be written.

Of course, if the academic humanities are a site in which we practice thinking critically with works of art, philosophy, and history, they do not directly disrupt dark posthumanist forces. More nuanced critiques of neoliberalism do not dissuade its acolytes. The Felixes of the world are not saved if we read aversive novels. But one way to be “posthumanist” is to allow philosophies, histories, and aesthetic works, including novels, to refresh our critical bearings in the lives we lead “post”—after, beyond—deliberations hosted in humanities classrooms and journals. In other words, the question to ask is: how do *we*—as political actors informed by the works institutionally housed in the humanities—respond to dark posthumanism, insisting that everything has not already been decided, that a brighter posthuman future can be made, and written? *a*

A New Horizon for the Study of the Arts and Humanities

Rainer Schulte

A GREAT DEAL OF NERVOUSNESS AND DISSATISFACTION has entered the hall of the study of the arts and humanities. Changes will have to occur to bring a new direction to the current uncertainty of these studies. The word that immediately comes to my mind is the German word *Vordenken*. The word, which has no immediate English word correspondence, denotes thinking toward the future. However, it has a prominent presence in German newspapers, literary magazines, and academic journals. To think toward the future could be considered a new paradigm. The idea of *Vordenken* is not particularly cherished in the academic world of the arts and humanities. The thinking and academic practice seem to be more oriented toward preserving the research and intellectual approaches of the past.

More than ever, current practices in the teaching of literature and the humanities should be re-thought and redirected, especially at a moment when technological inventions require some drastic changes in the way we do research and approach the interpretation of texts, whether they are verbal, visual, or musical. The major function of studying the arts and humanities is the act of interpretation, the understanding of a work of literature, painting, musical composition, or historical and philosophical works.

One way to revitalize the interpretive approaches to works might be achieved from the point of view of translation. George Steiner, in the following statement, opens a new vista to the practice of the act of interpretation:

"All acts of communication are acts of translation."

It should be understood that the approach from the translation methodologies should not be considered to be the only way of creating new approaches to the act of interpretation. The reading of a novel or short story is an act of translation; the viewing of a painting or listening to a musical piece are acts of translation. Lately, some serious research is being advanced from the study of facial expressions and bodily movements of human beings as acts of translation. What kind of changes can be expected from the application of translation thinking and practices to renovate and revitalize the act of interpretation?

Looking back to a general practice of approaching the interpretation of a work, the immediate question always comes to the forefront: What does the text mean? Such a question relied on the assumption that a text could be reduced to one definitive meaning. Translation practice teaches us that there is no such thing as the only definitive meaning of a text: think of the numerous translations of Dante's *Inferno* or even the Bible. The same thing can be said about the interpretation of literary texts: no novel, short story, poem, or play can be reduced to one final definitive meaning.

The question "what" does a work mean should be transformed to "how" does a work come to mean? It is time to rethink our approaches to the practice of interpretation, which constitutes the essence of the work in the arts and humanities.

The paradigm of translation might help to understand how the interpretation of works can be initiated and practiced from the point of view of how does a work come to mean? One of the best examples might be the poem by Arthur Rimbaud entitled "Voyelles" (Vowels). The guiding principle of the poem is anchored in the five vowels that come to life via sound, color, and the associations that Rimbaud attributes to each vowel. What Rimbaud wants to communicate is that reducing a poem to one meaning is an illusion. The poet must create the atmosphere of the poem that will be communicated to the senses. The prominent approach to the poem will be anchored in the reconstruction of how the poem was built. Not one meaning but meanings come to life from the reconstruction of the associations that the individual reader can derive from the associations that the poet begins to visualize in the movement of words.

In the words of Rimbaud:

"I invented the color of the vowels. I regulated the form and movement of each consonant, and with instinctive rhythms I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible someday to all the senses."

The approach to the interpretation of works that have been created by writers, painters, and composers always requires an act of translation. No two translations are ever the same. Speaking about literary works, the number of re-translations of Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue) or Charles Baudelaire's "Correspondances" continues to rise every year. That practice reconfirms that the definitive translation of a work does not exist. The original work will not change and does not have to change in order to maintain its power, whereas the translation needs to be revitalized as the cultural and social standards and energies of each century change. Each translation reflects a new effort of the translator to revive the internal energy and vision of a work to the present sensibility of the reader.

My guideline to rethink the way we approach and interpret a work comes from the many years I have practiced the art and craft of translation and studied the theoretical dimensions of translation. In addition, my many years of playing musical pieces on the piano continuously forced me to explore and understand the quality and expansiveness of a sound. Listening to a note twenty times opens up new vistas to the potential communication force of a single note or chord. The interaction with individual notes opens a new way of how to interpret a work as a performing and translation act.

Some of my ideas were also generated by Steven Pinker's 2014 essay "Why Academic Writing Stinks," an essay that caused quite a strong reaction when it was published. The essay opens some serious questions about the nature and value of existing academic writing. One of Pinker's main arguments was that academics describe the works with a prose that is "turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand." These rather offensive descriptive outbursts require a serious rethinking of the act of interpretation.

THE PRACTICE OF TRANSLATION DOES NOT START WITH describing a text, but rather with a continuous effort to establish relationships between the words, images, and sounds of the other language and the possibilities of the English language. An ongoing dialog with the other language, the foreign word, must be established. That activity initiates a continuous act of performance that has to be enacted by the translator and the reader. The stasis of the printed word on the page will be transferred into a continuous activity of establishing associations.

Established practices of approaching and reading a written work underwent some unexpected changes with the publication of Julio Cortázar's 1963 novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*). It became obvious that the established ways of looking at a work were no longer written in stone.

Cortázar indicated that his novel could be read in two different ways: the first can be read in a normal fashion the way it was printed and ends with chapter 56. The second should be read by beginning with chapter 73, and then following the sequence indicated at the end of each page to end with Chapter 131.

Naturally, the publication of the novel caused some strong reactions on the part of critics and readers. What was Cortázar telling the reader? The logic of the linear walking through the pages of a novel is being questioned. The juxtaposition of situations that are similar in their intensity and visualization throughout the novel presents another way of recreating the atmosphere of the work. After all, one of the guiding aesthetic principles of modern art, whether verbal, visual, or musical, resides in the explosiveness of dissonant juxtapositions.

To refine this kind of approach to the understanding of a work, the practice of the reconstruction of the translation process can provide helpful tools. Reconstructing how a text was translated would provide new techniques of how to perform the interpretation of a work. The reader would explore how the work was put together, rather than seeing the work as an object that requires description. The static act of description is moved to exploring the associations inherent in words and images. Description versus performance!

Readers engage in an act of communication with the work and try to translate the work into their own sensibility. To understand how to enter a work as a dialogue, the reconstruction of how a work was built engages the reader as a performer. To show this method, I use “The Bound Man,” a 1958 short story by Ilse Aichinger, a very distinguished German writer who came to fame after World War II.

Ilse Aichinger. “The Bound Man” („Der Gefesselte“)

Here is the first paragraph of the short story.

Sunlight on his face woke him but made him shut his eyes again; it streamed unhindered down the slope, collected itself into rivulets, attracted swarms of flies, which flew low over his forehead, circled, sought to land, and were overtaken by fresh swarms. When he tried to whisk them away, he discovered that he was bound. A thick rope cut into his arms. (The rope cutting into his arm.) He dropped them, opened his eyes again, and looked down at himself. His legs were tied all the way up to his thighs; a single length of rope was tied round his ankles, criss-crossed up his legs, and encircled his hips, his chest and his arms. (The parts of the body covered by the rope.) He could not see where it was knotted. He showed no sign of fear or hurry, though he thought he was unable to move, until he discovered that (introduction of the notion of play) the rope allowed his legs some free play and that round his body it was almost loose. His arms were tied to each other but not to his body and had some free play too. This made him smile, and it occurred to him that perhaps children had been playing a practical joke on him.

The two prominent words that immediately come to the attention of the reader are **rope** and **play**.

These are the key words of the story. Because of digital technology, the reader can pursue these two words rapidly throughout the story, a kind of horizontal reading. This kind of reading activates the associative thinking of the reader. Both these words are repeated many times throughout the story. Each time they represent a repetition with a different association.

Following the repetitions of rope through the story shows how the writer has created the life of the rope:

The "rope" is around his entire body

The rope cuts softly into his flesh

Free play allowed by the rope

As soon as the rope tautened, he stopped

The rope around his ankles

The rope was knotted at his ankles

The rope slackened

Being cut by the rope

The limits set by the rope

Others gravely tested the rope

He did not take off his rope

The rope dancers

In his dreams he forgot his rope

He always anticipated the effect of the rope

To obey his rope

He was not hampered by the rope

He had never felt so much at one with his rope.

To follow the various repetitions of the word “rope” reveals that the author understands the importance of not mechanically repeating the exact phrase. By expanding a new association with each repetition, the presence of the rope expands the visualization of the rope in the mind of the reader. For this kind of technique, there is an excellent demonstration in the movie *Amadeus*. Antonio Salieri plays the exact same musical phrase of a music of line, and then Mozart comes into the picture: each time when he plays the same musical moment it is a repetition with an unexpected variation.

Digital technology enables a different way of walking through a work, which immediately engages the student in a performing activity: each repetition has to be visualized and challenges the student’s imagination. The primary question is no longer “What” does the text mean, but: How can I uncover what is going on in a text. In a sense, the reader begins to perform the text. The structure of the text begins to be revealed. The horizontal reading of a text immediately engages the reader into the structure of the work. The next step might be to choose the word “play” and follow it through the short story to see the variations of associations the writer has attributed to the concept of play. Horizontal reading can be performed on various levels. The horizontal reading should then be followed by reading the way the work was printed to recover the complexity of a work by reconstructing the movement of how the story was built. The advantage of entering a work as a performing act releases the readers from describing, since they recreate how the text was made. The stasis of “what” does it mean moves toward the “how” does the text come to mean. A

From STEM to STEAM

A Modest Proposal

Ming Dong Gu

TODAY, THE DWINDLING ENROLLMENT of literature majors in colleges and schools and the diminishing interest in reading literary works in society are a widely recognized fact, if not around the globe, at least in the U.S. In most universities and colleges, literary studies across the country are struggling to survive in the age of digital revolution by eking out their existence on the fulfillment of literary requirements for general education. And most people in society today are likely to read almost anything on iPhone, iPad, and internet *but* literary works, be it poetry, fiction, or drama. There are tell-tale signs and statistical evidence to confirm that literature as a topic for readings is dying out in ordinary people's life, and literary studies are becoming increasingly marginalized by the growing dominance of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects in schools and colleges. In an increasing number of schools and colleges across the globe, students take courses in literature not because they enjoy reading literary works, but because they are required to take a certain number of literature courses before they can graduate and obtain their educational degrees.

This situation is confirmed by my own experience.¹

The bleak situation is not restricted to the West. In fact, in most universities and colleges across the world, literary studies are struggling to survive in the age of globalization and telecommunications. As a result, not a few thinkers have expressed an alarmist view that in the foreseeable future, literary studies are likely to become an endangered species among the institutionalized academic disciplines. Jacques Derrida, for one, predicted as early as the 1980s: "An entire epoch of so-called literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications (in this respect the political regime is secondary). Neither can philosophy, or psychoanalysis. Or love letters."²

¹This is confirmed by own personal experiences. Every year, I teach at least one general humanities course with a focus on literature. Each class varies from 70 to 90 in the number of students. At the beginning of each course, I always take a straw survey. My finding is that humanities majors constitute a very small percentage while the number of literary majors counts by fewer than one hand.

²Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 24.

The sharp declining of humanities majors is duly reflected in a recent report by the commission of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.³

In view of the stark reality facing literature and literary studies, this article will revisit C. P. Snow's notion of "Two Cultures" in relation to the existing opinions on the status of literature, briefly review the impact of STEM on literary studies in higher education, and examine the feasibility of reviving popular interest in literature through a new conception. As a feasible move to prepare us for the coming of the so-called "post-literary" age, I propose a dual conception of "big literature" as greater humanities and "small literature" as *belles lettres* or refined literature in the traditional sense. With this proposal, I conduct a comparative study of some techno-texts and traditional types of literature and reflect on opportunities afforded by the digital revolution to turn STEM into STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) in the postmodern, post-human, and post-technology era.

The STEM Boom and the Return of the "Two Cultures"

In an article titled "The Shrinking Humanities Major" published in *Inside Higher Education*, a study using data analysis from the Humanities Indicator project by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences finds that "The number of bachelor's degrees conferred in what the academy considers core humanities disciplines (English language and literature, history, languages and literatures other than English, linguistics, classical studies,

³ *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a vibrant, competitive, and secure nation*, Cambridge, MA: the Commission of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013. available online at <http://www.amacad.org>

and philosophy) declined 8.7 percent from 2012 to 2014, falling to the smallest number of degrees conferred since 2003."⁴ It also notes that the decline is a consistent trend. By contrast, majors in STEM subjects have seen a steady rise since 1990. On the following page is a chart showing the trend of shifts in bachelor's degrees awarded by discipline since the later 1980s (Figure 1).

Although literature is not listed as a separate category, it is the major component in the statistics. There is little doubt that natural sciences majors are on the steady rise. Despite ups and downs, the subject of engineering has kept its number of majors more or less since 1990. Thus, it is reasonable to say that though the prophesied demise of literature as an educational institution may have many factors, the declining enrollment of literary majors in colleges is statistically attributable to the hegemony of STEM subjects in institutions of higher learning. The sharply declining trend of humanities majors keeps pace with that of federal funding for the humanities in the report by the commission of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

A look at the chart (Figure 2) confirms three facts already known from casual observations: (1) the funding for the humanities is the smallest, and it is much smaller than that of the natural sciences; (2) it is declining year by year and now is at the lowest ebb; (3) humanities keep losing out in the competition for funding with sciences and technology subjects.

In view of the competition between humanities and STEM subjects, we seem to have come full circle and returned to an old dilemma, which appeared in the first half of the twentieth century and has never been satisfactorily resolved. This is the problem of "The Two Cultures," first identified by C. P. Snow in his famous lecture delivered in

⁴ Scott Jaschik, "The Shrinking Humanities Major," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 14, 2016.

Distribution of Bachelor's Degree Completions among Academic Fields (1987-2018)

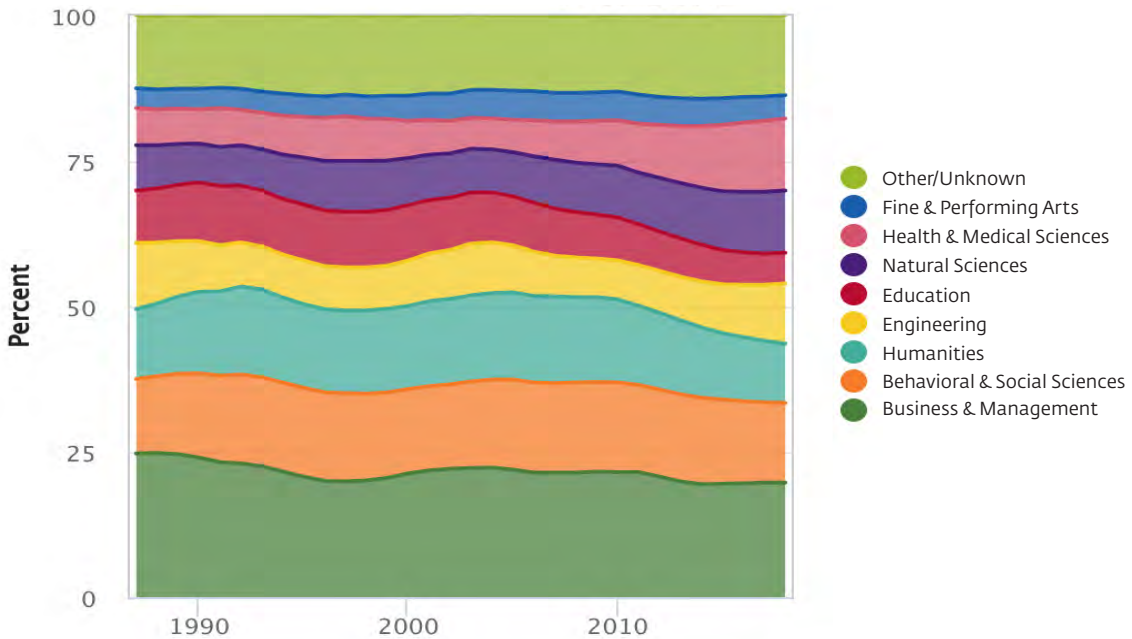


Figure 1 Humanities Indicators, 2021, American Academy of Sciences, amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/bachelors-degrees-humanities#31602

1959, subsequently published in its book form as *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. In this influential book, Snow articulated his famous argument that the intellectual life of the whole Western society has split into two contrasting and almost exclusive cultures—one of the sciences and the other of the humanities; and the split became an obstacle to resolving world problems in the modern age.⁵ For quite some time, Snow's argument attracted a great deal of attention and aroused a considerable amount of concern among far-sighted thinkers and intellectuals, but after much sound and fury, the furor died out and the warning in his argument has, until recently, almost been forgotten, at least in the mind of the general public. With the coming of the age of telecommunication, however, the old dilemma identified by Snow has returned to haunt us again and this time, with a

⁵ C. P. Snow, [1959] *The Two Cultures* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 3.

vengeance. It has not only affected the developed nations of the West but also exerted a negative impact on the developing countries of the third world.

In efforts to salvage literary studies from the pressures of STEM and to avert the likely coming of the apocalyptic future, theorists and scholars in literary studies have scrambled to propose strategies and measures to sustain literary studies. It seems to me that the strategies and measures advocated and proposed may be classified into two large categories, which happen to fall into two opposite poles. One is progressively looking forward and introduces new theories and approaches to literary studies, which range from the already well-known schools of feminism, women's studies, gender studies, post-colonial studies, post-structuralism, New Historicism, to more recent theories like gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, eco-criticism, literary Darwinism, post-humanism, cognitive studies, diasporic

Federally Funded Share of Expenditures for Academic Research and Development in the Humanities and Other Selected Fields (Fiscal Years 2007-2019)

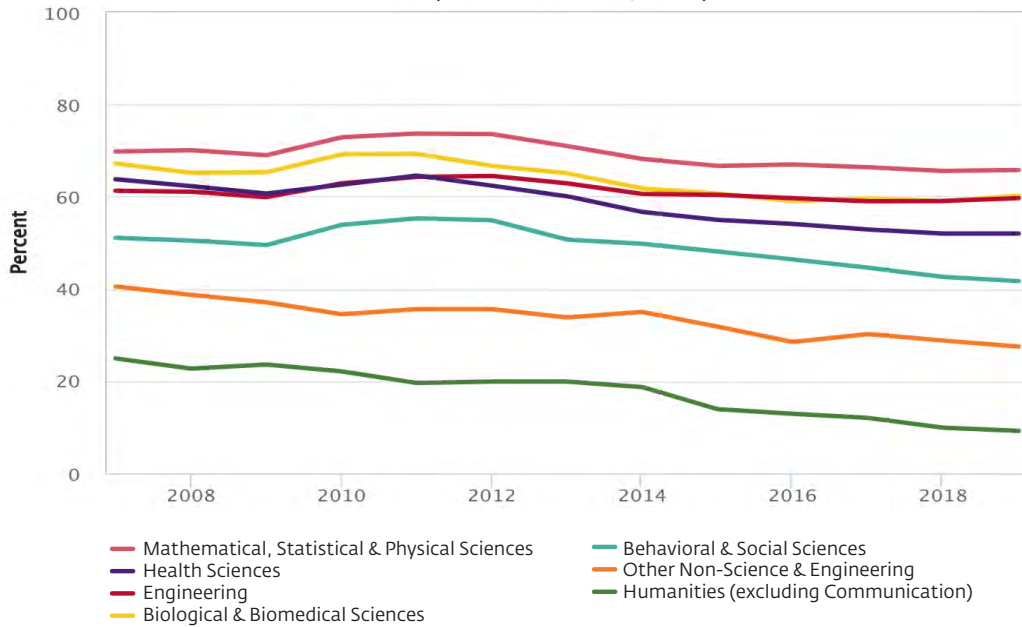


Figure 2 Humanities Indicators, 2021, American Academy of Sciences, amacad.org/humanities-indicators/figure/iv-35c-federally-funded-share-expenditures-academic-research-and

studies, cultural studies, etc. Ironically, while these new theories and approaches have broadened our horizons in literary studies and aroused immense interest among literary scholars, they have produced a strong alienating effect on students as well as given rise to a tacit or open reaction from some scholars of literature. Some scholars of literature have openly criticized the “new-fangled” theories of literature, attributing the decline of literary studies to the introduction of radically new theories and approaches, and calling for a return to traditional approaches to literature. In the 1980s when theory was the rage, it was attacked by some conservative critics.⁶ As a consequence, Paul de Man had to come up with a defense of theory. In his influential essay, “The Resistance to Theory,” he acknowledged the devastating effect and consequence caused by the controversy over theory: “The most

effective of these attacks will denounce theory as an obstacle to scholarship and, consequently to teaching.”⁷ The conservative attack on post-structuralist and postmodern theories may be somewhat outlandish, but to be fair, it is partially justified at least by the alienating effects of postmodern theories on students. A few of my colleagues complained that most poststructuralist and postmodern theories of literature, instead of fostering students’ interest in literary studies, have estranged them from literature and literary studies and taken much of the fun of reading literature away from students. For these reasons, Edward Said, while lamenting the disappearance of literature itself from college curriculum, vehemently denounced the “fragmented, jargonized subjects” that have taken its place.⁸

⁷ Paul de Man, “Resistance to Theory,” *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982), 4.

⁸ Said, “Restoring Intellectual Coherence,” in *MLA Newsletter*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1999), p. 3.

⁶ Peter Shaw, “The Dark Age of the Humanities,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, 23.1 (Fall, 1987), 5-9.

From another direction, some literary scholars and teachers have devised various practical strategies and measures to deal with the declining interest in literature and literary studies as a result of the dominance of telecommunication and high-tech prestidigitation.⁹ Their measures may achieve a certain degree of success, but these are nothing more than contingent measures to improve student enrollment, ineffective to shore up the status of literature and will prove to be vain attempts to curb the declining trend of dwindling interest in literature. Although a recent survey shows some optimistic results in young people's engagement with reading literature after a two-decade decline, a 2004 report by the National Endowment for the Arts states a sad fact adequately conveyed by the title: "*Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America.*"¹⁰ To resuscitate literary studies and salvage the literary institution from the claws of the revolution in information technology, we must revisit the problem of "Two Cultures" and rethink the nature, function, and approaches to literature, and explore ways to meet the challenges of STEM and the dominance of telecommunications. We must admit that the time has changed, and so literature has to change with it. As one think piece about the fate of literature in the age of information well puts it, "To thrive in the fluid, multifarious information habitat of today, the literary animal must become a *chameleon*."¹¹ The current conception of literature belongs to the social and technological milieu of print

9 See Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller, *Thinking Literature across Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

10 "*Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*," Research Division Report no.46, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC, 2004.

11 "The Future of Literature in the Age of Information," from *Three Pound Brain*, rsbakker.wordpress.com/essay-archive/the-future-of-literature-in-the-age-of-information/

culture, very different from the present-day era of media and communications. The gigantic transformation of human communications in our time demands a new conception capable of preparing us for the coming of the so-called "post-literary" era.

A Dual Conception of Literature

When thinkers issued warnings about the "death of literature," they were talking about the death of "literature" in the traditional sense. Contrary to the prophesied demise, the ongoing technological revolution has brought about a revolution in literary creation. As a result, far from being threatened with extinction, literature is thriving in the age of telecommunications, albeit in multi-platformed forms other than those in the traditional sense. This revolution in literary creation should give us insights for addressing the problem of "The Two Cultures" and to meet the challenges posed by STEM. In view of the fact that films, television, music videos, cartoons, advertisements, and the performing arts are already being taught side by side with literary works in some literature departments around the world, it behooves us not to pit STEM against literature, but to reconceive them in an interpenetrating, cooperative, complementary, and mutually empowering relationship.

Such a conception of literature's relationship to STEM should give us ideas to meet the challenges posed by STEM. Unlike the cited thinkers and scholars who have discussed the "death of literature," I am not going to examine who or what is responsible for the declining conditions of literature in its traditional sense. In view of the fact that films, television, music videos, cartoons, advertisements, performing arts are already being taught side by side with

literary works in some literature departments around the world, I deem it strategically important to propose a new conception of literature to cope with the challenges to literature. This conception has its core in a distinctive categorization of two kinds of literature: (1) “literature in its narrow sense”; and (2) “literature in the broad sense.” For the sake of convenience, the two categories may be replaced by two short terms: “Small Literature” and “Big Literature.” “Small Literature” is “small” because it refers to the tacitly accepted but narrow and restricted conception of literature as *belles lettres* or refined writing in the time-honored category of poetry, fiction, drama, and refined essays, taught and studied in colleges and schools for centuries. “Big Literature” is “big” because it refers to a wide range of writings in general, not confined to the accepted literary genres, but including any imaginative writing like film, TV series, pop songs, online fiction, comic writings, webpage writings, blog writings, etc., not to mention such hybrid, multi-platformed writings as kinetic poetry, hypertext fiction, chromomosaic novels, and collaborative narratives—all are made possible by or related to the digital revolution. In other words, “Big Literature” in the broad sense is a term for general, imaginative writings to be subsumed under the large category of “greater humanities.”

The dual conception has its conceptual grounds and a workable logic. Conceptually, literature is a slippery category, which has repeatedly escaped our attempts to nail it down with hard and fast definitions. As Terry Eagleton humorously puts it, “literature does not exist in the sense that insects do, and [that] the value judgements by which it is constituted are historically variable.”¹² Historically, many

12 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 16.

genres of writings, which were not regarded as literary works in our common sense, past and present, have nevertheless been treated as belonging to literature. In fact, in its evolution in history, the conception of literature was closely connected to technology and once included treatises by scientists. First and foremost, “literature” was closely involved with the development of technology, especially printing: “Literature itself must be seen as a late medieval and Renaissance isolation of the skills of reading and of the qualities of the book; this was much emphasized by the development of printing.”¹³ Moreover, “literature” in ancient times not only included writings of philosophers but also treatises by scientists. In around 1825, the English writer William Hazlitt is reported to quote another person as saying, “I suppose the first two persons you would choose to see should be the two greatest names in English literature, Sir Isaac Newton and Mr Locke.”¹⁴ We know very well that while the former is a scientist, the latter is a philosopher. Neither of them is regarded as a literary writer in our present-day society. After the industrial revolution, there has been a broadening tendency in the developing notion of “literature” in modern times into areas of media and communications. This trend, Raymond Williams observes, is a reaction against the narrow way of restricting “literature” to the “printed book or to past literature rather than to active contemporary writing and speech” and “touch[es] the whole difficult complex of the relations between literature (poetry, fiction, imaginative writing) and *real* or actual experience.”¹⁵ The appearance of science fiction as a new

13 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (从小文学New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 186.

14 *Ibid.*, 185.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

A video game shares with the novel and epic the qualities of fictionality and extended narrative.

genre in the nineteenth century and its recent upsurge in popularity are eloquent testimonies to the broadening trend of literature in the age of digital revolution and telecommunications, and should give us much food for thought in our efforts to turn technology from an “enemy” of literature to an “ally” in sustaining popular interest in literature in society and reviving literary studies in colleges and schools.

STEM as an Ally for Literature

The opening of this article addresses the concern with the shrinking of literary majors and the dwindling of reading public of literature. One may ask: why should we bother with the shrinking of literary majors? Will a person who does not read literature perish? The first question is eloquently answered by my colleague, Professor Dennis Kratz, former Dean of Arts and Humanities at UT Dallas: “A university without arts and humanities is only half a university.”¹⁶ The second question has been repeatedly answered by numerous thinkers and scholars in history and the present, whose elaborate ruminations may be boiled down to one often heard truism: “Literature matters.”¹⁷ But how can literature as an institution and as an aspect of civilized life survive the onslaught of STEM and digital revolution? The answer seems to be found in feasible ways to turn STEM into STEAM.

With the exponential acceleration of technological development, STEM subjects

16 Cited from a letter by the dean of the School of Arts and Humanities addressed to the President of the University of Texas at Dallas in 2017.

17 J. Hillis Miller, “Literature Matters Today.” *Substance* 42. 2 (2013): 12-32.

will continue to dominate education and society and turn more and more people into netizens of interface culture.¹⁸ This irresistible trend has its inevitable drawbacks and social consequences, which have been observed by many. Even in technical aspects, interface culture has shortcomings identified by enthusiastic supporters and theorizers of digital revolution. In his acclaimed book *Interface Culture*, Steven Johnson, while finding interface design exciting and fascinating, faults it for placing excessive emphasis on graphic elements in interface culture at the expense of textual aspects of our culture.¹⁹ This is indeed the case. Take the study of video games for example. Up to now, there are two schools of game theories: ludology and narratology.²⁰ Narratologists recognize the role of video games as a storytelling medium, and emphasize its narrative function as cyberdrama or interactive fiction, which presents a simulated story world where a player engages in responding to what happens to him or her, like a character in a literary work. Ludologists, however, argue that the narrative function is secondary, if not incidental, to video games, although a video game has narrative elements like story, plots, characters, and action in a traditional story. Nevertheless, they strongly argue that a video game is first and foremost a game, and should abide by

18 A netizen is “a user of the Internet, especially a habitual or avid one.”

19 Steven A. Johnson, *Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create & Communicate* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

20 Gonzalo Frasca, “Ludology meets narratology: similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative.” (1999). *Ludology.org: video game theory*. www.ludology.org. Retrieved May 2, 2018.

the ludic principle of entertainment. As the present-day situation shows, the ludologist theory seems to be more popular. If this is the case, the ludologist trend is certainly detrimental to the integration of computer games and literary works and channels what may be called “gamification of literature” in a direction more and more remote from literary works. Narratologist or Ludologist, the prevailing principle of computer game designing is profit-driven and overlooks the social responsibility of moral education.

Some Suggestions to Turn STEM into STEAM

Although we may lament the fact that the socially critical role once played by novelists like Dickens, Hardy, Zola, Lawrence, and Dreiser, who exposed the grave consequences of rapid industrialization, has been taken over by technology-generated media, we should not lose sight of another fact that science and technology are not natural enemies of literature and can be utilized to transform literature and arts into interface humanities. This new kind of humanities may bridge the gap between technology and arts by providing new and innovative platforms for the functions of education, cognition, and entertainment that used to be fulfilled by literature and arts. To create a viable humanities, we should have the broadest possible conception and definition of literature in the age of globalization and telecommunications. Some literature departments have already incorporated painting, photography, film, and TV into their literary curricula. And some universities have already merged arts and technology into one school. The recent merging of arts, humanities, and technology into a new school at the University of Texas at Dallas represents this new developmental trend. Going with this trend, we may

expand the literary curricula to include online literature, blog writings, visual artifacts, and even video games.

A broad literary curriculum does not mean that we should completely abandon the established sense of the literary. It only means that what has been taken as literature will make adjustments to allow for mutations and transformation of the literary in the face of radical technological changes and challenges. Whatever is included should be subjected to aesthetic reconfigurations determined by what has been tacitly taken as the literary, and conform to the time-honored functions of literature.

As a way to turn technology into an ally to literature, we should find as many interconnections between literature and technology as possible. One obvious connection is to marry literature with video games. To argue for the inclusion of video games into literature may seem extremely quixotic, but for literature to survive under the onslaught of technology, this move may be a viable way to revive popular interest in literature and reinvent the teaching machine under the pressures of STEM. James Paul Gee’s book on the positive effects of video games on learning should make us rethink the role of video games and other digital games for reviving general interest in literature.²¹ A video game shares with the novel and epic the qualities of fictionality and extended narrative. Like lyric poetry, it possesses a subtlety of emotions, themes and symbols. Comparable with film and TV series, it features the elements of storytelling, movable images, dazzling music cues and visual sights. In a word, video games possess the strengths of most artistic media without many of their limitations. For these reasons, some people

²¹ James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

believe that video games are endowed with the potential to become the best suited form of storytelling for our time. In my opinion, however, for video games to become a post-literary text, they need to integrate canonical literary works into the process of their design. Up to the present, video games have already made excursions into classical literary works. For example, game designers have made use of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the creation of a game: *Hamlet or the Last Game without MMORPG Features*. It is an adventure game based on Shakespeare's titular drama developed by the independent video game developer Denis Galanin. Of course, although the game deviates radically from Shakespeare's original drama in a plot in which Hamlet returns to find Claudius and Polonius locking up Ophelia with the aim to marry her to the usurping king, it surely would attract the attention of readers who have never read the play, thus stimulating their interest in reading the classic. Although the game has been positively reviewed by media and game critics, regretfully, it focuses too much on fantastic imagination and entertaining function of games to the complete neglect of the original plot and aesthetic qualities of the original classic. This seems to be very typical of the outcome of combining games and literary works: the gamification of literature. In my view, with due respect to traditional literary narratives and the function of aesthetics and moral education, video games may yet give rise to a new literary genre that can rival traditional literary works. The modern conception of literature incorporated some literary genres like the novel and science fiction into the Pantheon of literature rather late, but they were finally admitted. The same may happen to technology generated genres of writing and works of art. Perhaps it may not be

entirely groundless to predict that technology-generated writings may someday gain their entry into the curriculum of literature, if we are open-minded enough to view literature in its broad sense.

Today, among the reading public, science fiction has enjoyed an unprecedented popularity. Science fiction has the benefits of both worlds—those of the sciences and humanities, and its popularity among the reading public is the consequence of both technological advancement and the innate drives of the human desire to control one's world and destiny in the postmodern and posthuman age of media and telecommunications. I believe that science fiction may play a crucial role in turning STEM into STEAM in colleges and schools and nurturing students into professionals with a refined sense of humanities. When STEAM truly becomes predominant in the curricula of colleges and schools, we may achieve genuine success in re-inventing the teaching machine for our time and in bridging the gap between the culture of sciences and that of the humanities in both schools and society. In the postmodern, post-human, post-literary, post-technology age, the digital revolution calls for interface humanities so as to meet the demand of nurturing a new type of educated people: a hybrid person who is a humanist-scientist or scientist-humanist depending on his or her career focus. There have been numerous such hybrid persons in human history, ranging from Aristotle, Leonardo, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Kant to C.P. Snow, Marshall McLuhan, Katherine Hayles, Steven Johnson, and others. "Big Literature" as an example of interface humanities should foster the appearance of large numbers of such humanist-scientists and scientist-humanists in the age of telecommunications and post-humanism. A

Form Fatigue

Thomas Riccio

OUR WORLD IS IN FRAGILE shape—actions and decisions today portent consequences of planetary magnitude. We find ourselves carried by swift and ever-shifting crossing currents churning and pulling us to an ever-widening and deepening unknown. We are intelligent, resourceful, responsive, and capable of creating a future imaginal world. The stakes are high, the terrain ever-shifting, unknowns and consequences unpredictable and ominous.

The future is now. All that was and ever will be lives at this moment.

What and where are the arts in this cauldron of future making? What, why, and how are the humanities in a world of increasingly porous and evaporative boundaries? Domains and bailiwicks once easily demarcated are vanishing like so many ghosts dematerializing into the ether. A new sort of world emerges, demanding a response.

The need and role of the liberal arts have had a long and convoluted history, undergoing numerous and contested transformations throughout the history of Western civilization. In the past lay both the origins and the solutions. An overview of the liberal arts from which the creative arts and humanities evolved is in order.

The liberal arts, as identified by Plato in his *Republic*, included grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, astronomy, music, and geometry. From these broad and encompassing origins, the arts and sciences evolved. Plato, who channeled and

conflated the thinking of Socrates with his own, articulated the template which seeded a concept of reality that informs every aspect of our world today. His philosophy, methods of inquiry, dialogic process, and interdisciplinary established critical thinking, drawing from a diversity of angles with the ability to adapt to evolving contexts and situations. It was the Axial Age. The world was younger then and maturing and in need of an operating system suited to the times and circumstances of a socially and culturally complexifying world.

Platonic Ideals are objective. They do not depend on human thought but exist entirely in their own right. They are perfect patterns embedded in the very nature of things. The Platonic Idea is, as it were, not merely a human idea but the universe's idea, an ideal entity that can express itself eternally in concrete tangible form or internally as a concept in the human mind [...] At times Plato seems to exalt the ideal over the empirical to such an extent that all concrete particulars are understood to be, as it were, only a series of footnotes to the transcendent Idea. At other times he seems to stress the intrinsic nobility of created things, precisely because they are embodied expressions of the divine and eternal.¹

The sub-categories of the creative arts and humanities as we know them today did not take the Form we would recognize until the Renaissance. Before this, the creative arts were considered artisanship, and the humanities were not specialized, giving rise to polymaths like Leonardo.

In his Socratic dialogues, Plato made frequent and varied cases against the dangers of relying on the senses, emotions, and the material world, because it was a changeable world of appearances. He argued that the changeable material and the observed world, the living world,

¹ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (London: Pimlico, 1991): 10-11.

referenced a more real world of reliable permanence, the world of Forms or Ideas (*eidōs* in Greek). For Plato, knowledge existed for those who could comprehend the true reality that lived immutable within the everyday experience: the Form. For example, an act of 'goodness' or a 'triangle' in the material world has no meaning in and of itself. Its meaning comes from referencing the Form (which holds the Idea) of each occurrence in the world. When I say chair, you think of the Form or Idea of a chair. The type of chair you visualize in the cave of our minds will be unique to us. However, they both adhere to the Form/Idea of a chair.

For Plato, an individual must be educated to recall and understand the world of Forms/Ideas, which he maintained was present in a person's mind. He associated Forms with a person's soul, which preexisted and was recalled in accordance with the soul of an individual. Your chair is different from my chair, but they are both chairs. However, not everyone is meant to be king or basketball great—that depends on a person's soul.

In the *Republic*, Plato presented the *Allegory of the Cave*, which asserted that most people spent their lives living in a cave perceiving shadows of physical objects on the cave wall and thinking that these comprised reality. Only those able to step out of the cave and into the sunlight and understand (educated or able to recall) truthful reality were fit to rule or serve as leaders in the *Republic*. Plato was an elitist, asserting that only the philosopher-king (and by implication, the educated) had the ability and responsibility to lead others out of the cave and into the sunlight. Only those educated to the Forms are thereby fit to know the truth. This is a paradigm of prejudice that shapes our world, and is the engine powering the academy. Truth and meaning lie not in the lived world but float

in the nether world of Ideas and Form. Our fundamental and unquestioned conception of reality is so integrated that you are most likely puzzled by my assertion.

The Forms/Idea, a seed, once planted, grew into the central germinating hub of Western civilization, remaining truthful to its origins to this day. The Forms initiated anthropocentrism, a model conceived to serve and articulate the human-centric perspective.² But before Plato and the Forms, which lifted humans from the world, there was another way of being in and with the world.

Cosmocentrism

Cosmocentrism is not human centric.³ Rather, it is place-centric. I hesitate to call it a "worldview" or "perspective," because that implies a human vantage. The cosmocentric, exemplified in multiple and varied ways by indigenous people, was a way of being of, in, and with the world. Written language is inadequate, because it is so oriented to the human-centric perspective and presence, and predicated on subject-object relationships, that it cannot convey the embodied oneness and openness of a living place.

Cosmocentric life was a conscious reiteration and reaffirmation of place-specific patterns. Integrative mind-body-spiritual agency with the world was functional and necessary for survival.

2 Anthropocentric societies and cultures are those shaped to the needs and advancement of humans with little or no consideration of the effects and consequences on other, non-human beings, or networks and systems of place, its sustainability and maintenance.

3 Indigenous systems of place are cosmocentric, meaning a lived conscious of how the actions on a microcosmic (local and place specific) level interrelate and affect the macrocosmic. The community of a terrestrial place, which include humans, flora, fauna, spirits, ancestors, elements, seasons, climate, and celestial movement and rhythms, are interdependently connected, making for a cosmocentric reality.

Humans are not an enlightened species, but rather self-serving and destructive without the restorative tonic and structure of the self-organizing system of nature to give life meaning and purpose.

The mind-body split promoted by Descartes, has haunted and hobbled humans and in turn life on earth:

The organism constituted by the brain-body partnership interacts with the environment as an ensemble, the interaction being of neither the body nor the brain alone. But complex organisms such as ours do more than just interact, more than merely generate the spontaneous or reactive external response known collectively as behavior. They also generate internal responses, some of which constitute images (visual, auditory, somatosensory, and so on), which I postulate as the basis for the mind.⁴

The cosmocentric way of being understands the lived world (the inhabitants of the environment, planet, and cosmos) as a body/mind which humans are but a part. What I term the cosmocentric is a *community of place*, a way of being which still echoes throughout the indigenous world today. “An indigenous person is a member of a community retaining memories of a life lived sustainably on a land base as part of that land base. Indigenous knowledge is any application of those memories as living knowledge to improve present and future circumstances.”⁵

Belief systems shaped by a group’s geography and climate were non-literate. What was true was held bodily, emotionally,

and spiritually. It was not fixed, did not exist in a virtualized and abstracted as a mental construct. It was maintained and conveyed in mythology, rituals, taboos, language, chant, song, symbols, shared orally and sensorially as a means by which to encode, communicate, and sustain a place.

For most indigenous cultures, individual human and non-human beings were said to have complex personalities acting like separate persons. Everything is alive, and often animals are referred to as people. To add to this complexity, humans often had animal identifiers such as clans and spirit helpers.⁶ The social, cultural, and spiritual belief systems of indigenous/cosmocentric systems were not arbitrary, but formed with all the community of place members for the good of the community.⁷

Alaska Native elder Harold Napoleon explains the idea of the cosmocentric, and how the Yup’ik concept of *Yuuyaraq* was a living, adaptive, and sensorial system of place integral to a way of being:

Yuuyaraq defined the correct way of thinking and speaking about all living things, especially the great sea and land mammals on which the Yup’ik relied for food, clothing, shelter, tools, kayaks, and other essentials. These great creatures were sensitive; they were able to understand human conversation, and they demanded and received respect.

4 Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London: Penguin Books, 1994): 89.

5 Tyson Yankaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (HarperCollins, 2020): 36.

6 With sports teams like the Tigers, Lions, Broncos, Eagles, and Bengals, and with popular culture attributions such as Spiderman, Batman, and Wolverine, are we that far from anthropomorphism? Vestiges of the cosmocentric live in Bull and Bear stock markets.

7 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Routledge: 1966, 2002): 14.

*Yuuyaraq prescribed the correct method of hunting and fishing and the correct way of handling all fish and game caught by the hunter in order to honor and appease their spirits and maintain a harmonious relationship with them. It outlined the way of living in harmony within this spirit [...] To the Yup'ik, the land, the rivers, the heavens, the seas, and all that dwelled within them were spirit and, therefore, sacred [...] When the Yup'ik walked out into the tundra or launched their kayaks into the river of the Bering Sea, they entered into the spiritual realm. They lived in deference to this spiritual universe, of which they were, perhaps, the weakest members. Yuuyaraq outlined for the Yup'ik the way of living in this spiritual universe. It was the law by which they lived.*⁸

Values, ethos, and beliefs were immediate, actionable, and accountable. Each member of the community of place, human and non-human beings alike, was animated and had agency (each speaking and being in their own way), experiencing, and witnessing the world uniquely. Daily acts were expressions of spirituality and dialogs enabling participation in and with the place.

Our ancestors were animists. We were all once indigenous to a place and cosmocentric. Within this world, the role and responsibility of humans, the most enabled inhabitants, and greatest beneficiaries of a community of place, are responsible to sustain and maintain a place.

Anthropocentrism

Hunting and gathering progressed into horticultural, herding, then into agricultural cultures. The agricultural revolution brought stability, security, and permanent settlements, enabling city-states to rise, providing a shared culture, unifying minds, and purpose through agreement. Their gods and belief systems evolved to reflect their

⁸ Harold Napoleon with Eric Madsen, *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, Fairbanks, 1996): 5.

cultural transformation, from elemental to increasing human-like embodiments reflecting the rise of human empowerment. Ancient Greece, beset by an external threat, required a means, an operating system, to enable trade, military and political cohesion, and an identity. The Forms established by our Ancient Athenian cultural progenitors came at a time of development responding to the need to organize disparate city-states for commerce and defense.

Plato, giving voice to and building on Socrates, laid the foundations of Western culture, shaping and informing Western and global culture to this day. Plato's establishment of reality and truth referencing a priori Forms came at a time of another axial shift in consciousness, the adoption of written language. The cosmocentric, the body in a lived, embodied world, once the unquestioned framing of reality, would give way to disembodied knowledge and alphabet knowledge, cascading through time to become embedded in social and cultural systems and firmly establish anthropocentrism as the operating system of the world.⁹ Under the slowly spreading influence of alphabetic technology, a new way of thinking facilitated by written language enabled the separation from the animate flux of the world and became a ponderable presence in its own right.¹⁰ Written language reinforced the assertions of Form knowledge, that immutable truths existed in pure mental Form rather than embodied, tactile, and living in the world. "Letters and the written words that they present are not subject to the flux of growth

⁹ The recent exhibit of African Art at the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth was an embarrassing example of how the anthropocentric and its institutions, frame and confine cosmogenic art and culture as a mysterious and exotic object positioned for the titillation rather than an insight into another way of being in and with the world.

¹⁰ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (Pantheon, 1996): 107.

and decay, to the perturbations and cyclical changes common to other visible things; they seem to hover, as it were, in another, strangely timeless dimension.”¹¹

Removing humans from active interaction with the world and exalting the superiority of human thought, Form, and alphabet knowledge had the effect of relegating all non-human beings to marginal positions, which would ultimately lead to denigration, marginalization, subjugation, and servitude of humans and non-humans not educated to the anthropocentric. This separates the knower from the known by keeping knowledge embedded in the human world rather than the sensuous lived world.¹² Alphabet knowledge and its removal from the body marked an inflection point: when deeply interiorized alphabetical literacy usurped orality and ultimately the cosmocentric worldview. At the time, neither Plato nor anyone else was aware that this was going on.¹³

Plato, followed by Aristotle, completed the turn from the cosmocentric by articulating logos, the process of reason, and scientific inquiry, which shaped ethics and values, the arts, and the humanities of today. Christianity and Islam imbibed the anthropocentric, incorporating, extending, and manipulating it to serve doctrinal ends. The body and embodied world became profane and dangerous, an impediment to achieving the idealized truth revealed by heaven. The monotheistic religions became patriarchal and supplanted animism, polytheism, and the feminine (the matriarchal, goddess, and mother earth) as part of a broader trend to reinforce and sustain anthropocentric hierarchal systems. Nature, once the measure of all things,

became secondary, as city-states, empires, Abrahamic religions, and the Renaissance, nations, corporations, capitalism, consumerism, and globalization are products of the human-centric.

The anthropocentric enabled and justified the pillage and plunder of the natural world and, in turn, the enslavement and righteous cultural domination wrought by conquest, conversion, and colonization. Because they were deemed lesser, unworthy, and unenlightened, “others” (human, animal, flora, mineral, and the environment) were inconsequential non-beings. The natural world and all associated with it were vilified and excluded access to religious purity that lived beyond the profane material world. Only fantasy heavens held ultimate truths and reality. The pure and imaginal, propagandized creations of thought promoted the denigration of the body and emotions of the individual and the alive world they inhabited. The concept of Forms enslaved and devalued the lived world, formalizing control through dogma and systems of belief and intellectualism that played on the emotions of inadequacy, guilt, and shame to justify and control. The cosmocentric, living-within-the-sensual-world realm was supplanted by virtualized fantasy, accessible only to those enlightened or educated to it—a pernicious form of hierarchal elitism evolved.

The Renaissance, sparked by the rediscovery of the ancient Greeks, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, reanimated anthropocentrism. Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man vividly placed man at the center of a mathematically determined and proportioned world. Forced perspective, determined by a human vanishing point, was introduced to the theatrical stage, the Allegory of the Cave vivified. Descartes promulgated the mind-body split, and the theatre stage became a metaphor for the

11 Abram, 112.

12 Walter J. Ong, Jr., *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge, 1982, 2002): 44.

13 Ong, 24.

illuminated mind speaking to the passive body of the audience. Ritual, once a communal exchange and celebration between humans and non-human and spiritual beings, gave way to a performance between and for humans. The performance of the anthropocentric remains today, expressive of primarily human concern. It is an expression of the human perspective, a means for cultural affirmations and social remediation, with all that is non-human serving as a backdrop to the human event or antagonist. The how and why of performance is an indicator of social and cultural movement.

Universities were established from 1088 onward in Italy, England, Spain, France, and Portugal, propagating, validating, and institutionalizing the anthropocentric. Implicitly pursued and valorized were the control of humans over the natural world and the othering of the cosmocentric. Educational philosophy and disciplines were structured by the prevailing cultural and societal needs, with universities becoming unwitting propagandists for the anthropocentric. Embraced and propagated by European culture, the anthropocentric was aggrandized as a worldview, giving rise to cultural and moral superiority, hierarchal legitimacy, and racism. This unchecked evolution was exclusively male, mainly structured and competitively driven by ego, status, and power.

In contrast, the more collaborative, sensual, and emotive sensibility, historically associated with women (and the cosmocentric), was marginalized and dismissed by the patriarchy as a substandard other. The near total exclusion of women parallels the genocidal conquest, disregard, and exploitation of the lands and lives of others—those deemed substandard and incapable of comprehending and adhering to the “truths” held by Form thinking. Those who

challenged or did not adhere to Form thinking were threats, outcasts, and heretics, dehumanized and eliminated, branded as witches, shamans, healers, and non-believers.

Anthropocentrism enacted in the world served as an affirming and justifying feedback loop. Rather than learning, accepting, and exchanging with non-conforming others, the male-exclusive, self-justifying anthropocentric juggernaut institutionalized and spread its concept of reality. This was accomplished most prominently by universities, which trained and had a far-reaching influence on the religious, political, military, merchant, and ruling classes.

The demise of the cosmocentric did not go unnoticed. The meaningful social and cultural centrality of the cosmocentric indigenous had become a reference, an allegory, metaphor, and nostalgia minded by the anthropocentric arts and humanities. Shakespeare, Keats, Manet, Byron, the Brontës, Shelley, Wordsworth, Beethoven, Thoreau, and Rousseau come to mind as searchers of a lost consciousness, as others single-mindedly embraced an ever-deepening interest in the human condition. The sciences pursued the exploration and documentation to control the natural world for the benefit of humans. Darwin established a schema that positioned humans as the apex of life on earth, giving credence to human superiority, speciesism, and eugenics. Electricity was identified and harnessed by Franklyn, Volta, and Edison. Franz Boas, Rasmussen, and Malinowski formulated anthropology, a tool to document others and often used to control and exploit. Biology and psychology flourished to chart and fathom every aspect of the mind and human body in the pursuit of control. Zoos and zoology, along with natural history museums, became metaphoric expressions of capture and domination of the natural world.

The anthropocentric and its primary avatar, advocate, and enabler, Western culture, has immeasurably benefited humans, resulting in longer and healthier lives, a measure of security and stability concerning the vagaries of the natural world, significantly enhancing and forwarding our species. Humans are the beneficiaries, and it would be difficult to imagine our world today without Form thinking, the pursuit and triumph of the anthropocentric. However, within every positive lives a negative, and adherence to the anthropocentric has come at a profound cost.

The human population has exploded, putting onerous stress on the environment. In my lifetime, the world's population has more than doubled, an unsustainable rate of growth. People are healthier and live longer in an increasingly insecure, threatened, polluted, and poverty-ridden world caused by (to name a few) industrializations, airborne and seaborne pollutants, plastics, rampant consumption, and the creation of ever more deadly war machines, technologies, and nuclear armaments. The anthropocentric response has been to refine in new and ever more frantic, extreme, and efficient ways to mine, manufacture, and exploit the natural world. What was once verdant, self-organizing and self-sustaining, has given way to abuse and devastation, precipitating accelerating decline. The sciences, arts, and the humanities were, in their origins, a means by which to understand and fathom the mysteries and wonders of our world and the place of and relationship of humans. Today that is a faint if not romantic notion.

Technological advancement serves as an accelerant to further the anthropocentric. Microscopes, telescopes, medicines, photography, automobiles, airplanes, telephones, audio recording, television, atomic and nuclear weapons, bioweapons, robots, the internet, social media, radar, space exploration, Artificial Intelligence,

and an endless cacophony of innumerable technological advancements are extensions of the human body and mind in keeping with the anthropocentric imperative.

The motive driving technology is human enhancement, empowerment, and survival at the expense of all else. Strip mining, oil and gas drilling, and fracking, along with bioengineering, genetics, and market capitalism, are all, each in their way, raping the earth—all the above subjects are taught at Texas universities. Animal experimentation and vivisection, along with agricultural pesticides, factory farming, pesticides, chemical fertilizers, growth hormones, and genetic modification, proceed without regard to environmental consequences. We are all part of the system, beneficiaries, and complicit in what portends the demise of our life world.

I don't see science embracing Indigenous methods of inquiry any time soon, as Indigenous knowledge is not wanted at the level of how. Only at the level of what. A resource to be plundered rather than a source of knowledge processes. Show me where some plants are so I can synthesize a compound and make a drug out of it.¹⁴

Business schools and computer science depend on expansion and self-serving control in a world with more people and fewer resources. Efficiency, time, and resource management are the word of the day. On a planet stressed by political, economic, and climate anxiety, migrations, and inequities, the assertion of control intensifies as it heads to its inevitable end.

Unless there is an active reconfiguration of new communities and formations capable of egalitarian self-government, shared ownership, and caring for their weakness. Post capitalism will be the new field of barbarism, regional despotism, and worse, where scarcity will take on unimaginably savage forms. [...] Now, over half a century

¹⁴ Yankaporta, 42.

later, amid the burning and pillaging of our lifeworld, there is little time left to meet up with the future of new ways of thinking and living on earth and with one another, with each other.¹⁵

All life is cyclical, with beginnings, middles, and ends. We are now at the end of the anthropocentric cycle. Form thinking, having carried the world so far, now turns on itself, participating in its demise. The human world is subsumed by monetization, narcissism, digital and drug-induced escapism, fracturing, bickering, and disassociation.

The anthropocentric is nearing its dead end and its apotheosis untethered by the terrestrial, floating in a digital virtual meta world; artificial intelligence brings artificial life and then the disappearance of life.

Arts and Humanities

As humans asserted control, the arts and humanism became expressive of the pathology of power, a cover, and justification for the domination and ultimately destruction of all else. The pragmatism of place-based systems gave way to human-centered social and cultural systems, with the arts and humanities serving as propaganda ministry for the anthropocentric. Value and meaning were no longer based on place considerations and maintenance but with the anthropocentric becoming further entrenched and institutionalized.

Value and responsibility shifted from place-based cosmocentrism to human needs, values, and functionality. Humanism is human centrism, a justification, bespeaking removal, control, manipulation, and ultimately superiority of humans and domination of a world that is not theirs but shared. The arts are an

expression of human valorization. Each painting, play, concerto, and hip-hop rave is a demonstration both of human triumphalism and removal from the non-human world as it contradictorily seeks transcendence and absolution of loss. The arts, humanities, and their prodigal progeny, technology, are not in the service of the world but rather, the tools of colonization and exploitation of the world of one species over all others. It is the rendering of the world into an object with dissonance, an expression of self-justifying human survivalism.

We are immersed in a cultural inheritance forged from another era's necessity. It is exhausted and inadequate for the needs of our moment.

As the anthropocentric expanded and flourished, so did the arts, sciences, and humanities. I am aware of no indigenous/cosmocentric culture with a word or concept for "art" or "humanities"; there was no cause or need for categories or demarcations for cultures that viewed the world as integrative and dynamically in flux. The Yup'ik word for dancing is the same word for prayer. For the Yup'ik of Alaska, objects and human experiences constituted a complex and unified worldview inextricably weaving together the material, spiritual, and personal. Every part is an expression of a more wondrous totality. Non-Yup'ik people might discuss art forms as separate categories—dance, song, story, art, objects, for instance—however, the Yup'ik would not or could not make the same distinctions.¹⁶

Anthropocentrism imposes structure and categories to assert control and power, and is true to this Form knowledge template which separates the lived with definitions of disciplinary Ideas and Forms. A person is

15 Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (London: Verso, 2022): 123–124.

16 Lynn Ager Wallen, *The Face of Dance: Yup'ik Eskimo Masks from Alaska* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1990): 7.

taught an art “form,” meaning educated to inherited and accepted concepts, and alteration or recombination of the forms is thought of as innovative, yet remains a human-centric elaboration. Any connection or consideration with a greater sense of purpose or responsibility to the lived world is a cause of puzzlement to those operating in a standardized mindset system.

Making land art, placing a sculpture in a park, or the impressionist painting of a rustic scene remains human-centric. Similarly, the humanities disciplines are ensconced and predicated on a system of Ideas and Forms. The methods and a knowledge base one must know to seek and comprehend the “truth” may draw from the world but remains decidedly a human creation for human benefit. The arts and humanities are so much a part of the anthropocentric they are incapable of any other way or purpose.

Disciplinary myopia is self-serving, speaking to those similarly initiated and with little responsibility or connection to their community of place. As they are currently self-righteously and doggedly configured, the arts and the humanities have outlived their usefulness. They continue as they do out of a combination of momentum, lack of courage, lack of imaginative alternatives, and structural investment. They are spent, exhausted, and need to evolve to the needs of an injured, complex, and challenged world.

Museums, the arts, and humanities are drawn to but befuddled by an African mask, a cloth made of pounded bark and intricately designed with animal blood, a wooden totem or fetish replete with feathers, shells, and animal parts. Exotic and strange, but unknowable as anything except a unique and marketable object. The historical Yup’ik of Alaska have possibly the most sophisticated mask tradition in the world. Masks drawn from shamanic

visions were elaborately carved and painted and afterward thrown away, having served their cosmocentric function. Today they exist in museums in Paris, New York, and Houston as unknowable curiosities. As with other indigenous groups, the tradition of mask-making among the Yup’ik no longer exists because it did not subscribe to, indeed, was a threat to, the conquering, missionizing ways of the anthropocentric.

The new is old because the old is new. We have reached the end of history. The arts and humanities today are left with remains, with many seeking refuge in an ever-narrowing arcana. Others remix hollow tropes, tired narratives, rehashed plots, and remixed music. The metaverse, superheroes, “reality television,” endless sportscast, and fantasy worlds portrayed by the media blend and fold the real and imagined. A last-ditch adrenaline rush to titillate and excite terminal rehashing and boredom. Collectively we are expressing a cocktail mix of delirium, hallucination spiked with anxiety, neurosis, and psychosis, and the ever-frequent mass shootings to mark the suicidal collapse of the human-centric system. Endless repetitions, sequels of inanity, banality, self-referencing, rampant and normalized, and increasingly desperate narcissism and the cult of celebrity, social media enabling anguished expressions of individuality with forced smiles and emojis as the human project sinks to the muck of its own doing.

Hopelessness, media filled with casual brain splatter killings as media entertainments, the fusion of the real and performed, truth is negotiable and conspiratorial—all point to Form fatigue. Our operating system is spent, rotten, having run its course. A culture of trauma and grievance emerges, the embrace of nostalgia becomes more desperate, and the reconciliation of historical ills and wokeness collides with conservative and

fundamentalist backlash and is part of the reckoning before a final, epic demise. The pandemic was a metaphoric expression of mighty nature fighting back to restore balance. It also allowed the planet to feel, think, and breathe again, giving hope for renewal.

Fear and uncertainty circle the planet provoking the return of the strong man of old invading empires and the return to medieval religiosity. Democracy, forwarding the human pursuit of freedom and individuality, is challenged because it offers no real solutions. Humans are not an enlightened species, but rather self-serving and destructive without the restorative tonic and structure of the self-organizing system of nature to give life meaning and purpose. Freedom and individuality have led not to enlightenment but exponential consumer choice. Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are desperate to say *I exist*, promoting mind and soul-numbing wannabe celebrity in an ADHD world. Partisanship, anger, guns, the demise of civility and public discourse, and the threat of civil war are part of the ending swirl.

We know what is happening around us. The indicators of systemic rot are everywhere, metastasizing towards collapsing ecosystems and catastrophic system failure. Extreme weather events: forest fires, hurricanes, floods, tornados, tsunamis, and earthquakes increase exponentially. In all their abundance and beauty, the life-giving oceans are heating and dying. Plastic islands form, and microparticles move through the food chain and into our bodies. The extermination of animal and plant life foreshadows our extinction.

Past is a prelude. I'm hopeful, and something in me tells me we can recreate a verdant and sustainable world. We cannot

return to the historical indigenous/cosmocentric way of being. We cannot abandon the advancements and advantages Form knowledge has afforded us. What we can do is listen again. Reconsider who we are as individuals not with the objective of human betterment and advancement, but rather think and do for our community cosmocentrically. Taking the best of what we know and reconceptualizing, reimagining how to live in and with the world. The advances wrought by globalization, trade, commerce, technology, and the environment, affect and create a new planetary society and culture in which we are all a part—every human and non-human being, the elements, the spirits, ancestors, and the cosmos. In many ways, we are becoming a new sort of indigenous. A new consciousness is taking shape around us. We are becoming earthlings. This is our place.

Over the last thirty years, the accelerated advancement has left us stunned, suffering from whiplash, coming so quickly and overwhelmingly. How things are and have been will no longer suffice. An epochal shift in thinking and being is taking shape around us. The arts and humanities, or whatever they will become known as, can lead the way, explaining, articulating, and integrating. Witness environmental and climate awareness, the rise of women's rights, the MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, gender and identity sensitivities along with veganism and animal rights, the recognition of poverty, famine, and health needs of the disadvantaged, and the heightened awareness of income and power inequity are all part of a shift. We are all part of the profound, all-encompassing shift and foundational to the survival of life on the planet. A

Rage against the University Machine

Eric Adler

ONE NEEDN'T BE ESPECIALLY DEVOTED TO KEEPING informed about the state of higher education in the United States to recognize that the humanities are not faring well on many college campuses. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck fear into the hearts of university administrators, American magazines and newspapers seemed to chime in each week with more signs of woe for the modern humanistic disciplines. Looming demographic shifts have only increased the sense of dread among many humanists and their advocates.

Those worried about the state of the humanities in U.S. higher education, moreover, can point to palpable signs of trouble. Various universities and colleges across the nation have begun shuttering humanities programs. In 2020, for example, Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, announced the discontinuation of its classics, philosophy, and “great ideas” majors. In the same year, Illinois Wesleyan University disclosed the axing of its classics department and slated programs in religion, French, and Italian for the chopping block. The University of Kansas in early 2021 announced plans to eliminate its humanities program and its undergraduate degrees in humanities and visual arts education. With a post-COVID fiscal crisis rearing its head, many faculty members fear that such closures are just the tip of the iceberg. In this context, at all but the wealthiest institutions of higher learning, the humanities seem to be fighting for their survival.

This situation has understandably encouraged much handwringing from segments of the American intelligentsia. As it turns out, such handwringing is nothing new. For decades, essayists and commentators have pointed to recent bugbears to help explain the sorry state of the modern humanities. During the academic culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, observers often blamed the popularity of

postmodern literary theory for the anti-humanistic drift of American higher ed. In his jeremiad *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990), for example, the conservative critic Roger Kimball suggested that “the much-publicized decline in humanities enrollments recently is due at least in part to students’ refusal to devote their college education to a program of study that has nothing to offer them but ideological posturing, pop culture, and hermetic word games.” More recently, some have deemed the dominance of “woke” politics the source of the humanities’ hardships. Still others point to the rising price of college tuition in the past few decades as the chief factor compelling many students to avoid the humanities for more practical fare.

Unfortunately, though, the causes of trouble for the modern humanities in American higher education are of much earlier vintage. In fact, they owe their origins to the very creation of the modern American research university in the late nineteenth century. Prior to this time, the study of ancient Greek and Latin literary masterpieces—which was then synonymous with the humanities as a whole—dominated the curriculum of most U.S. colleges. Thanks in large measure to the intellectual and pedagogical influence of Renaissance humanism, the course of studies at the early US colleges was overwhelmingly a prescribed one. Italian humanists such as Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) had argued that students should read the great works of Greco-Roman antiquity (in their original languages) as a means to improve their character and style. Homer, Sophocles, Menander, Sallust, Vergil, and Horace—such authors, Renaissance humanists contended, provided a vision of the Good Life essential for inspiring the young to live up to their higher potentialities. Thus, the early American colleges, steeped in Renaissance humanism, required all students to engage with these and kindred writers of classical masterpieces.

American higher learning was initially conceived—in theory, at least—as a moral enterprise. This vision not only fit with the approach to elite education that had been popular in the Renaissance; it was also in tune with Greco-Roman pedagogical traditions. As far back as 62 BC, the Roman statesman, philosopher, and orator Cicero had announced that the *studia humanitatis* (“the studies of humanity”) were valuable because they instilled the crucial quality of *humanitas* (“benevolence,” “kindliness,” “humaneness”) in their devotees. Although his descriptions of the constituent elements of the humanities differed from later versions of the tradition, Cicero underscored the moral aims of education and culture. This ancient approach to pedagogy, refracted through the ideals of Renaissance humanism, was a paramount influence on higher learning in America prior to the Civil War. Indeed, classical studies played such an outsized role in early U.S. education that knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek

was the lone prerequisite for students aspiring to matriculate at the colonial colleges. Even many years after the colonial period, roughly half of the American college curriculum remained classical.

Although they would seldom self-identify in this manner, most humanities professors now comport themselves as scientists.

This approach to education—dominated as it was by the classical humanities—earned many detractors over the course of American history. Why, critics wondered, did the U.S. colleges focus so much attention on the study of Latin and ancient Greek? Why didn't they train students for careers other than the so-called learned professions of ministry, law, and medicine? Among disparagers of the antebellum classical colleges were those whom the historian Andrew Jewett has labeled the first generation of *scientific democrats*. These reformers, influenced primarily by educational currents in Germany, pioneered the American research universities in the late nineteenth century, aiming to reorient higher learning in the U.S. around the natural and social sciences. They believed that the scientific method could supply the necessary tools to maintain a cohesive and robust democratic society. Thus, they endeavored to reduce the roles of the classical languages (i.e., the classical humanities) and Christian theology in the U.S. colleges.

In the late nineteenth century, these scientific democrats pushed to make the production of new knowledge the supreme goal of American institutions of higher learning. Such reformers also managed to jettison the prescribed classical curriculum of the early American colleges in favor of free choice among elective courses. No longer shackled to required coursework, at many U.S. colleges undergraduates could now pick any classes that fit their fancy.

The creators of the American research universities touted free election in part because it was a curricular system conducive to the sciences. Indeed, influential scientific democrats such as Charles W. Eliot (1834–1926), a chemist who served as the longstanding president of Harvard University, championed elective coursework as the curricular embodiment of Darwinism and laissez-faire economics. Eliot, a disciple of the British scientist, philosopher, and social Darwinist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), openly advertised his pedagogical philosophy with evolutionary vocabulary. “In education, as elsewhere,” Eliot opined in an essay on the liberal arts originally composed in 1884, “it is the fittest that survives.”

Other scientific democrats took the lead in enshrining specialized scientific-style research as the main goal of the American

professoriate. Soon, rigorous but narrow graduate training became de rigueur for aspiring faculty members; advancement within the profession now hinged on the creation of esoteric research impenetrable to educated laypeople. This reorientation of professorial priorities also helped minimize the influence of the classical humanities on U.S. higher education. Specialized scholarship encouraged an academic ideal of knowledge for its own sake. This marked a profound shift from the spirit of Renaissance humanism, with its focus on transmitting the received wisdom of the ancients.

Although they originally met with much resistance, the reforms pushed by the scientific democrats managed to revolutionize higher learning in America. The attacks on the spirit of Renaissance humanism in the U.S. colleges were so successful, in fact, that proponents of the classical humanities—recognizing the dismal fate for the collegiate study of Latin and ancient Greek—reconceptualized the humanities in the late nineteenth century. Since the Renaissance, the *studia humanitatis* had referred to the study of the literary masterworks of ancient Greece and Rome; American humanists now saw fit to expand the humanities to include a broader array of subjects. English literature, art history, philosophy, French, and German—these and kindred disciplines were granted a power previously bestowed on the study of classical authors alone. The *modern humanities* were born.

As those attuned to more recent educational history will note, in the U.S. these days the modern humanities aren't faring much better than did the classical humanities in the late nineteenth century. And no wonder: the educational vision of the scientific democrats still dominates American higher learning and thus the marginalization of the humanities has continued apace. To be sure, most U.S. colleges and universities no longer boast completely elective curricula. But their modest attempts to tame curricular election—mostly through the creation of the major/minor system and the inauguration of so-called distribution requirements—leave the pedagogical goals of the scientific democrats undisturbed. Indeed, one might even suggest that the character-building function so key to the humanist project since antiquity has disappeared from American institutions of higher learning. Colleges and universities in our nation no longer advertise themselves as conduits for the moral improvement of the young; rather, they stress the ability of their scientific-style researchers to improve the material conditions of society and to instill in students an array of job-ready skills.

Since the late nineteenth century, then, the very system of American higher education has by design fought against humanistic values and rendered it well-nigh impossible for the humanities to flourish. Even in the early twentieth century, the scientizing of the U.S. colleges was so manifest that the Harvard comparative literature

professor Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) could charge many of his colleagues in the humanities with abandoning humanism in favor of the pseudo-scientific investigation of literature. No longer did such professors examine great works of art, music, philosophy, literature, and religion to determine sound ethical standards and answers to life's enduring questions. Rather, they reveled in minute research that—like the work of the scientists on their faculties—would supposedly lead to the inevitable march of progress. This scientific approach to the humanities, already apparent in the early twentieth century, has become even more dominant since then.

Although they would seldom self-identify in this manner, most humanities professors now comport themselves as scientists. Hence, many of them will not vouch for the importance of *any* humanistic content in a general-education curriculum. Plato, comic books, Confucius, pornography—all are just humanistic “texts,” prime fodder for the recondite analyses of the professor. Such an outlook remains distinctly anti-humanistic: since antiquity, genuine humanists have believed that *particular humanities content* was key to perfecting the individual.

Disdainful of such a perspective, humanities professors now lamely suggest that their courses are essential to their institutions because they supposedly provide students with skills in “critical thinking.” Unfortunately, their colleagues in the physical sciences, social sciences, and vocational disciplines make the same claim about their own classes. The humanities, consequently, have lost any unique sense of purpose: they purportedly offer students the same aptitudes that all other subjects provide. Formerly seen as the means through which students may live up to their higher potentialities, the humanities have degenerated into an exercise in mere mental calisthenics. Many humanities professors, oddly enough, appear not to recognize the crucial role of the imagination in human flourishing, oblivious to the fact that literary and artistic masterworks help us grapple with questions surrounding the best ways to live.

What does this tell us about the likely fate of the humanities in America? In the realm of higher education, the outlook is not rosy. To help their disciplines thrive on campus, humanities professors must fight against all the pragmatic incentives of American academia. Circumscribed, discipline-specific graduate training encourages prospective professors to research and write esoteric academic books and articles guided by an anti-humanistic spirit of scientism. The desperate need to publish such research to have a chance to find gainful employment and advance through the academic *cursus honorum* forces graduate students and young professors to fetishize narrow scholarly publication over other aspects of their jobs. And the free-market curriculum that dominates American colleges and universities suggests to students that they have little or nothing to

learn from the past. Without a radical break from such a system, the modern humanities will continue to wither.

Although the U.S. is also home to colleges that demonstrate a more robust commitment to humanism, these institutions, unfortunately, are few and far between. Even the conservative founders of the fledgling University of Austin, who heavily criticized the vicissitudes of U.S. higher ed, seem oblivious to the broader problems for the humanities; thus, they championed “Entrepreneurship and Leadership” as their institution’s inaugural program.

In these circumstances, the future of the humanities may depend chiefly on institutions beyond academia’s orbit. The recently founded Catherine Project—which sponsors free, online tutorials and discussion groups focused on important books of the East and West—could help revive a spirit of humanism absent from most American institutions of higher learning. The early Renaissance humanists, it should be noted, originally spread their pedagogical vision outside of Europe’s universities; the same could hold true for a rejuvenated humanist movement in the contemporary U.S. ■

The Art of Conversation and the Revival of the Humanities

Benjamin Storey

NO ONE IS HAPPY WITH THE STATE OF THE HUMANITIES; the dominant characterization of the problem by humanists themselves is crisis. Indeed, as Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon point out in *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*, humanists have been describing their disciplines as in crisis for the better part of two centuries. The word “crisis,” they note, appeals to humanists because it cast them as defenders of “the human” against the degrading forces of modernity, from natural science to capitalism. If the humanities are in crisis, it is because they fight the good fight against overwhelming odds.

But a crisis that endures for two centuries is not really a crisis. The right word for the state of the humanities is less crisis than decadence. As Ross Douhat defines it, decadence is characterized by repetition, intellectual exhaustion, and despair—sentiments familiar to all those who know the academic humanities from the inside. While many humanistic scholars still run great seminars and write valuable books, the larger story is one of shrinking enrollments, discontinued PHD programs, and demoralized teachers. The reason for this lack of interest is not that the humanities go against the grain and court cancellation, but that they go with the grain and drift into irrelevance. The egalitarianism, liberationism, and opposition to hierarchy characteristic of much humanistic writing and teaching are not actually an exciting challenge the prejudices of democratic societies. For the goodness of egalitarianism, liberationism, and the anti-hierarchical spirit are exactly what democratic societies take for granted, as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out long ago.

In their erudite expression of a dominant worldview, the academic humanities today resemble the medieval universities as the Renaissance humanists saw them: an entrenched and insular guild, more obstacle than venue for the flourishing of the intellectual life. But that does not mean the humanities as such have nothing to contribute to our world. As Reitter and Wellmon point out, the term “humanities” has several meanings. The word refers not only to a set of university disciplines, but also to the study and practice of a set of intellectual arts—principally poetry, history, and moral philosophy—which have no necessary connection to academic institutions. The Renaissance flourishing of those arts, from Petrarch and Boccaccio in the fourteenth century to Cervantes and Shakespeare in the sixteenth, took place outside the university’s walls, and was conceived by many of its practitioners as an alternative to the decadent form of intellectual life that possessed these institutions.

When one separates the substance of the humanities from the academic disciplines that bear their name, their present state and prospects look brighter. Book sales of classic titles in literature, philosophy, and history are strong. Reading groups abound. The classical schools movement, which now counts some million students, asks the young to read and take seriously works that have nothing to do with the contemporary spirit in ethics and politics—from the history of Egypt to the geometric proofs of Euclid to the lives of the saints. Many of them fuse the spirit of religion and humanism in a way that is original and fecund.

The humanists of the Renaissance may offer a lesson to us insofar as they showed how intellectual life can be revived from outside dominant institutions. Importantly, they distinguished themselves from the theologians, jurists, and doctors of the universities not only in the substance of their thought but also in their characteristic forms of speech and writing. As Marc Fumaroli points out, they rejected what they regarded as the dead and rigid forms of university speech—*lectio*, *quaestio*, and *disputatio*—in favor of the free and lively forms of letters, essays, and conversation. They brought these arts to high degrees of perfection in their writing and their lives, leaving a literary legacy that subsequent generations would treasure.

In the art of conversation, in particular, present-day lovers of the humanities may find something to imitate and to offer that may be of service to the wider world. Despite our digital connectedness, ours is an age of isolation, alienation, and division. More people are living alone than ever before; many are disconnected from and distrustful of the major institutions of social and civil life, from town government to Hollywood cinema; social media echo chambers relentlessly vilify those with whom we disagree. While many exclusive universities have turned themselves into pricey, judgy monocultures that exacerbate these problems, the humanities’ historic cultivation of the art of conversation might contribute to ameliorating them.

The art of conversation the humanities cultivates leads us to engage with those with whom we disagree, for intelligent disagreement is indispensable to intellectual progress. It draws its vitality from the intrinsic interest of the subject at the center of humanistic inquiry: the question of how to live. In a time of existential dislocation and social atomization, those who model thinking well about our lives in the company of those with whom we disagree have something unmistakably useful to offer.

We may see what the art of conversation can be by considering how it was practiced by two of its principal adepts. Both were moral philosophers, or, as the French term has it, *moralistes*, interested above all in the question of how human beings live. Each of them—Michel de Montaigne, the archetype of French humanism, and his most important successor in the tradition of the *moralistes*, the extraordinary polymath Blaise Pascal—expounds a different vision of the good life. And each assigns conversation an essential but distinct role in that life.

In them, we may see a case for the enduring relevance of the humanities as arts that both help us think our own lives through and bring us into conversation with one another. Such a reminder is perhaps more important for our universities than any other institution in our society. For while universities still pay lip service to “great conversations” and “meaningful dialogue,” many have become places where alarming numbers of students and faculty are afraid to speak their minds. If the humanities—understood not as a proprietary domain of the university, but as an inheritance freely given to anyone with a library card—can offer us this reminder, they may make a modest but concrete contribution to developing the conversational disposition of which our academic, personal, and public lives seem so sorely in need.

Michel de Montaigne: Conversation and Presumption

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) is the emblematic figure of humanism in France. His three semi-autobiographical volumes, the *Essays*, brought the essay into being as a literary art form, and were some of the most widely read books in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They have retained their charm ever since, as was recently illustrated when Sarah Bakewell’s brilliant biography of Montaigne, *How to Live*, became a surprise bestseller in 2010.

Like most Renaissance humanists, Montaigne never taught at a university. His attitude toward academic life is that of a satirical outsider, and he gins up brilliant copy by lampooning learned pretension and pedantry. His own humanism, by contrast, comes across as rich, free, and winsome. Though his learning is vast, he

wears it with a light touch. Every sentence he writes hums with wit, pathos, or irony. He makes clear that he is neither poet nor historian nor philosopher (except “accidentally”), yet he engages with all of them as a free and intelligent equal. And he turns his impressive intellectual resources to the purpose of humbling yet liberating self-instruction, according conversation a central place as an art that both shows us our limits and exercises our judgment.

Montaigne lived his adult life during France’s wars of religion: a nasty and confusing three-way conflict that raged from the massacre of Huguenots at Vassy in 1662, when Montaigne was thirty, until the Edict of Nantes secured religious peace in 1598, six years after his death. Those wars are never far from Montaigne’s mind as he writes the *Essays*. His humanism proved an attractive alternative to the theological intransigence and bloody-mindedness that beset his country.

The *Essays* seek to intervene in that conflict at the most fundamental level: the level of self-understanding. Montaigne argues that the “original and natural malady” of the human race is what he calls “presumption.” He sees this presumption as the psychological root cause of the conflicts that swirled all around him, noting that “it is putting a very high price on one’s conjectures to have one’s neighbor roasted alive because of them.” In the *Essays*, he creates a series of “secular spiritual exercises,” as Pierre Manent has put it, intended to remedy that original and natural malady.

The method of the *Essays*, as Fumaroli suggests, is conversational. Every chapter puts human possibilities in dialogue with one another, drawing from the manifold examples available to Montaigne in the books with which he surrounded himself and the conversations and experiences of which he made the *Essays* a detailed record. This comparative method encourages a complex mixture of appreciation of the many ways human beings live their lives, modesty about one’s dispositions and accomplishments, and the free but unpretentious exercise of individual judgment about the whole.

One sees this method at work in Montaigne’s assessments of the characters with whom he populates the pages of the *Essays*. He honors the Roman citizen-martyr Cato the Younger in his place, but pulls back from the brutal extremes to which he took his civic dedication. Of some of the religious orders of his time, he writes, “I do not fail, just because I am not continent, to acknowledge sincerely the continence of the Feuillants and the Capuchins, and to admire the manner of their life:” he respects religious self-restraint without seeing any need to imitate it. The greatest of philosophers, for Montaigne, is Socrates, with whom he constantly engages in the *Essays*. And the distinctive model of moral and intellectual life he presents to the world is self-consciously divested of the highest moral and intellectual aspirations Socrates holds forth.

Constantly comparing himself to these and many other examples of how people have dealt with what he calls “the human condition,” Montaigne makes his own modest life the unassuming hero of his book. He describes that life as “humble” and “inglorious,” and fills it with satisfying, varied, but unambitious activity. He enjoys his travels, but has none of the ambitions of an explorer or hopes of the pilgrim. He has love affairs and eventually a marriage, but prides himself on never expecting too much from either. He reads, but specifies that he prefers light books, Plutarch and Ovid, to the heavy-duty philosophizing of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

Montaigne places the art of conversation at the center of this way of life. He calls it “the most fruitful and natural exercise of our minds,” and uses it to both assert his own freedom and keep the temptation of presumption in check. In an essay entitled “On the Art of Conversation,” he tells us that he seeks out disagreement, and delights in the freedom of spirited intellectual contestation, for “unison is an altogether boring quality in conversation.” He admires and engages in frank disagreement, disdains the pulling of punches, and likens good conversation to jousting. And yet he counts it his victory when, “in the very heat of the battle,” he makes himself “bow beneath the force of my adversary’s reason.” Good conversation demands that one be at once free and modest, bold and reasonable.

Conversation partners capable of embodying this complex disposition are rare, and not always available in the flesh. Montaigne often finds the best conversation available to him in encounters with minds of the past available to him in the pages of books. And so he closes his chapter on conversation with an extended meditation on Tacitus. He both admires and differs from the Roman historian, defending his pagan religious views before his own Christian readership, yet criticizing his bashfulness in writing about the personal lives of himself and others. In so doing, Montaigne demonstrates the freedom and boldness of judgment, together with appreciation of others and modesty toward oneself, that conversation cultivates.

The taste for such conversation is not an accidental element of Montaigne’s humanism. “Our souls reach out beyond us,” he writes in the title of a brief but important chapter. We are naturally discontent and outward-looking—a disposition pregnant with trouble. Conversation brings us into contact with others, and the comparison it embodies and encourages allows us to weigh and consider their examples. But it ultimately brings us home to ourselves, in a motion Ann Hartle calls “circular dialectic,” with a perspective at once broadened, freed, and self-possessed. Such is the fruit of his humanistic conversation, which issues in a model of thought, sociability and life that a long train of readers would find preferable to the fanaticism so common in the France of Montaigne’s time.

Blaise Pascal: The Conversational Path to the Greatness and Misery of Man

Montaigne would have a long train of admirers in the tradition of the *moralistes*. The greatest of them was the remarkable, even “frightening” genius, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). Pascal called Montaigne the “incomparable author of ‘The Art of Conversation.’” Though Pascal would develop a Christian humanism which dramatically reverses Montaigne’s vision of the human condition, he always held the *Essays* close, treating it as a breviary of human psychology, and developing his own thoughts through an intense and intimate dialogue with Montaigne. His *Pensées* illustrate the depth human thought may gain from intense conversation with alternatives we reject.

Pascal was perhaps the most extraordinary mind to emerge from the rich intellectual world Montaigne helped foster in France. His father, Étienne Pascal, was himself a serious mathematician, connected to the best mathematicians of his time. He homeschooled his son in the gentle, humanistic spirit Montaigne recommended, and cared so much for his son’s humanistic studies of Latin and Greek that he withheld instruction in his own favorite subject, mathematics, lest it distract young Blaise from his languages. Neither father nor son were ever connected with a university.

Confronted with the extraordinary development of his son’s mathematical talents even without lessons, Étienne Pascal eventually relented and had the boy instructed. Blaise would prove to be a true prodigy, making world-historical contributions to arithmetic (with Pascal’s triangle), geometry (with his solution to the problem of the cycloid), and physics (with his discovery of atmospheric pressure). He was also a significant inventor, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, creating and marketing the world’s first mechanical calculator and implementing Paris’s first public transportation system.

As he matured, Pascal’s attention gravitated toward the question of how to live that was central to humanistic inquiry. And when he looked around at the pleasures and pursuits preferred by adepts of the Montaignean way of living popular with prominent people in his own time, he concluded that their outwardly splendid and diverting existences were so many ways of avoiding the most important human questions.

These were not the sour grapes of a disappointed outsider. Pascal successfully engaged in everything the variegated and charming world of learned Paris in his time had to offer. He participated in scientific endeavors and literary controversies at their most daring and exciting. He discovered mathematical truths both ingenious and enduring. He experienced the thrill of clandestine political activity and the glow of a writer’s fame. He knew good friends and the love of family. He had money and he made more of it. But his soul was too uncompromising and honest to accept any of the little fibs we deploy to

convince ourselves that the finite and fleeting things we can enjoy—wealth, fame, friendship, excitement—will really satisfy the longings of souls that can think about, and therefore desire, the infinite.

Montaigne's attitude toward academic life is that of a satirical outsider, and he gins up brilliant copy by lampooning learned pretension and pedantry.

For Pascal, the Montaignean world of highbrow dabbling could be summed up in the word *diversion*. Travel, reading, flirting, hunting, gambling: all are a shield we hold up before our faces to blind ourselves to the fact that we are running toward a cliff. That cliff is death, and mortality is the most evident mark of the insuperable gap between what the human soul longs for and what human life can deliver. We want knowledge but dwell in ignorance; we want happiness but endure misery; we long to live and are fated for dust and ashes. Though something in us always knows this, we avoid looking at it by whatever means we can. And so we are attracted to anything that gets our minds off of ourselves: the insipid trivialities of salon gossip in Pascal's time or of Tik-Tok in ours; the intrigues of romance and sport; even the pursuits human beings take most seriously, from money to scholarship to politics. The chief attraction of all of it is that it relieves us of the burden of self-awareness.

Pascal judged the whole effort of Montaigne's *Essays*—to learn to be at home with oneself—paradoxically self-alienating. He sums up his own humanism in an aphorism that negates almost everything Montaigne stands for: *l'homme passe l'homme*, “man transcends man.” To be human is indeed to reach out beyond oneself, to have desires that outstrip our possibilities, intimations that point beyond what we can know, hopes that defy our mortal limitations. A truly human life goes with this motion rather than seeking to check it. To know the human heart is to know that no human thing can fill it, and to begin down the one path Pascal believes genuinely corresponds to that truth: the anguished but clear-eyed search for God.

As Pascal embarked on that search, he kept his Montaigne close, though he regarded some of the essayist's most important thoughts as “entirely pagan.” He had a special relish for Montaigne's “incomparable” chapter on conversation, and commends Montaigne's counsels of tactical tenacity when sounding the depths of others' convictions (i.e., receive other people's one liners with diffidence, to see if they will stick with their statements without approval). Such roughness is unavoidable for those who truly seek to discover “what there is that is good and sound at the bottom of the pot,” in Montaigne's

inimitable language—what lives in the secret recesses of human hearts, behind all the social subterfuge and self-deception. Such was Pascal's intention, and he found engagement with this powerful interlocutor an indispensable aid in developing his own understanding of the human condition and considering what might constitute a true answer to the question the human heart incessantly asks.

Pascal was familiar with Montaigne's brilliant observation intended to check our tendency to believe that the whole cosmos is interested in our fate:

Whoever considers as in a painting the great picture of our mother Nature in her full majesty; whoever reads such universal and constant variety in her face; whoever finds himself there, and not merely himself but a whole kingdom, as a dot made with a very fine brush; that man alone estimates things according to their true proportions.

Applying his own geometric mind to Montaigne's humanistic insight, Pascal at once deepens its pathos and reverses its import. There is no magnitude so great that we cannot double it; there is no unit of measure so small that we cannot divide it in half. Space spreads out quite literally to infinity; and there is no minimum limit, either—no indivisible atom upon which the whole might somehow rest. We are not merely a small point in nature's vastness. We are suspended between two infinities. To see as much is not merely to humble ourselves, but to enter into the unsettling wonder appropriate to our complete inability to comprehend our place in the whole.

The same dialectic between the great and the small is at work in Pascal's most sustained discussion of Montaigne. That discussion takes place in a gripping philosophic dialogue, recorded by Nicolas Fontaine, who witnessed Pascal's extraordinary first meeting with one of the priests who led the Jansenist sect who would play a decisive role in Pascal's intellectual and spiritual life.

In that meeting, Pascal and Father de Saci discuss the two philosophers most on Pascal's mind, Epictetus and Montaigne. Saci had a conversational art of getting people talking about the subjects they most cared about, and leading them from wherever they began in the direction of the Gospels. But Pascal's interior dialogue with the philosophers he most studied had its own religious motion, and took flight with very little help from Saci.

Pascal seeks to understand philosophy by putting two of its exemplars, Epictetus and Montaigne, into conversation with one another. In the stoic Epictetus, Pascal sees the heights of human greatness—of unflinching dedication to duty and courageous resignation to fate—that man can achieve by his own powers.

But he also sees that such heights are inseparable from dogmatism, presumption, and pride. In the hedonist Montaigne, Pascal sees the power of skepticism to shake us loose from such presumption, and make us aware of human frailty. But he argues that Montaignean skepticism and commendation of pleasure-seeking inevitably leads to despair.

Pascal depicts the confrontation of these two alternatives—stoic dogmatism and hedonistic skepticism—as a “battle of giants,” in the words of Graeme Hunter, which implicates all of philosophy. It shows the extremes of human possibility, which “ruin and annihilate one another.” Their mutual destruction makes way for the God-man of the New Testament, who combines the greatness of commanding creation with the lowness of a suffering servant, thereby stretching beyond anything human beings could hope to achieve and matching the worst we could fear to suffer. The old story of Bethlehem, Lake Gennesaret, and Golgotha is the paradoxical, non-invented answer to the human heart’s most profound terrors and longings.

Perhaps Pascal would have reached this and the other characteristic insights of his distinctly modern Christian apologetics without his intense conversation with Montaigne. But we will never know, for he found in Montaigne the key to understanding much about the hidden workings of the human heart and the fleeting fascinations of his contemporaries. Arguing with Montaigne made Pascal who he was.

Perhaps Montaigne could have been Montaigne without his love of conversation, and his constant comparative engagement with the thinkers and figures he so constantly interrogated. But that conversation is precisely what populates the vast world of the *Essays* and accounts for their enduring power to engage us. Despite their radically different answers to the question of the human soul, both these thinkers sought the human truth by grappling resolutely with those with whom they disagreed.

In a moment when so much of academic speech seems moribund, we should take a conversational lesson from these two kinds of humanists, who thought and lived outside the university. The fundamental reason for doing so is that their example may help us in the basic human task of living in the light of the clearest possible understanding of our situation. The deepest source of the enduring vitality of the humanities is precisely their capacity for helping us find, in one another, the resources we need to know ourselves. Whether in old institutional forms or new ones, a humanism that speaks to such abiding human longings will always be relevant. A

Expertise and Education

Jordan Poyner

In discussion it is not so much weight of authority as force of argument that should be demanded. Indeed the authority of those who profess to teach is often a positive hindrance to those who desire to learn; they cease to employ their own judgement, and take what they perceive to be the verdict of their chosen master as settling the question.

—Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* I.10

IN THE POLYPHONIC DISCOURSE ON THE FUTURE OF THE humanities in higher education, much has been said about what the humanities are—and aren't—good for. In the December 20, 2021 issue of *The New Yorker*, Louis Menand (an English professor at Harvard who co-founded a year-long introductory course in the humanities for freshmen) declared that: “Humanists cannot win a war against science. They should not be fighting a war against science. They should be defending their role in the knowledge business, not standing aloof in the name of unspecified and unspecifiable higher things.” In Menand’s sights were some recent advocates of the humanities whom he understands to denigrate science—as a kind of hydra of all material, quantitative, and empirical thinking—in favor of the “ineffable” outcomes of humanistic education. According to Menand, “Knowledge is a tool, not a state of being,” and humanists should get better at flexing their implements.

This strain in the conversation is certainly exciting, but what does it tune out? For Menand's argument to work, "humanists" would have to know what they know, and demonstrate it. There is, apparently, no room for a Socrates, who occasionally, frustratingly claimed to know only that he knew nothing. Is there time and patience enough before the ship of the humanities sinks to consider the potential benefits of abdicating epistemic authority? Could it be that the best education requires a student to ask what knowledge is, instead of simply acquiring it from the credentialed dispensers? The Catherine Project, a relatively newborn nonprofit, was launched partially in response to this question.

What the Project does is apparently simple: instead of students, we enroll readers in seminars on great works of literature, philosophy, and natural science. Volunteers facilitate conversations between eight and twelve readers without directing them toward a determined conclusion or claiming expertise in the subject at hand. There are no credits to secure, grades to maintain, academic honors to win, or entrance fees to establish participants' investment. Those who stick around must be committed in earnest to a serious discussion of ideas untethered from the conditions typically imposed in the learning business. This situation can be uncomfortable for those used to these conditions and this discomfort is worth exploring.

Among the guidelines for discussion that are shared with all participants, one presents especial difficulty: "When you refer to sources outside the shared reading, including historical or other context, you claim to be an expert at the table. A good conversation relies on sources that all present can evaluate; the text read in common should be central." Participants in Project seminars occasionally struggle to refrain from commenting on the historical or intellectual context of a text under discussion. In a discussion on Aristotle, someone is liable to generously offer an explanation of Plato's thinking on the subject. This tendency is exacerbated by the absence of the authoritative voice of a teacher who is presumed to know more than their students.

The insistence on dealing exclusively with primary sources strikes many as radical, mistaken, and overly difficult. Authors, texts, and ideas do not exist in isolation: they are informed and influenced by other ideas and forces. If we want to understand Aristotle, we *should* consider what he learned from Plato. The Project does not reject this way of thinking. Rather, we take it quite seriously—so seriously that we do not take for granted the essence of such influence. Instead of simply accepting someone else's gloss on the relationship between ideas, we ask our readers to actively consider the issue on their own terms.

The Project can ask this of its readers because it understands education to be more than the simple transmission of knowledge or truth from the more learned to the less. For us, the questions

What constitutes knowledge? and *What is knowledge for?* are live. And we do not set for ourselves and our readers the objective of arriving at the “correct” understanding of an author, text, or idea. However ambiguous or ineffable it might be, we understand education as, in part, the cultivation of a human being’s ability to think for themselves. Could it be that such an education requires the courage to encounter one’s own perplexity before moving on to deeper understanding? And, if so, what do we stand to gain or lose from avoiding such encounters by immediately turning to the experts?

To know what knowledge is and what it’s for might require the consideration of even more fundamental questions, like what a human being is and what they’re for.

The discomfort that readers in Project seminars experience when forced to think through a difficult text can be productive. If one is willing to dwell on the difficulty, to be unsettled and challenged by it, one can develop a flexibility, a stamina, an imagination of thought. As with the development of the analogous qualities in the body, pain is involved. The turn to authority—whether in the form of a teacher, well-informed peer, or explanatory footnote—is an easy way out of this labor, but it sacrifices a deeper learning for what passes as erudition.

None of this is to say that the Project is opposed to teachers. We are careful about who we allow to lead our seminars, but we also understand that the true teachers in our seminars are the books we read. Hence the engagement with what are commonly called the Great Books. We read these books in part because they constitute a conversational nexus: these texts read and speak to one another. If Aristotle came to a deeper understanding of the world after an engagement with Plato, perhaps we might too. And if Aristotle is not alone—if others have acquired their own distinct understandings of Plato—perhaps Plato can speak to many kinds of readers, at various points in their studies. Perhaps Plato, who wrote dialogues and not

treatises, understood that what he wrote would be difficult for some readers and that difficulty was pedagogically useful, not to be explained away by a commentator whose own degree of understanding is not easily vetted by the already perplexed.

We prize a certain amateurism, but not shallowness. This distinction may escape a culture that has ambivalently embraced a dichotomy of expertise and common understanding, so that—whether one favors trusting experts or suspects them of autocratic designs—it goes without saying that there really are experts. Because we abstain from this binary understanding of knowledge and its possession, our education is available to all, regardless of their educational or intellectual past. Those who facilitate our courses are as likely to learn as those who enroll in them, and we are confident that scholars stand to gain as much from the communal contemplation and study of profound texts as those who have yet to set foot in a college classroom.

Furthermore, we believe that there can be dialogue between readers from different walks of life. This further informs our insistence on dealing first with primary texts. When our seminars convene, we know that our readers have at least one thing in common: they have all read the passage to be discussed. If it is Aristotle, then they have Aristotle in common—not Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle or the latest scholarship. They must try to make sense of the text together. In so doing, they might learn—from Aristotle and from each other—how to be better thinkers and readers.

It is not at all clear that those who participate in these activities acquire knowledge. But then again, it’s not entirely clear (to me, at least) that knowledge is, in fact, a tool and not a state of being. To know what knowledge is and what it’s for might require the consideration of even more fundamental questions, like what human beings are and what they’re for. We could choose to be satisfied with the answers of those who appear to have considered the question more fully than us and simply move on, but then let us be honest about our situation: we are being informed, not educated.

The Catherine Project is a continuation in some form of an ancient, Socratic practice: to recognize that you don’t know, that you don’t have the answer and that you can seek it without waiting for the experts to enlighten you. The point of the Catherine Project is that you don’t have to seek on your own. **A**

Can the Humanities Flourish in Prison?

Karen Hamer and Cedric Martin

What is the power of the arts and humanities in prisons? What is the value of the intimate space that is created between people who live in prisons and the volunteers who come in to teach in those classroom spaces? This is what we, Cedric and Karen, have come to the page to think about aloud, together. We are now two years into writing together about arts in prisons, and it has been six years since Cedric first stepped into Karen's Shakespeare theater classroom in a men's state prison in Colorado. Now into his 22nd year of incarceration, Cedric still recalls that day as "the first time that someone, other than my visitors in the visiting room, looked at me and saw a human being."

For Karen, who founded a nonprofit theater company in Colorado Springs in 2008, the two years that she taught theater as a prison volunteer proved to be a gateway into the veiled world of corrections. Following graduate study in education in New Zealand, she attended the University of Cambridge and is now a doctoral student in Criminology at UT Dallas. In 2018, she undertook a U.S.-wide survey of people who taught theater in prisons. They were mostly actors and directors, although some were humanities academics in English or Communications departments. Karen also conducted in-depth interviews with 36 theater volunteers, both male and female state-trained volunteers who taught in jails or prisons for men, women, or youth. These volunteers, whose average age was 44 with an average of seven years of experience as prison volunteers, ran programs at all levels of security through to solitary housing units.

In the us, there are approximately 5,000 corrections facilities, approximately 3,000 of which are jails and around 2,000, state and federal prisons. It is a massive system, and we know you have heard the numbers: there are 2.2 million people incarcerated, although these numbers have decreased since COVID. With 127 prison theater programs U.S.-wide in 2018, they barely make a programming dent in prisons. But the individual response and experience, both for the arts volunteers and the incarcerated participants, is often profound. Radical experiences of inclusion and belonging shape arts experiences in prisons. In a place of radical exclusion, danger, and fear, both the practice of art and the relational milieu that is the arts classroom ushers in healing, hope, and possibilities for being human in the midst of what Cedric describes as the “carnival of cannibals” that is prison.

When you come of age in prison, as Cedric did, you learn to not only look at people and things but to really observe. After ten years in solitary confinement, small movements and gestures can be radically affecting. When your volunteer Shakespeare class instructor leans toward you to whisper an observation during a showing of Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, you wonder not at the boldness of Beatrice but at the scent of healthy lung tissue that fills your nostrils. In the stagnant stench of prison, you worry that your “foulness” might infect her “beautiful soul,” because the arts and humanities, in prison, are about nothing more nor less than learning to breathe. They are about learning to trust that there will be fresh air tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow—and not really believing it but nevertheless coming back for more. After a Shakespeare performance class in prison, it is about going to bed with, not sugar plums dancing in your head, but with an iambic rhythm that echoes through the night against the blare of a loudspeaker that rarely quietens amidst the bright lights outside your cell that never dim.

In the noisy, brutal, and even deadly atmosphere of prison, the arts and humanities beckon fiercely toward the humane, the human.

Anger, frustration, boredom, hatred and the very real fear of death or serious bodily harm taint every action in the prison environment. Beyond prison, debates ring in University Senate meetings and on social media over the value of English and history and the arts in an economy increasingly dominated by computer science and A.I., by marketing and the all-powerful Amazon algorithm. Inside prison, where time swirls thickly as a murky pool in which people grow older but there is little other material change, reading and writing poetry and prose becomes a way not only of marking time but of making it meaningful.

Here, in the golden hour that is a theater arts class in prison, is the loud roar of Bottom with his donkey's head, announcing his presence. Here are the fervent whispers of Romeo and Juliet under the covers before they part at the song of the lark, revealing their love. Here is the space to contemplate the beauty of movement and speech, to feel language trippingly on the tongue that earlier that morning tasted coffee prepared from hot or cold tap water, depending on the water temperature du jour, strained through a sock. Staff, prisoners, administration, every single one of them rigidly walks a tight line knowing that any violation of the prison code, real or perceived, can be life-altering or life-ending. Here, even here, Cedric arms and armors himself with art: his trusty flex pen, blank paper, and his memories of magical occurrences during his truncated experiences with theater-based volunteers.

One of the gifts of the arts and humanities in prison is that of inclusion. Of his fellow incarcerated artists, Cedric says, "We share the same ferocious devotion to our craft, sacrificing and suffering, catering and cajoling, to reach our practice. We stand steel-spined, steady-eyed, and fire-bellied, as we invited our peers and our captors to see us, one line at a time, one drawing at a time." Particularly in high-security and close custody or solitary confinement-type settings, it becomes important to know that one is not alone, to find out that there are others of the same ilk though differently pigmented or extricated or artistically inclined.

Particularly now, with the reinstatement of Pell grants for prisoners, no one really believes that people go to prison for the education. The last forty punitive years of mass incarceration, when warehousing reigned as the supreme carceral aim, have rather put an end to the idea that prisons rival country clubs. In this long interregnum since Pell grants for prisoners were withdrawn in 1994, the humanities nevertheless insisted on inserting themselves into individuals' lives. People read fiction in prisons, and images danced in their heads. They wrote letters, those letters informed by their reading. They engaged in conversations; they swapped books. At higher custody levels, this latter activity was no small undertaking. Sometimes, to share a book, it meant that one had to carefully separate the pages into bundled parts, as Cedric recently did, carefully separating the pages of

Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* into packages just thin enough to swish (or, the technical term: *fish*) under his cell door, across the hall, and down the tier to the intended recipient.

Run much like a community theater group, although perhaps with rival gang members or class members who have seriously wounded each other out in the prison yard, the theater classroom in prison becomes a meaning-filled rehearsal space for a different kind of life from the life of punitive deprivation served up with cold Folgers in the morning. In an environment of restraint, control, and coercion, the “free space” of the theater classroom in prison becomes a space for emergence, for being seen, and for relationship. It is a “free space” in the sense that people who live in prisons describe as being “not like prison.” In this vibrant space, words have a way of getting around and ideas have a way of germinating, for the arts have always been practiced in arenas of deprivation: wartime; concentration camps; and prisons. In any total institution or extreme circumstance, the arts rise to the surface as a tube pushed up through the earth for breathing. Like the bell tied to a Victorian cadaver's finger, lest he or she prove to be alive after all, art production signals that the artist is alive.

Art in prison, whether visual, theatrical, or musical, is a radical act of creativity. To create art in an extreme setting—extreme in trauma, isolation, deprivation—is to wrestle limited resources into an alchemical Gordian knot that disgorges something more than the sum of its parts. Sometimes it seems that, the greater the pressure and the more precarious the process, the more rarefied and powerful the offering. Thus, amidst the hefty, seductive pull of stagnation, when one begins one's sentence believing that it is possible to sleep one's prison time away, art demands an alignment with *life*. To put pen to paper is to declare that one is here, located in space, tethered and grounded to a place, yet free—free to draw as and what and if and when one desires. Free to share or not share the work, as one wishes. It is possible, with thumb on the fleshy belly of a four-inch “flex” pen, and index and pinky fingers straddling its length—it is *possible* to illustrate and, thus, perhaps, indicate another world. One can draw people towards oneself and bathe in their presence as they emerge on the page. One can remember a past and envision a future. One can begin to believe in oneself as an actor in possession of intellect, creativity, and agency, despite the stricture and restrictions within which one lives.

In the bounded world of prison, this is not nothing. Let us say that again: to create; to put marks on a page; to read; to recite; to think; to speak: *this is not nothing*. When the alternative is stagnation or death—a very real alternative in the closed and cloistered, locked and closeted world of the penitentiary, where news does not get out, and light and air do not get in—these marks on the page, these words

between people, they matter. They matter in the sense of being important, or even urgent, but they also matter in the sense of calling something into being: they make real - and in that emerging reality they declare that you are here, that you are. While Martin Buber speaks powerfully to the I-Thou relationship with another, there is a potency in the I-Thou relationship with oneself in prison. In the declaration that *I am* in the precarious darkness of a prison cell, one regards one's existence as not only primordial but pre-eminent. Without this divine sense of self, without believing oneself to be here and present, the alternative of self-evisceration, of active harm, or inadvertent stagnation, is very real.

When the authors of this article first met and the prisoner found himself looked at and seen, he fully expected the arts volunteer to turn her gaze away. Instead, there was a moment of fundamental recognition in what Martin Buber terms *das zwischenmenschliche*, the relational space between people in which it is possible to begin to belong to one another. It is this radical act of inclusion as human beings who belong to one another that sets the stage for the enduring impact of the arts in prisons. This is the residue that lingers long after one leaves the scene of engagement (the classroom) and returns to the place of isolation (the cell). Here, in this space of radical inclusion, two or three or twelve in a prison classroom can sit down and not only reason together but create something new: a radical community of inclusion, and kinship, and love.

A prison arts classroom might seem unexpected as a radical setting for love. Certainly, most prisoners and prison arts volunteers don't expect to define it that way, not when they first enter in. Later, however, and upon reflection, many find they can come to it no other way. For, the radical act of art—of believing that which is in the creative human mind and hand and heart can matter—along with the radical act of inclusion, defines the setting as a place that cannot proscribe a radical act of love. To know oneself seen and named, valued and beloved, in the mutual engagement of co-producing art in the most difficult of spaces, is a harbinger of hope, hard on the heels of this radical act of inclusion-hospitality. This is the place and possibility of healing, not only for the prisoners and volunteers who participate but for the staff who wearily circle the wagons each night, trying edgily to make it home in one piece after too-long shifts.

This sense of welcome and embrace in the prison theater space is freely named and acknowledged by prison theater volunteers, because it is also a space of freedom for them in which they feel free to be themselves, free from judgment, free to walk into a wide, warm circle of welcome at the end of their day. There, in the prison theater classroom, volunteers talk about the freedom to talk openly and

honestly with the time to do so, minus cell phones, with minimal distraction. Due to the voluntary nature of prison theater programs, most of which do not earn prisoners time off their sentences (known as “good time”), people are there because they want to be, both incarcerated participants and volunteers alike.

For volunteers who carry inner wounds and conflicts, it is deeply courageous to enter the world of theater in prison. They may take months or even years to slowly ease into the space as the sole or lead facilitator. Perhaps part of the power of theater in prison stems from the transparency of the volunteers. Interacting with theater volunteers is a world away from interacting with prison staff where the overriding orientation is suspicion. Prisoners and staff have different worldviews. They are actively pitted against each other. In these bounded, exclusionary relationships, Cedric feels that the staff want him to feel punished, to exist in a constant state of misery. He seeks and works to avoid that. Yet those around him, those in charge and his fellow prisoners, appear to endorse the belief that incarcerated people are irreparably flawed or evil.

In contrast, there is a powerful two-way flow of healing that operates for prisoners and volunteers in the artistic and relational space of prison theater. This reality resonated with Chad, a theater volunteer in an eastern state prison whose journey toward facilitating a prison theater group was slow and heavily laced with emotion. His journey was deeply shaped by the rape of a close friend that had occurred in the years prior to his prison theater involvement. In Karen’s interview, Chad had this to say:

I refer to it as that grey area that I didn't want to have exist in my life. I wanted to have, “You're good,” or “You're bad, and people who do this should go to jail,” - but then to have all of these guys and see the beauty and the truth and the humanity in these [theater] performances and get to know some of [them], for me it was a huge, I think, growth in - in how I thought about people in prison. And I think there's an element of me trying to fix what happened by doing this work.”

This volunteer’s willingness to embrace his own brokenness, and to find wholeness beyond it, is a testament to the strength, vulnerability, and mutual embrace of participants in the prison theater space, incarcerated participants and volunteers alike. It is representative, a small slice, of what is possible within the glow of prison arts and humanities classrooms. In the end, being human together amid destruction and decay, may be the most important thing. In the slow moment toward one another, the question of *Can humans flourish in prison?* begins to be answered with the qualified, improvisational theater response of a curious “Yes, and ...” A

The Future of the Humanities and the Specter of Antisemitism

A Reflection on the Holiness of the Human Being

David Patterson

IN ITS CURRENT STATE, DOES THE STUDY OF THE HUMANITIES have much to do with our humanity or with the holiness of the human being? Does the category of *holiness* have a place in the humanities? Is there a place in the humanities for an encounter with God and humanity, with good and evil, or with meaning and meaninglessness? If so, then why do we find such a deafening silence among scholars in the humanities with regard to the antisemitism that pervades our campuses? Let me explain.

There is a scene in the 2013 film *The Book Thief*, in which Liesel, a little girl in Nazi Germany whom a German family has taken in after her mother was arrested for being a Communist, is out one day with her adoptive father. They witness a shopkeeper being arrested by the Gestapo under suspicion of being a Jew. Her father tries to intervene, only to be shoved to the ground and threatened by a Gestapo agent. Liesel, of course, is traumatized by the incident. She goes home and down to their basement, where her family is hiding a young Jew named Max, whereupon she asks Max, “Why did they treat him [her father] like that?” And he answers: “Because he reminded them of their humanity.” And the Jew reminded her father of his, her father’s, humanity. But what are we reminded of when we are reminded of our humanity? And why would we hate someone for reminding us? Perhaps it is because the Jew turns us over to the vulnerability that Liesel’s father experienced. And so the antisemitism that pervades our campuses reminds us of our humanity, beginning with those of us who are engaged with the humanities. Let me explain.

To be reminded of our humanity is to be reminded of our responsibility to and for the other human being, both neighbor and stranger. Because the other human being, as a child of Adam and a child of God, is infinitely precious, our responsibility runs infinitely deep. Indeed, the more we respond, the more responsible we become: the debt increases in the measure that it is paid, and we are forever in arrears. Hence the antisemitic stereotype of the Jews as the keepers of the ledgers of the world. Reminding us of our humanity, the Jews allow us no sleep; indeed, they render us vulnerable, as Liesel's father was rendered vulnerable. We cherish our sleep: as history has shown, we kill people who shake us from our sleep and awaken us to our infinite responsibility to and for the other human being, beginning but never ending with the Jews. The *Why* of antisemitism, therefore, is to be found in an opposition to a fundamental teaching from Judaism concerning the holiness of the other human being, particularly the stranger. It is an opposition to the love for the stranger commanded thirty-six times in the Torah. It is an opposition to God: Jew hatred is God hatred, a hatred of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a hatred of the ancient teaching concerning the *absolute* holiness of the other human being that enters much of the world through the Jewish people. The *Why* of antisemitism goes to the *Why* of the humanities.

Does the God of Abraham have a place in the humanities, in the study of texts and traditions that took God seriously? Do we in the humanities take seriously the very questions that were a matter of life and death for the authors of those texts? I fear that we do not. I fear that we find ingenious ways of avoiding those questions by turning to such contrivances as critical theory, post-modernist theory, gender theory, race theory, narrative theory, and other theories that enable us to evade any *absolute* responsibility.

It is no secret that antisemitism, the hatred of those who remind us of our humanity, is on the rise in our society and that the place where it is most rampant and most fashionable is the college or university campus. This is a matter of fact. And it should be a matter of profound concern to those of us in the humanities because what begins with the Jews does not end with the Jews. Why not? Because antisemitism is not a form of racism; rather, racism is a form of antisemitism. Antisemitism goes to the heart of the meaning of *humanity* and the holiness of the human being. In the words of Emmanuel Levinas, antisemitism is "in its essence hatred for a man who is other than oneself—that is to say, hatred for the other man." If the horror of widespread, increasingly violent antisemitism is to be averted, it must take up a refusal on the part of the professoriate to be silent, beginning with the humanities. If it does not begin there, where will it begin? Or is the professoriate in the humanities okay with this trend?

The trend has been going on for quite some time, and it continues to increase. On April 3, 2006 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights noted, “Anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist propaganda has been disseminated on many campuses that include traditional antisemitic elements, including age-old anti-Jewish stereotypes.” On January 25, 2015, Naftali Bennett reported that in 2014 there had been a 400% increase in antisemitic incidents on American campuses, compared to the previous year. That same year, Aryeh K. Weinberg, Director of Research for the Bechol Lashon Institute for Jewish & Community Research, found that “more than 40% of students confirm anti-Semitism on their campus.” In 2014, and again in 2021, the Louis Brandeis Center noted that more than half of the Jewish students across college campuses in the US (54%) report either experiencing or witnessing antisemitism on their campuses and are afraid to identify as Jews. Among others who have published similar findings are the Anti-Defamation League, the Amcha Initiative, and the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy (ISGAP).

With regard to the University of Texas at Dallas, I can confirm these findings, albeit the evidence is anecdotal. A couple of weeks after the Israeli Apartheid Week (the word *Apartheid* is already an incitement to Jew hatred) sponsored by UT Dallas’s Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) in 2022, I happened to have a Shabbat dinner at which two UT Dallas Jewish students were present. They told me that that SJP students spat upon them when they showed up at the SJP’s Israeli Apartheid event. They said they were afraid to report it, because they believed nothing would be done and that there might be reprisals. I tried to warn the Briana Lemos, Director of the Student Organizations Center, about the speakers known for their incitement of Jew hatred whom the SJP hosted for that week, including Nerdeen Kiswani, Ali Abunimah, and Tarek Khalil. I shared with the UT Dallas police what the students shared with me about being afraid to report the incident. In both cases I was met with silence. Would the UT Dallas humanities faculty also remain silent if they had known? I wonder.

As the U.S. Civil Rights Commission’s report suggests, the antisemitism that pervades our campuses is generally cloaked in the self-righteous garb of anti-Zionism. Often compared to Nazi Germany, the Jewish State is typically tagged with every possible evil, from colonialism to the corona virus, from apartheid to human rights violation, from racism to misogyny. Whereas the Nazis deemed the existence of the Jew to be illegal, the campus anti-Zionists deem the existence of the Jewish State to be egregiously immoral. And what should be done with an egregiously immoral state?

Chief among the sources of the growing presence of anti-Zionist antisemitism on our campuses are the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) organization and SJP, which has chapters on more than two hundred campuses, including UT Dallas. These movements enjoy

increasing support not only among college students but also among college administrators and professors, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. On April 4, 2019, New York University announced its selection of the NYU chapter of SJP to receive the President's Service Award. How, exactly, did NYU's SJP achieve this distinction? By staging an annual Israeli Apartheid Week? By publicly denouncing the "Zionist entity" and its supporters as racist, colonialist, imperialist, and illegitimate? A week later Omar Barghouti, co-founder of BDS, which has the full endorsement of SJP, was barred from entering the United States because BDS includes five U.S. designated terrorist organizations in its membership. As in the case of those terrorist groups, the stated aim of Barghouti's BDS movement is the elimination of the Jewish State. Barghouti was on his way to speak at several venues, including NYU as a guest of SJP.

In January 2014 David Lloyd, Distinguished Professor of English at UC Riverside, organized an event featuring Omar Barghouti. Barghouti accused Israeli soldiers of "hunting children." He also accused "Israel and its lobby groups" of controlling Congress and the media. Students (in eight humanities classes) received credit for attending Barghouti's antisemitic diatribe. Here we have two age-old tropes of antisemitism: the blood libel and the world Jewish conspiracy. Drawing upon familiar methods of inciting Jew hatred, members of SJP chapters throughout the country have exploited social media, staged protests, encouraged violence, and promoted hate speech. In a tweet from April 9, 2013, Rutgers SJP expressed their support of BDS by declaring, "The world has stopped Nazism. It has stopped Apartheid. Now it must stop Zionism." The projection of "Nazi" on the Jew is a form not only of antisemitism but also of Holocaust denial. Having come to signify the most heinous of evils, the term *Nazi* is a designation attached to anyone who deserves annihilation. Where are the humanities professors? We shall see.

In their academic tolerance of SJP, anti-Zionists and advocates of Islamic Jihad often cloak themselves in the guise of academic freedom. Administrations that decry any hint of Islamophobia have treated hate speech toward Jews on the part of organizations like SJP as the legitimate exercise of free speech. An Amcha Initiative study from 2019 demonstrates that "faculty [are] a driving force" in the elevation of antisemitism on college campuses—particularly faculty in the humanities and social sciences.

Joseph Massad of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Columbia University, for example, insists that Israel has perpetrated "racist colonial violence for the last century against the Palestinian people." His colleague Gil Anidjar insists that Zionism is "colonial in the *strict* sense" and that "Israel is absolutely a colonial enterprise," where in today's academic circles, *colonial* is synonymous with *evil*. Marc Ellis, formerly of Baylor University, has claimed that "the

Palestinians are comparable to the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, awaiting annihilation.” These antisemites in humanities departments, who walk around in professors’ robes, do not argue or inform—they incite. Their incitement is an example of sheer “negationist anti-Zionism,” as Robert Wistrich calls it, “that delegitimizes and dehumanizes Israel” and is both “totalitarian in its political essence, and *theological* in its insistence that Israel was ‘born in sin.’” Which means: there is no redemption for the Jewish State other than annihilation.

Among the professional organizations in the humanities and social sciences that have entertained motions to support BDS and condemn not the policies but the existence of the Jewish State are the following:

African Literature Association
Middle East Studies Association
American Anthropological Association
American Historical Association
American Studies Association
Association for Asian American Studies
Association for Humanist Sociology
Critical Ethnic Studies Association
National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies
Native American and Indigenous Studies Association
National Women’s Studies Association
Modern Language Association

In July 2022 Cary Nelson and Joe Lockard published a report stating, “The MLA’s main governing body, the Executive Council, has joined with its Committee on Academic Freedom to endorse anti-Zionist complaints about the most widely adopted definition of contemporary antisemitism. Realising that the members would likely vote down their statement, the members of these two committees acted in secret, without notice and without membership approval.” Add to this the statement published in 2021 in support of the terrorist group Hamas, declaring that “the feminist cause is the Palestinian cause,” signed by more than 130 Women’s and Gender Studies programs throughout academia.

Nor are the Jewish scholars in the humanities immune to this sickness of the soul we call antisemitism. Neil Kressel notes that outside of Israel, Jews are acceptable only as long as they publicly condemn the Jewish State. Afraid of being counted among the “evil Jews,” says Manfred Gerstenfeld, the anti-Zionist Jews of academia “identify with the suffering of the Palestinians and belittle or explain their major crimes... . In effect these Jews say to the non-Jewish world:

“We are the good Jews.” And since we are Jews, we cannot be antisemitic. Thus in 2020, when the Israeli government considered (but never implemented) extending its civilian authority to Jewish communities in the West Bank, more than 400 professors of Jewish studies signed a statement denouncing Israel as an apartheid state, guilty of crimes against humanity. Yes, that was the language used by humanities professors: not the language of “we disagree with this policy” but of “apartheid state guilty of crimes against humanity,” clearly an incitement to Jew hatred. Among them were Steven Zipperstein of Stanford University, Susannah Heschel of Dartmouth, Zachary Braiterman of Syracuse University, Sidra Ezrahi DeKoven of Hebrew University, Amy Jill Levine of the University of Tennessee, Steve Jacobs of the University of Alabama, and Hasia Diner of NYU—all of whom are renowned professors in various areas of the humanities.

There are other examples among Jewish professors in the humanities. Stanford University historian Joel Beinin, for instance, asserts, “In my view the state of Israel has already lost any moral justification for its existence.” Among the most shocking is Michael Neumann, philosophy professor at Trent University, who maintains that any Jew who does not explicitly condemn Israel is complicit in its crimes, and its primary crime is its existence. “I am not interested in the truth, or justice, or understanding, or anything else,” he affirms. “If an effective strategy means that some truths about the Jews don’t come to light, I don’t care. If an effective strategy means encouraging reasonable anti-Semitism... , I also don’t care. If it means encouraging vicious racist anti-Semitism, or the destruction of the State of Israel, I still don’t care.” Yes: “reasonable anti-Semitism.” And we must not forget linguistics specialist Noam Chomsky, who claims that the Jewish state is “part of an international terror network that also includes Taiwan, Britain, Argentine neo-Nazis, and others” and is bent on world domination.

The sophisticated antisemites of academia are not a bunch of rabid nut cases or Aryan Nation types with an eighth-grade education who are holed up somewhere in Idaho. No, they are highly educated, highly cultured, highly sophisticated professors, many of whom hold positions in humanities programs. They are generally devotees of the arts, and well-versed in literature and philosophy. Some can even recite poetry from memory. And yet, in many cases they are given to the demonization of Israel and the Jews through an academic discourse calculated to project every evil onto the Jews. From the standpoint of these scholars, the Jews are not the victims of antisemitism—they are the source of it: they are the Nazis, the white supremacists, the colonialists, the racists, the mass murderers, and these self-righteous intellectuals will have no part of it. With this rise in antisemitism comes a decline in any sense of the absolute holiness of the other human being, a millennial teaching that the Jews represent by their

very presence in the world. Taking the divine spark within every human to be derived from one God, Judaism represents a view of God, world, and humanity that is diametrically opposed to anti-Zionist antisemitism, which necessarily views the Jew not as “other” but as “evil”: either the Jew is evil or the enlightened intellectual is evil.

To be reminded of our humanity is to be reminded of our responsibility to and for the other human being, both neighbor and stranger.

So what does all of this mean for the future of the humanities? Where lies the holiness of the human being in the study of the humanities? Is holiness even a category in the study of the humanities? Or are we so entrenched in ontological contexts and contingencies that we are blind to any metaphysical absolute such as *holiness*? If so, God help us. If such social and political constructs as race, class, and gender are adopted as first principles—as is the case in many of the fashionable theoretical circles in the humanities—there can be no room for any notion of the *holiness* of the human being. For holiness derives not from a social construct, which is ultimately rooted in power, but from a divine revelation, as embodied in Jewish teaching and tradition. And if the fashionable theories that dominate the humanities are to be promoted, then Jewish teaching must be opposed. The Jews and the teachings of their tradition, therefore, must be, at best, marginalized, if not eliminated.

My guess is that most professors in the humanities regard the story of the creation of Adam a myth of little note. But the question is not: Did it happen? But: What does it teach? According to the Jewish teaching hated by the antisemites who hate the Jews for reminding them of their humanity, the holiness of the human being derives from each human being’s connection to a single source, to God and to Adam. The human being not only has value but is *holy*, first, because each human being is an emanation of God, created in the image and likeness of the Holy One. Therefore, each human soul is spiritually connected to the other through its connection to a single Source.

Second, each person is physically tied to the other through his or her tie to Adam. According to the sages, God begins with one and not two, so that no one can say to another, “My side of the family is better than your side of the family”: there is only one side of the human family, with all the ethical obligations that come to bear in being part of the human family. To be sure, the Hebrew term for

“human being” is *ben adam*, literally a “child of Adam.” Just as each beam of light that radiates from a star is connected, through the star, to every other beam of light, so is each soul connected to every other soul through God, from whom every soul emanates. And each body is connected, through Adam, to every other body, which is itself an aspect of the soul. The ethical—which, I fear, has been lost in the study of the humanities—inheres in these connections, which transcend the contrivances of race, class, and gender—contrary to the fashions and fads that pervade many quarters of the humanities.

Without the ethical, the humanities will not only be bankrupt, but will continue to be an accomplice to the Jew hatred that has crept into academia. The ethical is revealed neither in social convention nor in philosophical pretension but in the face of the other human being, as Emmanuel Levinas has said. In the face of the other, we encounter the ethical demand as what he calls the “exigency of the holy,” which, through the face, is revealed from on high. Without that dimension of height and holiness, there is nothing higher about higher learning. And if this dimension of height is not to be found in the humanities, then nowhere in academia is the holiness of the human being, with all its ethical implications, to be found. Our students will continue to come to us hungry from a sense of meaning; as it stands, all too often, they ask us for bread, and we hand them a stone.

The Hebrew word for “humanities” is *limudei haruach*, the “study of the spirit” or “of the soul.” Is there a place in the future of the humanities here in the U.S. for the study of the soul created in the image and likeness of the Holy One? Is there a place in the study of the humanities for the holy, for the absolute that transcends the accidents of nature, social conventions, and political agendas? Is there a forum in which we may address the life of the soul and the hunger for meaning, without which the soul cannot live? Shall we have the courage to confront questions of God and humanity, good and evil, life and death? Such an endeavor does, indeed, require courage: to engage those questions, in my experience, means going against the grain of the prevailing, vacuous, and insidious theoretical fads. Nor can we ever engage those questions innocently: they implicate us in matters of why we live, what we stand for, and what we will refuse to stand for. Perhaps that is why we in the humanities shy away from such questions, which, from ancient times, comprise the “Jewish Question.” The questions that shape the humanities should be questions of why we live and why we die, of what we fear and what we fear *for*. But I fear that is no longer the case. If my fears are confirmed, where lies the future of the humanities?

I began this reflection with a scene from a movie. Let me end with another scene. In 1961, Stanley Kramer released his film based on one of the Nazi war crimes trials, the Judges’ Trial (yes! The *Judges’ Trial*): *Judgment at Nuremberg*. These were judges versed in the law,

in the great philosophical and literary traditions of Germany, traditions that have left their mark on all of us in the humanities. Witness Martin Heidegger, the unrepentant Nazi, to take just one example. One of the most powerful moments in the film comes during a scene in which the defense attorney tries to debunk the testimony of a German woman who had been testifying to the innocence of a Jewish man. When the woman was just a teen, the Jew had been falsely accused of making inappropriate advances upon her, convicted in court, and murdered *in accordance with the law*. The Nazi judges' defense counsel was in the midst of violently badgering the witness, when a defendant named Ernst Janning stood up and cried out to his attorney, "Are we going to do this *again!*?"

In 1946 Max Weinreich published a book titled *Hitler's Professors*, with profiles of the professors in the Third Reich who were complicit in the promotion of Jew hatred throughout Germany, many of whom were in the humanities. Indeed, by 1939 more than half of Germany's philosophy professors were members of the Nazi Party. And so I put the question to my fellow students and professors in the humanities: *Are we going to do this again?* A

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**MAPS
OF
MEANING**

The Subjunctive Grammar of Hope

Paul Strohm

WE ARE LIVING IN A WORLD and a time inhospitable to utopian thought, a time when all resources conducive to such thought are to be valued. Some of these resources are, fortunately, borne within language itself. These resources include the currently threatened devices of the subjunctive, that grammatical mood encouraging to the formation and expression of alternate social possibilities. In English, the subjunctive has been declining since the medieval period, and this essay returns to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in order to observe the subjunctive in a moment of relative flourishing, as a continuing and renewable source of imaginative refreshment and transformative social possibility.

But what is this utopian mode of which I speak? Karl Mannheim—a Weimar theoretician of onetime repute and continuing pertinence—says that “A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality in which it occurs.”¹ This state of mind “is oriented toward objects which do not exist in the actual situation.” He then sets a high standard for utopian thinking, limiting it to orientations

which “shatter . . . the order of things prevailing at the time.” But, in keeping with the diminished social imaginary of our own time, I’m ready to settle for something smaller in scale, a less demanding conceptual altitude, and to seek forms of expression that result in the construction of what may be called “micro” rather than “macro” utopias. These would be utopias that settle for small or temporary or wishful adjustments in the prevailing situation; with ambitions that might fall short of radical transformations, but are nevertheless revisionary of the situation at hand. (I’m thinking of Mannheim as, perhaps, Erving Goffman would have rewritten him, with attention to small adjustments and local effects.)

Which returns us to grammar, and sentence-level grammar, in fact. I am particularly interested in grammatical features that permit the construction of non-factual sentences, thus allowing the expression of wishes and hopes that are utopian, in the sense that they revolve around matters not yet realized or achieved in the world. Thomas Visser describes such sentences as possessing a “modality of non-fact,” concerning such matters as wishes, imagination, contingency, doubt, uncertainty, supposition, potentiality, and

¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York, 1968), p. 192.

other states of non-reality.² Linguists often, in a usage by which I (no linguist) am rather charmed, describe these formations as consisting in “an *irrealis* mood.” The linguist Inge Olssen underscores the utopian potential of these formations by attaching them to what she calls *nondum*-situations, the not-yet-realized or experienced, as contrasted with *iam*-situations, already realized or incorporated in the experience of the speaker.³ Non-factual/factual, *irrealis/realis*, *nondum/iam*: all offer ways of distinguishing between two modalities. One concerns the imagined, hypothetical, or unrealized; the other the observable, the verifiable, the already-achieved.

The subjunctive mood remains among our grammatical resources for the expression of non-factual or utopian utterance, and constitutes a primary resource of the alternate imagination. But, with the English subjunctive in decline since its Old English heyday, we would be in serious difficulty had it not been successively reinforced by other *irrealis* devices with which it is often associated, and that supplement its expression of the non-factual. Joining the subjunctive as ways of expressing unrealized or unproven possibilities are such devices as the use of modal auxiliaries (*may*, *might*, *should*); modal conjunctions (such as *if* or *as if*);

2 F. Th. Visser, *An Historical Syntax of the English Language*, Part II: Syntactical Units with One Verb (Leiden: 1966), p. 786.

3 Yngve Olsson, “The English Verb in Its Context,” *English Studies*, 40 (1959), 358-67 refers to the modally marked and modally zero forms in terms of speech situation: “There are cases in which the situation referred to by a sentence is something which has not yet been incorporated with the experience of the speaker [“God help you”] and there are others in which the situation already has [“Statistics often fails”]. We shall call the first type NONDUM-situations and the second type, IAM-situations . . . This classification is not simply the old distinction between “the subjunctive” and “the indicative”: it does not apply to the verb alone, but to the verb as connected with *the whole sentence*, and it is made in terms of *speech-situation* (p. 362).

modal adverbs (*perhaps*, *probably*); introductory formulae (*I desire that . . .*).⁴ All these devices, independently or in concert, wrest our attention from the here and now, and redirect our attention to the non-present or, more tendentiously, the “not-yet.” But let me start with the subjunctive itself, in a moment of its flourishing, as it serves to reformulate the oppressive world of actual circumstance.

David Lindsay’s sixteenth-century *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* suggests some of the ways in which a late medieval/early modern visionary and reformist agenda can be fostered by the subjunctive mood, and also by the use of that mood in coordination with other conditional formations.⁵ The play—a late medieval “morality play” in one of its fullest stages of elaboration—opens upon a society, and especially its least prosperous members, fallen victim to a rapacious church. Its well-intentioned but bumbling king is deceived and enthralled by lightly-disguised figures of vice and sensuous enticement. Just voices, such as Verity and Chastity, are isolated and in disarray. King Correction, the voice of Reformation, is awaited from abroad, but

4 Otto Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Grammar* (New York, 1965), pp. 265-68. For examples see Visser, *Historical Syntax*, vol. 2, pp. 761, 843; I have taken additional inspiration from Visser’s similar enumeration, *Historical Syntax*, vol. 2, p. 789. I believe Jespersen to be correct in his assertion that none of these devices is precisely “equivalent” to the subjunctive (p. 267), but they may be considered as alternative and roughly equivalent means to the same end. Already within the Old English period some of these devices were giving the subjunctive a serious run for its money. Quirk and Wrenn observed that in Old English “the subjunctive [by which, I take it, they mean a ‘subjunctive sense’] came to be expressed more and more by means of the ‘modal auxiliaries’, *willan*, *sculan*, *magan*.” *An Old English Grammar* (London, 1955), p. 84. They make an additional point, important to my following analysis, which is that various devices expressive of unrealized or conditional situations may be used in coordination with the subjunctive, in order to supplement or enhance a conditional sense.

5 David Lindsay, “Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estates,” *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford, 2000).

must, upon arrival, seek for virtuous followers and recruit support from moribund institutions of governance and the demoralized estates of the realm. Extracted from the specifics of history, this text references a proto- or pre-comic situation of the sort Northrop Frye described so well in his essay on the “Mythos of Spring,” in which repression prevails, and the stifling hand of an aged society prevents insurgency or innovation.⁶ Vital to this society’s comic regeneration is a place, and a means, for the expression of imagined transformation. Within this vexed situation arises Johnne the Common-Weill, as the voice of indigenous reform. In a series of visionary speeches, he expounds a series of steps to be taken, beginning with an end to common thievery, even if practiced by an entrenched elite:

*War [were] I ane king, my Lord, be Gods wounds,
 Quha [Who] ever held common theifis within
 thair bounds,
 Quhairthrow [By which] that dayly leilmen
 nicht be wrangit [wronged],
 Without remeid [remedy] thair chiftanis suld
 [should] be hangit,
 Quhiddel [whether] he war ane kniche, ane
 lord, or laird . . .
 (ll. 2592-96).*

This speech begins with an inversion, *War I for if I war*. This inversion implies the modal conjunction *if*, and does its work without requiring its presence. Such inversions are preferred for counterfactual, or at least extremely conjectural, situations, as this one most certainly is. The tenuousness or counter-factuality of the situation is enhanced by two additional devices. When used with the singular subject *I*, *war* is a subjunctive expression of a non-fact. One could imagine Richard II in 1399 or Henry VI in 1461 saying, in the indicative, *am I a king?* or *was I a king?* since his objective situation

admits of some doubt in the matter. But the wholly imaginary character of Johnne’s kingship—he is certainly no king—is obviously better served by the subjunctive.

Johnne’s speech depends on three different and conjoined devices: (1) inversion, (2) the creation of a conditional sentence, (3) employment of the subjunctive *war* in its apodosis or main clause. [The past tense of *war* also has subjunctive rather than temporal force, but I’ll say more about that presently.] Together, these devices convey a hypothetical state of mind that, in its extreme conditionality, frees him to “think like a king,” to imagine innovative regal action and possibility. Carrying on, in the next line, he imagines a situation in which a lord *held* or protected common thieves—the subjunctivity of *held* is signaled by its use of the past form to express a present condition. He then extends the hypothetical character of his utterance by means of two modal auxiliaries—expressing the possibility that loyal men *nicht* be wronged and the hope that the malefactors *suld* be hanged—*suld*, in this instance, signaling a consequence as yet unrealized but earnestly desired to happen. Finally, he returns to the subjunctive, to express an unlikely but desirable outcome, that punishment would be obtained irrespective of social class, whether the abusing party *war* a knight or lord or laird. Here we have, in short, a visionary moment—its idealized character thoroughly signaled by the rich array of subjunctives and complementary devices in which it is framed.

A few exchanges later he is at it again, this time employing the same inversion, bolstered by a preterite subjunctive, introducing a conditional sentence in which he imagines a denial of contributions to Rome. Here he follows with two modal auxiliaries, the first *sould* expressing a sense of determination, of what he “ought” to do, and the second *sould* a sense of necessity,

⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 163-85.

that in this instance no penny get to Rome:

*Ware I ane king, sir, be Coks Passioun,
I sould gar mak [should certainly make] ane
proclamatoun,
That never ane penny sould go to Rome at all.
(2846-48)*

Pauper, a representative of Scotland's beleaguered poor, now seconds his anti-clerical views, and in a similar manner. Already reduced to poverty by Church exactions, Pauper refuses to tithe to a Parson who does not preach. The Parson asks if he expects to be relieved of his obligation to tithe, and Pauper replies,

*Ye, be Gods breid [bread], war I ane king.
(l. 2956)*

Asked whether his intention is to deprive the prelates, he replies that he would allow them to keep their foundation, but then turns to a critique of worldly kings who do not meet their obligation to restrain the clergy:

*Ware I ane king, be Coks deir Passioun,
I sould richt sone mak reformatioun.
(ll. 2961-62)*

One further observation: In each of these instances, Johne's and Pauper's conditional self-insertion into the position of imaginary kingship is accompanied by blasphemy: "be Gods wounds" . . . "be Coks Passioun" . . . "be Gods breid" . . . "be Coks Passioun." I suppose these blasphemies might express nothing more than pent-up exasperation, in the vein of modern English "for God's sake," but some other explanation seems necessary to explain the invariability of this association of rough oath and wishful dream. In each instance, the speaker has employed the subjunctive to forecast a desired state of affairs, and thus casts himself as a kind of imaginative petitioner. But his petition remains

unattached, unsecured by address to anybody in particular. Language allows these petitions to be effectively—borrowing a grammatical term—"intransitive," to possess or pass over to no object beyond themselves. (Suspending their illocutionary force or necessary consequence, they don't expect an answer.) Yet petitions surely work better if they have an object, and so these rough oaths—although accompanied by, or excused by, rough negation—posit a phantom object, a divinity somewhere on the scene. Perhaps this stretches a point, but it seems to me that the prevalence of sacrilegious oaths in proximity to utopian imaginings represents an attempt to take a wish generated within a language system and to attach it to something extra-linguistic and "real." In this conception, the wounds of Christ are invoked (under the excuse of negation) as a pledge of wishes' possible fulfillment.

The *Satyre* will finally grant these wishes, not from below but, indeed, as an exceptional and divine gift. The twin agencies of imagining and wishing, within grammatically-enabled structure, have created a pressure of expectation within the play, leading to a future deliverance. (Which, at the end of this play, will indeed occur with the arrival of Divyne Correctioun and the institution of a new and regenerated regime.)

**All these devices wrest
our attention from the
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the 'not yet.'**

“Were I a king” introduces a host of wishful literary projections of a transformed present or—pretty much the same thing—an ideal future. Sancho Panza’s island comes to mind, as an alternate rendition of regenerative top-down rule. There is, of course, a frailty in such imaginings, traceable, perhaps, to the grammatical forms of non-fact or counter-fact within which they are hatched and upon which they rely, and they often necessarily cancel or undo themselves prior to any kind of concrete realization. Think of that mini-utopia in *The Tempest* when the good Gonzalo allows himself a subjunctively-couched dream:

*Had I plantation of this isle, my lord . . .
 And were the king on't, what would I do? . . .
 I' the commonwealth I would by contraries
 Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
 Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
 Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
 And use of service, none; contract, succession,
 Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
 No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
 No occupation, all men idle, all;
 And women too, but innocent and pure;
 No sovereignty—
 Sebastian. Yet he would be king on't.
 Antonio. The latter end of his
 commonwealth forgets the beginning.
 (II, 1, ll. 144-59)⁷*

These jibers have a point. In his flights, including the self-abolition of his own post, Gonzalo does indeed forget his beginning, that condition of imaginatively untrammelled power that allows him to think hypothetically in the first place, that condition of “subjunctive kingship.” But remember too that Gonzalo, giving himself over to the magical conditions of an isle

⁷ *The Tempest* (Riverside Shakespeare, 1974).

that will not allow him to “believe things certain,” is included among the circle of those finally blessed.

I haven’t paused over what is perhaps the most striking aspect of the constructions seen so far: their modal use of the past tense, the predicative force of *were/war*. Part of the meaning here is derived from the totality of the statement; it would retain a hypothetical character even if the indicative “was” were substituted for the subjunctive “were”: “was I a king” or “if I was a king.” Think about the popular song, “If I were a carpenter and you were a lady/ Would you marry me anyway, would you have my baby?” In conditions of performance, it is often sung, “If I was a carpenter,” without complete loss of hypothetical effect. Even when the indicative “was” is substituted for the subjunctive “were,” the unexpected past tense continues to cast the statement in an *irrealis* and effectively subjunctive mode.⁸

The importance of introducing the past tense into these present-time situations—whether marked as “were” or “was”—is exactly that it makes no sense. He’s not saying, after all, that he *used to be* a carpenter; he’s saying, should he be revealed to be, or should he decide to become one. The “were”/“was” here functions merely to disrupt the statement’s temporal coherence. But what is the virtue, or the importance, of this disruption to the initiation of visionary or alternative thought? The answer rests in the fact that the disclosure of hypothetical or future possibility is abetted by anything that unsettles a statement’s temporal coherence.

⁸ In a debate that reaches beyond my own expertise, some grammarians have doubted that the introduction of a discordant past tense to refer to a present or future action constitutes a subjunctive construction. See Sylvia Chalker and Edmund Weiner, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (Oxford, 1994). All I can say is that it works for me.

But *why*? How is it that *irrealis* modes advance their purposes by messing time around, destroying our sense of time's coherence or orderly flow?

We sometimes permit ourselves the illusion that time moves in an orderly and chronological flow, from left to right, and past to future, with the past irrevocably over and the future having not yet arrived. This sense of time carries us toward the future, but also seals us from the future, which, after all, hasn't happened yet. But this seal can be broken, and access to the future facilitated, by a view of time that treats past, present, and future as simultaneously present, as rattling around and contending in the disordered moment of the "now." Nobody has explained this view of temporality better than Augustine, with his reminder that, not only may past and future be discovered within the present, but that our *only* access to future, or to past, is within the fleeting moment of the present:

... It is incorrect to say, "There are three times, past, present, and future." Perhaps ["fortasse"] it would be more appropriate to say, "There are three times: the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future." ["*praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris.*"]⁹

Augustine goes on to assault the linearity of time and tense, arguing that the past and the future are accessed only within a "now" that is so ephemeral as itself to permit no secure access.

Dislocations of ordered temporal succession serve as reminders of the heterogeneity and temporal incoherence of the now, and they also enhance the possibility of access to the future and the past within the moment of the now. The

9 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 11 (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classics, 2016), p. 230.

effect of a deliberately distorted temporality is, in Jespersen's terminology, "to denote unreality at the present time."¹⁰ Or, as Huddleston and Pullum put it, "to express modal remoteness as well as time"—a state of remoteness and temporal uncertainty in which anything can happen.¹¹

I'm proposing a paradoxical grammatical situation in which future access is best gained not by the use of future tenses, but rather by a deliberate jumbling of tenses, of which the most typical examples involve not the future but an inappropriate predicate. As a short example, consider the Tin Woodsman's "If I only *had* a heart." He doesn't actually want one in the past. He doesn't want to be a guy who *used to* have one. He wants one now, and in the future. His long-deferred wish comes true in the film's unfolding action, and he will get one. But he needed the subjunctive to frame his wish and stake its claim upon the future.

In Lindsay's satiric play, we see the subjunctive hard at work, opening areas of utopian possibility. In the medieval period, such work proceeds in a variety of literary works and genres, of which I'll pause to consider one more: a collection of political poems found in a manuscript also containing a version of *Piers Plowman* and popularly called "the Digby lyrics," after their seventeenth-century owner and collector, Sir Kenelm Digby.¹² These poems were composed in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, in the first conflicted years of the always-precarious Lancastrian succession following the deposition of King

10 Jespersen, *Philosophy of Grammar*, p. 266.

11 Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002) p. 88. Or, as Visser has it, employing the predicate modally and without relation to any particular time-sphere institutes a state of unreality (pp. 761-62).

12 Quotations are from Helen Barr's authoritative edition and commentary, *The Digby Poems* (Exeter University Press, 2009).

Richard II in 1399. The poet, a committed Lancastrian, offers poetics of hopeful anticipation, which entails his frequent reliance on the subjunctive, appropriate to a set of as-yet unrealized ambitions for peace and prosperity within the realm.

Whole poems are cast in what might be considered a subjunctive spirit, in which states of hopeful wishfulness contend with lingering unease, and are imagined ultimately, but not certainly, to prevail. One such poem, apparently written upon the accession of Henry V, second of the three Lancastrian kings, is “God Kepe Oure King and Sauē the Croune.” In this poem the subjunctives “kepe” and “sauē” express the poem’s yearning that the still-fragile dynasty might thrive, its sense of *may* God keep the king, and *may* the crown be saved. The poem celebrates the crown as a physical object as well as a more abstract symbol of majesty, hailing it as a symbol of unity, but a unity ever threatened. Given the poem’s anxious uncertainties, the subjunctive is deployed both as a vehicle of wishes and hopes, and also of lingering unease:

*Yif sercle, and floures, and riche stones
Were each a pece fro other flet [separated],
Were the crowne broken ones,
Hit were ful hard ayen to knet [knit].*

Such a division of the crown has not happened, but the subjunctive “were . . .” allows the poet to contemplate a possibly—though not certainly—dire instance. Yet, ready to hand, the subjunctive also allows vigorous imaginative pushback, as when, later in the poem, God is called upon to unbend his bow of wrath and to preserve the king:

*Pray we God his bowe of wraththe vnbende,
And saue the king and kepe the crowne.*

Subjunctives, in the fifteenth century, are

no longer as clearly marked as in Old English or early Middle English. Subjunctive and active forms frequently intermingle, with decisions about subjunctive force resting on context and interpretation. This poem, like most of its manuscript companions, generates what might be called a subjunctive atmosphere. As in these lines about God’s stewardship of human affairs:

*God geueth his doom [judgment] to alle
kynges that be,
As a God in erthe, a kyng hath might. . .
Men do in derk, God seeth in light:
Synne, morthere [murder], derne [secret] tresoun
Not may be hyd fro Goddis sight.
To ryghtwys iuge God geueth the crowne.*

These lines may be read either subjunctively (*May* God give his judgment to all kings, *may* God give the crown to the righteous judge). Or, more encouragingly, they may be read actively or indicatively (God gives his judgment to all kings, God gives the crown to the righteous judge). My suggestion is that this indeterminacy gives us a better poem, a poem in which subjunctivity allows the poet to hover between certainty and uncertainty, the certainty that God has matters routinely in hand, versus a state of affairs in which the position of the righteous judge has yet to be secured.

Certainly, the poet’s wishes for his emerging yet still-vulnerable nation are clear, and his poem ends in a blizzard of subjunctively-couched hopes and wishes:

*God lete this kingdom neuere be lorn [lost]. . .
God yeve vs space of repentance,
Good lyf, and deuocioun.
And God kepe in thy gouerance
Oure comely king, and saue the crowne.*

Here the subjunctive underpins, and supports, a poem of balanced yet hopeful political speculation.

A final note on “were I a king.” Of

course, hypothetical kingship is not the only prologue to utopian thinking. Nor is the hypothetical thinking it enables necessarily utopian in effect. A grammatical structure is like a highway: its planners and builders don't necessarily get to say what kinds of vehicles are going to move along it. Miri Rubin has pointed out a thirteenth-century French instance to me where the thirteenth-century speaker says that he if were king he would immediately institute a pogrom. And other kinds of hypothetical recastings, some quite forlorn, can occupy the place of non-factual speculation. I'm once more thinking, for example, about Shakespeare's *Richard II*, with Richard simultaneously sure and unsure that he is a king at all. At the point of his enforced resignation, Richard laments,

*O that I were a mockery king of snow,
Standing before the sun of Bullingbrook,
To melt myself away in water-drops!*
(IV.1, ll. 260-2)

Richard is an antic truth-teller, with regard to the dissolution of his royal aura and authority, resorting to the subjunctive in order to express a wish for self-obliteration. This wish springs from a distress as great as that of Marlowe's Faustus, who opts for the imperative mood, albeit still in the expression of an unrealized (and unrealizable) self-obliterating wish:

*O soul, be chang'd into little water-drops,
And fall into the ocean—ne'er be found.*¹³

Of course, the Middle Ages had other, and differently premised, avenues of grammatical access to the future. I am thinking especially of the powers of prophecy and its enlistment of an active and indicative mood to secure its vision of

the future. When I first started looking into this subject, and the particular contributions of prophetic discourse to a regenerative social imaginary, I callowly expected to discover the voice of prophecy closely allied to the subjunctive and other *irrealis* formations. Not so. Adhering to the indicative mood, prophecy stays as far as possible from acknowledgements of the invented or the insubstantial. Prophecy, no matter how outlandish, needs to sound sure of itself, to express confidence about what will happen. The subjunctive or *irrealis* is the mood of wishes, hopes, dreams . . . many of which turn out to be impractical or unrealizable, and possessed of a charm intimately associated with their implausibility. Whereas prophecy, by contrast, is *realis* all the way, its choice of the indicative solidifying its relation to the observable, the verifiable, to that which is certain to be achieved. And so prophecies about the future are realized in simple, declarative statements, not about what *might be*, but about what *is the case*. To allow a subjunctive to creep in would undermine their very purposes.

By way of brief illustration, here is William Langland, one version of whose *Piers Plowman* shares the Digby manuscript with the political poem we have just been discussing. Here Langland imagines a reformist king, if not Christ-Roi himself, straightening things out in a local monastery:

*Ac [but] ther shal come a king and confesse
yow religiouses,
And bete yow, and the Bible telleth, for
brekyng of youre rule,
And amende monyals [nuns], monkes and chanons,
And put hem to hir penaunce.*¹⁴

¹⁴ In this case, the B rather than Digby's C text. William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995), X, 316-19.

¹³ www.fulltextarchive.com/pdfs/Dr-Faustus.pdf, p. 82.

No watery wishes here, but a clear and unambiguous statement of expectation of events certain to come.

Rather than discovering itself in the ruins of the time continuum, prophecy accepts the linearity of time, accepts it as a medium that it has no wish to disturb or shatter, but rather to adapt it to its own confident purposes. Without challenging the premise of continuous time, prophecy seeks, rather, to steal a march, to fast-forward through time, or to leap to a subsequent stage in its unfolding. The prophet, in other words, needs the progression of time, in order to secure its history of that which will be revealed in the future. Linear time is co-opted to serve prophecy's program of persuasion, of an inescapable progression from present to

future. Its job is to persuade us to share in its self-certitude, the certainty with which it knows things.

Other grammatically based devices for influencing the future co-exist with the subjunctive sense of future possibility and the prophetic claim to know where everything is heading. The Digby poems are, for example, simply loaded with imperatives, the most urgent of the *irrealis* modes, with their insistence on what must happen without delay. And space will not permit an investigation of the future perfect and the confidence with which it describes future states which "will have been." We need them all, these modalities of speculative and hopeful thought, the precariously-surviving subjunctive prominent among them. A

The People's Choice

Political Legitimacy in the United States and World History

Al Martinich and Tom Palaima

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LEGITIMACY of government are relatively rare in the United States except in university departments of political science, which deal with abstractions. Legitimacy becomes an urgent, practical issue when sizeable numbers of 'we the people' fear that our political parties are irreconcilable and that the government's functioning is malfunctioning.

In the history of the United States over the last two hundred and fifty years, the two great occasions for national reflection on legitimacy preceded the War of Independence and the Civil War. The current divisions in the country are now a third occasion. Two years into Joseph Biden's presidency roughly two out of every three Republicans polled profess that Biden is not the legitimate president of the United States.¹ During a Senate Committee hearing on the nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson for the Supreme Court, Senator Ben Sasse asked Brown Jackson whether she thought the

¹ See Ben Kamisar, "Two-thirds of Republicans still don't believe Biden was elected legitimately," *Meet the Press Blog*, Oct. 25, 2022, online at [nbcnews.com](https://www.nbcnews.com). The Texas Republican Party approved a platform rejecting "the certified results of the 2020 Presidential election, and we hold that acting President Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. was not legitimately elected by the people of the United States." Azi Paybarah and David Montgomery, "Texas Republicans Approve Far-Right Platform Declaring Biden's Election Illegitimate," *New York Times*, June 19, 2022, online at [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).

Supreme Court was legitimate.² Not many decades ago that would have been like asking whether the US is a democracy. No longer. The Heritage Foundation published a long article with the title "America is a Republic, Not a Democracy."³ In September 2022, Chief Justice John Roberts insisted that disagreement with the Supreme Court's decisions should not result in questioning its

² GOP Senator to Jackson, "Do You Think The Supreme Court Is Legitimate?" *Forbes Breaking News*, March 27, 2022. Youtube.com. Sasse reported that Democrats say the Supreme Court "leans into extreme partisanship" and that such comments "undermine the public's trust" in the Court. As we were writing this in May 2022, *Politico* published a draft opinion of an impending Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* ("Read Justice Alito's initial draft abortion opinion which would overturn *Roe v. Wade*," *Politico*, May 2, 2022, [politico.com](https://www.politico.com)). The immediate reaction by numerous media commentators was that with this decision, the Court may lose its legitimacy. Although that reaction may be too strong, demonstrations against the decision have already begun. Also, the announcement of the attorney general of Michigan that she will not enforce a state law prohibiting abortion is evidence that she does not accept the decision... (Beth LeBlanc, "Attorney General Nessel refuses to use office to defend Michigan's abortion ban," *The Detroit News*, April 7, 2022, [detroitnews.com](https://www.detroitnews.com)).

³ Bernard Dobski, "America is a Republic, Not a Democracy," June 19, 2020, [heritage.org](https://www.heritage.org). The core of this article is a shabby piece of reasoning. The author asserts that the US is either a republic or a pure democracy; he then denies that the US is a pure democracy because the word 'republic' appears in the Constitution but not the word 'democracy', and further that the Federalist Papers criticize the Athenian and Roman democracies. The argument, we point out, commits the fallacy of false dichotomy. In addition to pure democracies, there are constitutional democracies, representative democracies, democracies with bills of rights, and democratic republics; and the author does not treat these alternatives.



Figure 1. East wall of Chamber B of the Yazilikaya Hittite Rock Sanctuary near Hattusa (13th century BCE) depicting in a niche the God Sharruma (the Hurrian Mountain God and son of the Thunder God Teshub) embracing Great King Tudhaliya IV (r. c. 1237–1209 BCE). The god has his left arm over the king's shoulders while holding the king's right wrist. He wears a short tunic and has pointed shoes. The king wears a long coat and carries a sword and a *lituus* or 'royal shepherd's crook,' a kind of scepter. Creative Commons / Wikimedia.

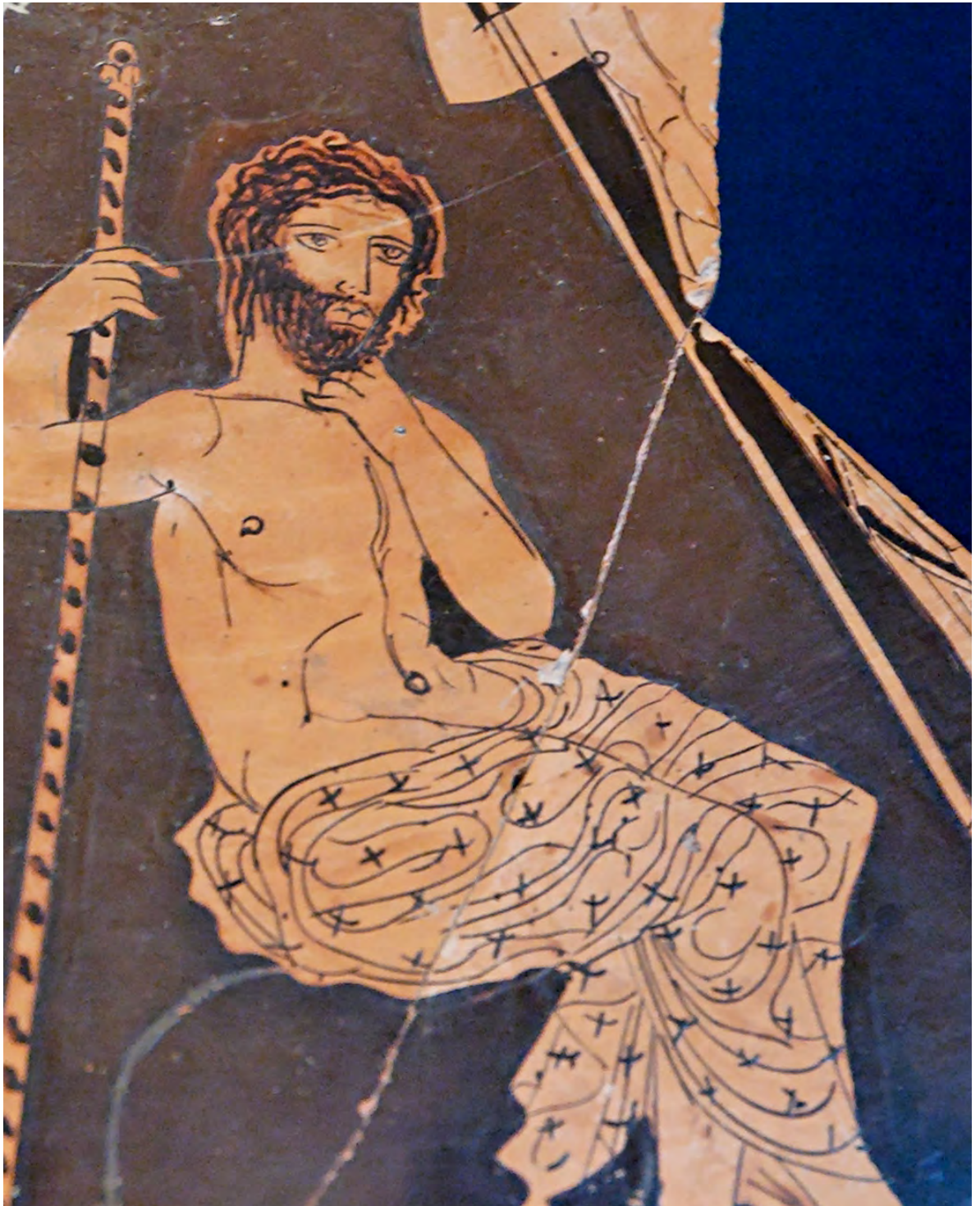


Figure 2. Agamemnon seated on a rock and holding his scepter, identified from an inscription. Fragment of the lid of an Attic red-figure lekanis by the circle of the Meidias Painter, 410–400 BC. From the Santa Lucia district in Taranto. Stored in the Museo Nazionale Archeologico in Taranto (Italy). Public Domain / Wikimedia.

The fatal weakness in social contract theories is that no one remembers ever making such a contract.

legitimacy.⁴ His comment is a red herring, because the Court's legitimacy cannot be preserved by fiat.

The legitimacy of Congress is also suspect. Fewer than 25% of Americans think that they can trust Congress to do what is right all or most of the time.⁵ We do not have polling results on the question of whether Congress can do anything that is for the non-partisan common good.

For thousands of years, political legitimacy was grounded in some transcendent entity. A good example is the relationship between the Hittite kings of the second millennium BCE and their patron divinity (Figure 1). In traditional Chinese society, the Mandate of Heaven supposedly constituted legitimacy.⁶ (The Chinese believed that heaven was divine, but they did not believe that the divine was a personal being.) What can be more compelling than a command from heaven? The authority of the Mandate of Heaven is baked into its descriptive name. A mandate from heaven must be obeyed. Each emperor had the Mandate of Heaven, and his subjects accepted him. However, if the subjects thought that his rule was intolerable, they could revolt; and a successful revolution proved that the emperor had lost the

mandate. Defeat was the sign of losing the mandate. The sign of heaven's new mandate was the victory of the revolution's leader. The Chinese had no institution to declare legitimacy other than the emperor himself.

For the Abrahamic religions, the sovereignty of God was indicated by his usual epithet, *Lord*. The legitimate human leader was chosen by God. The sign of legitimacy varied. It could be charisma as it was for Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad, or inheritance as it was for the kings of Israel and Judah (with allowances made for special cases; for example, God rescinded Saul's kingship and bestowed it on David).

The ancient Greeks appealed to Zeus, himself called in the Homeric epics *anaks* 'supreme king' of men and gods, as the legitimizer of 'Zeus-nourished kings', and the protector and validator of true justice in court decisions (Hesiod, *Works and Days*). Rulers in the Atreid dynasty of the royal house of Mycenae, like Agamemnon in Homer's *Iliad*, manifested their divinely gifted authority by a *skēptron* (scepter) fashioned by the craftsman god Hephaestus (Figure 2).⁷ Famously, the goddess Athena set the precedent for the formerly aristocratic council known as the Areopagus to focus on homicide decisions, even as its membership was becoming democratized by the inclusion of former central officers of state known as *archons*. And Athena herself (as a ruse to convince the susceptible

4 Robert Barnes and Michael Karlik, "Roberts says Supreme Court will reopen to public and defends legitimacy," *Washington Post*, Sept. 10, 2022, at [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com). The obvious interpretation is that citizens will no longer accept many of those decisions. The decisions will be inflicted on them.

5 "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2022," June 6, 2022, Pew Research Center, [pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org).

6 H.G. Creel's "The Mandate of Heaven" in *The Origins of Statecraft in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, 81-100.

7 Mait Kolv, "Basileus, Tyrannos and Polis. The Dynamics of Monarchy in Early Greece," *Klio* 98:1 (2016) 1-89. T. Palaima, "The Ideology of the Ruler in Mycenaean Prehistory: Twenty Years after the Missing Ruler," in Robert Koehl ed., *Studies in Aegean Art and Culture*. Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press, 2016, 147-149 *et passim*.

populace that he was her choice) was in the chariot that led the powerful aristocrat Peisistratus into Athens in his second attempt at tyranny.⁸ Such theories worked in practice because the *de facto* government had the power to enforce the judgment that God had given them the right to govern. One advantage of the theory of the divine right of kings was that it included the claim that the king (or queen with supreme power) was God's "vicegerent," that is, God's official interpreter of what he commanded.⁹

If a government became contested in the greater Greek world, the divine will became obscure. In such cases, it was normal for people to appeal to the oracle at Delphi to settle the controversy. Herodotus reported such a case about the kingdom of Lydia. Gyges, the bodyguard of the Lydian king Candaules, staged a palace coup by murdering the king and marrying Candaules' complicit widow. Gyges became the *de facto* king. But the dead king's supporters did not accept Gyges and threatened a counter coup. Eventually, "Gyges' faction came to an agreement with the rest of the Lydians that if the oracle elected him to be king of the Lydians, then he would serve as king.... The oracle indeed did elect him and Gyges in this way became king."¹⁰ Appealing to an oracle of Apollo meant that Apollo, not those who sought his counsel through the oracle, had responsibility for making the decision. However, as Herodotus' story makes clear, both groups of Lydians had to be willing to

accept the decision of a third party. The effectiveness of the oracle's decision depended on *acceptance* by the people, not divine revelation.

Even when everyone agrees about who the true god is, a person's judgment about the veracity of a supposed divine revelation often seems to be a consequence of what the person already wanted to be true. The Israelite King Ahab wanted to attack Aram. He consulted his prophets. Four hundred of them said Yahweh had assured him of victory. The only prophet to disagree was Micaiah, who refused to reveal what Yahweh had revealed to him for fear of Ahab. Under coercion, he said that Israel would be defeated. Ahab imprisoned him and attacked Aram. But Israel was defeated, and Ahab killed in battle (1 Kings 22; see also Jeremiah 28). Similarly, Socrates, listening to his *daimōn*, was the sole juror who opposed convicting the generals on trial after the battle of Arginusae (406 BCE). His reputation suffered, but the people later realized their mistake.¹¹

Another problem with supernatural or preternatural revelation is identifying the source of divine authority. The ready answer—that God has authority because he is God—is uninformative at best. What is it about being God that makes him a moral or political authority? Goodness would not explain it. Many good people lack authority and would not be good rulers even if they had authority. And many people with authority are neither good nor need to be. Another answer given by Jewish and Christian theologians is that God has authority because creation is his property. This answer is also inadequate. *Pace* Locke, property depends on the laws and the government that protect it. Without

8 Claudia Zatta "Making Historical Mythical: The Golden Age of Peisistratus," *Arethusa* 43:1 (2010) 21-62.

9 Peter Newman Brooks, "The Theology of Thomas Cranmer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David Steinmetz. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 155.

10 Herodotus, *The Histories* 1.13, translation by Palaima. For more about the Gyges coup, see *The Landmark Herodotus*, ed. Robert B. Strassler. New York: Anchor Books, 2009: 9, 810-815.

11 Interested parties should read three chapters in Fiona Hobden, Christopher Tuplin eds., *Xenophon: Ethical Principles and Historical Enquiry*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012: 161-212, 243-268, 269-306.

government, one may possess or control something; but it is not property. Thomas Hobbes rightly rejected goodness and property as possible answers. His own answer was that God's authority comes from his "irresistible power." While his answer has the merit of grounding authority in something that is not normative, few people genuinely believe that might makes right.

The importance of acceptance can be gleaned from the story of Solon. With the *polis* (city-state) of Athens beset with extreme wealth disparity that had driven most small landowners into a form of perpetual debt slavery, a condition that had led in other city-states to the rise of strong men, whom the Greeks called *turannoi* or 'tyrants', Solon was called upon by the conflicting factions to formulate propositions to restore order. In the Herodotean account (1.29.1-2), immediately after enacting his reforms, Solon left Athens on travels for ten years "really to avoid being forced to change any of the laws which he had passed. For the Athenians could not do this themselves, since they were constrained by mighty oaths to use for ten years whatever laws Solon had given them." Solon's reforms were good, if controversial, propositions, but they only became law once the Athenians accepted them.¹²

We think the lesson of the stories about Solon and Gyges can be generalized. Not a god, or an oracle, or a wise person, creates legitimacy, but rather acceptance by the people creates legitimacy. Solon, the oracle, and divine instructions performed their function because the people accepted them—in Solon's case constrained further by Solon's own politically adept absence of ten

years—as definitive. Individuals may object to this idea because they think that the U.S. Constitution made American government legitimate (Figure 3). But the Constitution cannot be the ultimate determinant of legitimacy, because the government of the United States already existed and was legitimate under the Articles of Confederation. A reasonable account of the creation of the United States is the acceptance by many American colonists of political independence from Great Britain, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. We believe that a government is legitimate only when and only so long as the people it governs accept it. A powerful entity that controls people by force alone is a *de facto* government, not a *de jure* one. However, it can become legitimate if those people come to accept it.

In the seventeenth century, various theorists tried to explain legitimacy without appealing to a god, prophet, oracle, or any other transcendent entity. Thus, the favored concept became the social contract. But theorists could not agree on who the parties of the contract were. English parliamentary leaders maintained that a contract between the king (or queen) and the people established legitimacy, while Hobbes thought the contract was made by the people themselves and that a king or other sovereign was a creation of the contract, and Locke's view was generally the same.

The fatal weakness in social contract theories is that no one remembers ever making such a contract. Nonetheless, contract theory did not die. Eighteenth-century French revolutionaries believed that a legitimate government was one in which the laws are the will of the people. Since one can imagine that ignorant, resentful people could make very bad laws, the revolutionaries appealed to Jean Jacques Rousseau's theory of the "general will," which is the will of the people who have the

12 As additional laws were introduced over time, they were backed up by the false assertion that Solon had prescribed them. See: B.M. Lavelle, review of Josine Blok, A.P.M.H. Lardinois eds., *Solon of Athens: New Historical and Philological Approaches* Leiden: Brill, 2006 in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, April 26, 2007: bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2007/2007.04.26 .

right knowledge and good intentions. The theory is lacking in one crucial respect: It gives no criteria for identifying those who have the relevant knowledge and intentions. This is the problem of the subjectivity of divine right theory brought down to earth.

The blood-soaked failure of the French Revolution revived a conservative view. Joseph de Maistre reminded people that monarchy was divinely sanctioned and the only stable form of government. He thought that the Bourbon pretender, the heir of the executed King Louis XVI, was the legitimate king of France and that the Pope was the ultimate earthly authority. That was his opinion, but most people had other opinions.

Theorists returned to explorations of the idea of a contract. Implicit in the idea of a contract is acceptance of it. We think that acceptance alone—acceptance by the people to be governed—is sufficient for legitimacy. The etymology of *acceptance* is helpful for understanding the concept. To accept something is to take it willingly. In doing so, one acquires certain duties and benefits. This process usually involves reciprocity, a continuing ‘give and take.’ Each citizen wants the government to provide physical protection against both internal dangers and external enemies. How much more government ought to provide depends on many factors, such as citizens’ attitudes, the society’s resources, and physical circumstances.

If we are right, phrases like “accept the legitimacy of” are redundant. Sentences

that use both *legitimate* and *accept* (or their cognates) can be paraphrased without loss of meaning by eliminating one of the words. For example, “Some people no longer accept the legitimacy of political institutions of the USSR,” may be paraphrased as “People no longer accept the political institutions of the USSR” or as “Political institutions of the USSR are no longer legitimate.”

Acceptance covers a broad spectrum of attitudes, both stronger and weaker ones: promotion, approval, consent, acquiescence, and sufferance, aka ‘putting up with.’ Our descriptions of the various attitudes are not definitions—political realities are too amorphous or complicated to be captured by definitions. Our descriptions are approximations.

Promotion, the strongest attitude of acceptance, is exerted by satisfied government employees, large and active memberships in political parties, public policy interest groups, and all others who contribute to the well-functioning of the government.

The attitude one level down from promotion is *approval*. Approval is exhibited by those who regularly vote in elections, pay taxes, and otherwise strengthen laws for everyone by keeping them themselves.

Consent is expressed by people who conform

Figure 3. Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, 17 September 1787. National Archives Building, Washington, DC. Creative Commons / Wikimedia.



to the laws with some appreciation of their necessity. *Acquiescence* characterizes those who go along with the laws without reflecting on their basis.

The lowest level of acceptance is *sufferance*. *Sufferance* consists of those who grudgingly conform to the laws despite disagreeing with the principles on which the laws are based, the reasons they were enacted, the specific controls of personal behavior they impose, or the penalties imposed for violation of the laws. Such citizens suffer the government and will oppose it if they believe circumstances are ripe to destroy it. Usual estimates of the percentage of people who actively opposed King Charles I during the English Civil War, and the percentage of American colonists who actively opposed King George III the during the revolution, are between 20 to 30 percent (Figure 4).

The dissolution of one government does not automatically legitimate its successor. The common soldiers of the parliamentary army promoted a democratic government in a pamphlet "An Agreement of the People" (Figure 5) but parliament rejected it. After the beheading of Charles I in January 1649, the new government rightly feared that many or most people would not accept the new Commonwealth, and the new government knew that many would refuse to take an oath of allegiance to it. Prudently, they required males over the age of 18 merely to conform to or "engage with" its laws. The so-called "Engagement" of 1650 merely required an affirmation:

And they [Parliament] do expect from all true-hearted English men, not only a forebearance of [restraint from] any public or secret Plots or Endeavors, in opposition to the present Settlement, ... But [also] a cheerful concurrence [consent], and acting for the Establishment of the great Work now in hand, in such a way, ... [that] the people of this Land enjoy the blessings of Peace, Freedom, and Justice, to them and their Posterities.

Parliament hoped for consent, but settled for acquiescence or sufferance.

A legitimate government is one that has a large majority of citizens who promote, approve, or accept it, with relatively few who acquiesce or suffer it. Uniform promotion is an unrealized ideal. Taking legitimacy as amounting to popular acceptance may seem paradoxical. How can an attitude or a belief make something so? The paradox dissolves when one considers that acceptance shows itself in behavior, primarily in obedience to the law. Also, acceptance of institutions great and small pervades daily life; for example, acceptance that covering a certain kind of paper with certain words and images makes that thing money, lyrically, "a little piece of paper covered with chlorophyll."¹³

Legitimacy is tenuous when sufferance is rife. The insurrection in Washington, D.C. in 2021 is a symptom. About 40% of the electorate considered the presidential election of Biden illegitimate. Only about a thousand citizens were willing to breach the Capitol. And only a couple of hundred members of Congress were inclined to overturn the election results. The insurrection failed because of the actions of a few dozen Republicans, notably Vice-President Mike Pence and some Republican state officials who refused to falsify election results. Their acceptance of the election result may have been due to no more than acquiescence to constitutional procedures. But their actions were sufficient to preserve the government of the United States. Preserving a government is sometimes highly contingent.

Some commentators claimed that the failure of the insurrection was proof that the government was never in danger. One might as well argue that the world was

¹³ More precision is required to avoid making counterfeit money to be "legal tender."



Figure 4. King Charles I receiving authority from a divine source. Image from *Eikōn Basilikē: The portraiture of His Sacred Majesty in his solitudes and suffering*, a book that was published on February 9th, 1649, ten days after Charles I was beheaded, and was purportedly written by him. Public Domain / Wikimedia.

never in danger of an all-out nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Then, nuclear devastation was avoided by the contingency of the refusal of Vasily Aleksandrovich Arkhipov, the chief of staff of the Soviet flotilla, to authorize the use of nuclear torpedoes against the US, contrary to the policy of the Soviet navy. Upon his return to the Soviet Union, he was reprimanded.

The stability of a government is a function of the number of citizens who accept it, their intensity, and a favorable environment, minus the number and intensity of the citizens who oppose it, and the circumstances favorable to revolution. Gerrymandered districts, revised voter qualifications and documentation, and new methods of counting ballots in order to favor candidates of one party could dissolve the democratic process. Democrats have been making this claim for some time. The Democrats believe that Republicans have been systematically bulldozing the rights and procedures of democracy. It is plausible that circumstances are ripe for insurrection or a *coup d'état*. Lindsay Graham predicted "riots in the street" if Donald Trump were to be indicted. With his characteristic eloquence, Trump said an indictment would create "problems ... the likes of which perhaps we've never seen."¹⁴ Another Republican presidential defeat in 2024 may result in more extreme actions. A Republican presidential victory may be equally dangerous if Democrats believe Republican election commissioners or secretaries of state manipulated the results. That Democrats may riot has precedence in events surrounding the

¹⁴ Lindsay Kornick, "Sen. Graham says if Trump is indicted, there will be 'riots in the street,'" *Fox News*, August 28, 2022, foxnews.com; and Myah Ward and Andrew Desiderio, "Trump warns of 'problems' like 'we've never seen' if he's indicted," *Politico*, Sept. 15, 2022.

Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968, called by commentators "chaos that veered into a police riot."¹⁵

A government can be overthrown by peaceful means. Notwithstanding the sporadic violence of the Brownshirts, Adolf Hitler was legally made Chancellor in 1932 and legally became a dictator when the German Parliament passed the Enabling Act in 1933. The mechanisms of parliamentary government were not disabled. If the American form of government becomes a dictatorship, it will also probably happen under color of law. The Republican National Committee passed a resolution describing the violent January insurrection as "legitimate political discourse." If the Republican Party prevails in the federal elections over the next three or four years, the change from democracy to oligarchy may be relatively bloodless. The risk to a representative democracy is grave no matter how many times a party committed to the peaceful transfer of power wins federal elections. It takes only one election by an autocratic party to destroy democracy by refusing to transfer power in future elections.

Our account of legitimacy, we believe, has three major virtues. First, it is easy to understand. Acceptability is not an abstruse or mysterious concept. It is intelligible to any normal adult. Unlike typical philosophical theories, our account does not depend on apprehending technical concepts of the sort that require any specialized training or are part of a complex system. The human condition is difficult enough without requiring great intelligence or masses of historical or legalistic information in order to know whether one's government is legitimate.

¹⁵ youtube.com/watch?v=3XzdltsTfvE.

The second virtue is that we do not use normative language to explain legitimacy. In particular, we do not hold that being legitimate depends on some prior entity that is already a legitimate lawgiver or has authority. The etymology of legitimacy is deceptive. Because it derives from Latin *legitimus*, which means *made lawful*, it is tempting to look for a lawgiver who makes a government legitimate.¹⁶ The problem with appealing to a lawgiver is that doing so presupposes what is to be explained. Moreover, it is no good to appeal to a transcendent lawgiver, because at least in a diverse community like the United States, there is no consensus about who that preternatural lawgiver might be.

The third virtue of our view is that it appeals only to something internal to a people, their acceptance, not to anything

¹⁶ *Lex, legis* "The Proto-Italic root noun *lēg- 'law' can be interpreted as a 'collection' of rules." Michael de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and Other Italic Languages*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010: 337.

transcendent such as a god, eternal moral laws, or something else. What causes government legitimacy? It's the people's choice.

Our discussion has been restricted to domestic legitimacy. But the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in late February 2022 raises the issue of international legitimacy. We think the essence of legitimacy is the same in the international sphere, acceptance of a government by other governments. Acceptance is typically shown by an assortment of sociopolitical actions among governments, such as an exchange of ambassadors, treaties, alliances, mutual trade and trade agreements, and membership in organizations such as the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union.

Legitimacy is always relative to the entities that accept or reject something. During the 1950s, the Albanian government was legitimate with respect to the People's Republic of China but to almost no other government in the world. From 1949 until the 1970s, the People's Republic of China was legitimate to the Soviet Union, other communist bloc countries, and some neutral countries, but not the United States until 1979. To return to Russia, Vladimir Putin declared the Ukrainian government illegitimate because he asserted that Ukraine was part of Russia. Most of Europe and North America disagreed with him. The objective and fundamentally Tacitean truth is that Putin has made the Donbas rubble and calls it Russia.

When there is no neutral authority to settle international disputes, the conflicted nations go to war. When there is no neutral authority to settle domestic disputes, one party revolts. A

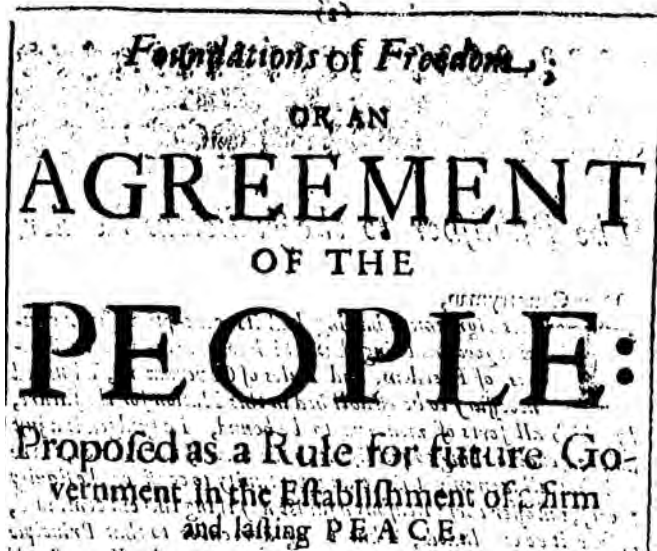


Figure 5. "An Agreement of the People." Title page from a pamphlet of 1648 in the British Library.

A large, stylized outline of the number 2, rendered in a thick black line. The number is positioned on the left side of the page, with its top curve extending towards the right.

**SCIENCES
AND
ARTS**

Techno-Wizardry and the De-extinction of Celia the Ibex

Lydia Pyne

ON A COLD AND MISTY JANUARY 6, 2000, A FIR TREE IN the Ordesa valley of the Spanish Pyrenees fell to the forest floor, crushing the last known individual of *Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica*—an ibex species that had been endemic the mountain range between Spain and France since the late Pleistocene.

As the last individual of her species, this ibex, Celia, was what we have come to call an endling. Her story joins that of other endlings, like Martha the passenger pigeon, Benjamin the thylacine (a carnivorous marsupial commonly known as the Tasmanian tiger), Turgi the Polynesian tree snail, and Lonesome George the Galápagos tortoise. Taken together, endlings form a grim and growing collection of extinction stories—a contemporary compendium of Aesop’s fables, warning us about ecological catastrophe. They are, inevitably, stories of how we humans carelessly spend nonhuman species.

Celia’s species was the first to be declared extinct in the new millennium, a harbinger, perhaps, of species loss and an embodiment of the sixth mass extinction we’re living through today. What is particularly poignant about Celia’s story, however, is what happened to her and her species in the years immediately following her death and her species’ extinction.

Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica is, to date, the only species humans have caused to go extinct a second time.

For tens of thousands of years, Celia's species has been known by many names. In English, it's an *ibex*. In Aragonese and Spanish, it's a *bucardo*; a *herc* in Catalan; a *bouquetin* in French. Although we don't know what Pleistocene peoples called the animal, we do know that Upper Paleolithic artists in contemporary Spain and Portugal painted them in panels of their cave art along with aurochs (a European wild ox that went extinct in the 1600s), bison, mammoths, deer, and horses. *Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica* was one of four subspecies of Iberian ibex, two of which are still alive today. This ibex—this *bucardo*—is an important character in the history of de-extinction and a story that is often overlooked in today's flurry of entrepreneurial enthusiasm about reviving long-dead species.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Biology*, “de-extinction” is the “the process of resurrecting species that have gone extinct.” Catapulted into popular imagination thanks to Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, the idea that humans could take an animal that had been dead for thousands of years—millions, even—and breathe new life into it is now comfortably part of our cultural lexicon. In the novel, dinosaurs are cloned from ancient dinosaur DNA extracted from mosquitoes trapped in amber. Outside of the novel—for scientists and entrepreneurs actively pursuing de-extinction today—the methods for such resurrections vary, from selectively back breeding wild populations to resemble the lost species, to editing individual genes. However, a fundamental assumption remains: that what is lost can be found; that what is gone can be recovered. That it is possible to walk back and “correct” history. And in 2003, we saw this science fiction become reality—for a matter of minutes.

De-extinction through cloning is often pitched as a last best effort to save a species when other conservation efforts have failed. In the case of the Pyrenean ibex, ecologists attempted crossbreeding programs in the late 1990s to try and expand the ibex's limited gene pool and see what other ibex subspecies could fill Celia's ecological niche. These programs were unsuccessful, as the ibex population dwindled from three, to two, to one. Nine months before Celia was crushed to death, park rangers and researchers successfully trapped and tranquilized her on April 20, 1999, and took a clipping from one of her ears to gather genetic material. There was an urgency to cryogenically preserving Celia's genetic material because cells collected while she was alive offered the best possibility—the best last resort—that she could be cloned after she was dead.

With Celia's death, cloning efforts to bring the species back to life began in earnest. Using a technique developed in the 1990s known as somatic cell nuclear transfer (the same method used to clone Dolly the sheep in 1996)—a laboratory team in Zaragoza, Aragón, began the complicated, time-consuming, intensive process of cloning Celia. These cloning attempts meant that hundreds of embryos were

transferred to either a pure Spanish ibex subspecies, or to a hybrid of a Spanish ibex male and a domestic goat. Some pregnancies terminated spontaneously and there was only one “success.” A single ibex clone was born on Wednesday, 30 July 2003.

“One bucardo female weighing 2.6k was obtained alive, without external morphological abnormalities,” the team clinically reported in its scientific paper, published in *Theriogenology* some six years later. “Although the newborn displayed a normal cardiac rhythm as well as other vital signs at delivery (i.e. open eyes, mouth opening, legs and tongue movements), it suffered from severe respiratory distress after delivery and died some minutes later.”

In short, the clone lived for seven minutes and then *Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica* went extinct a second time. A subsequent necropsy revealed that the clone had died of a lung pathology.

Wednesday, July 30, 2003 [was] a turning point in the history of biology. For on that date, all at once, extinction was no longer forever,” geneticist George Church and science writer Ed Regis jubilantly—evangelically, even—declared to their readers in *Regenesis: How Synthetic Biology Will Reinvent Nature and Ourselves*, published in 2012. Synthetic biology combines genetic engineering with evolutionary biology, and with other biological disciplines, to actively design or redesign organisms with new, “useful,” and human-centric purposes. This sort of bio-enterprise was, of course, subjected to harsh critique in Michael Crichton’s sci-fi worlds. Back in Zaragoza, Aragón, though, *Jurassic Park* wasn’t fiction. Those seven minutes seemed to prove that extinction wasn’t necessarily the end of the evolutionary line for a species.

Which begged the question, however: now what? Now that it’s possible to resurrect a species—at least for seven minutes—what do we do with that? What species should be next?

For almost twenty years, the answer was “nothing.” Although the successful cloning of Dolly the sheep is widely acknowledged to have ushered in an era of stem cell research that has had wide-ranging effects, no other organism has yet been brought to life the way Celia’s clone was. But interest and appetite for creating a long-extinct organism has been re-kindled since 2022, when the start-up bio-engineering company Colossal Biosciences, founded in 2021 by Harvard and MIT-based geneticist George Church and serial entrepreneur Ben Lamm, recently announced it will “de-extinct” a thylacine and a woolly mammoth—each one an icon of extinction and loss in its own unique way.

Thylacines, known in historical records as Tasmanian tigers, wolves, or hyenas, had dark, distinctive stripes running from behind

the shoulders to the tail, short, rounded ears, powerful jaws, and dense, short fur. They were marsupials (like kangaroos and koalas) and their females carried joeys in a back-opening pouch. Around two million years ago, thylacines were found in mainland Australia as well as Tasmania; by the time European settlers arrived on Tasmania, historical estimates suggest that there was a population of roughly 5,000 thylacine individuals.

Thylacines were hunted to the brink of extinction by European settlers, erroneously convinced that thylacines were a threat to their sheep. By the 1930s, several thylacines still lived in captivity as the numbers of the species dwindled. *Thylacinus cynocephalus* went extinct in Tasmania when the last known individual—an ending we now call Benjamin—cruelly died in captivity in 1936. By the end of the twentieth century, the thylacine had become a mascot and a warning in Australia and Tasmania, spurring on legislation to protect other threatened and endangered species.

Charitably, bringing back the thylacines—a species that isn't very far removed from living memory—could be a way of making up for the vicious, systematic way that humans hunted the species to extinction and callously allowed Benjamin to die locked out of his enclosure one cold winter night in Hobart. Penance, perhaps. Realistically, though, it is just too little, much too late.

Moving much further back in time and to other continents, woolly mammoths (*Mammuthus primigenius*) roamed across glaciated Europe, Asia, and North America for hundreds of thousands of years, becoming extinct roughly ten thousand years ago. (Some relict populations lived as recently as four thousand years ago.) The exact cause of their extinction has been debated for decades—whether their demise was driven by humans overhunting them in the Pleistocene, or whether woolly mammoths were unable to survive when the world's climate changed millennia ago, a warming that ended the last glacial cycle.

It's an understatement to say that woolly mammoths capture the imagination, and have done so for centuries. As long as people have thought about the Pleistocene, these massive proboscideans have stood out as icons of an Ice Age. It's hard to argue that a woolly mammoth couldn't offer an imagined peaceful, primordial Pleistocene here in the twenty-first century's world-literally-on-fire-all-the-time Anthropocene.

In Colossal's laboratory world, a baby woolly mammoth—or, more accurately, a baby woolly mammoth-adjacent organism—will be created by combining woolly mammoth DNA with Asian elephant DNA, via CRISPR gene editing, and then transferring an embryo to gestate in an Asian elephant's womb. Unlike Celia, however, this sort of woolly mammoth isn't a copy of an organism that has ever existed, but rather a uniquely twenty-first century animal.

According to its website, Colossal claims that “[combining] the science of genetics with the business of discovery, we endeavor to jumpstart nature’s ancestral heartbeat. To see the Woolly Mammoth thunder upon tundra once again. To advance the economies of biology and healing through genetics. To make humanity more human. And to reawaken the lost wilds of Earth. So we, and our planet, can breathe easier.”

But—and here’s the catch—it is left as an exercise to the imagination precisely which tundra these woolly mammoths will thunder across amid today’s melting permafrost. Or how a genetically modified elephant makes humans more human. Or how offering investors a chance to create a Mr. Snuffleupagus jumpstarts nature’s ancestral heartbeat. The environment in which this woolly mammoth lived is long gone, its social context extinct along with its species. As a myriad of people have long pointed out in a plethora of ways, de-extinction via cloning is a very narrow definition of a species and a very limited understanding of what “bringing it back” would entail. The idea that a historical organism—or a historical species—could successfully and ethically exist outside of its historical context requires a, shall we say, colossal degree of mental flexibility.

Despite overwhelming scientific obstacles, a legion of logistical issues, and never mind the, well, mammoth ethical questions that surround this “de-extinction,” there’s still a heroic romanticism to bringing back an extinct animal. Recycling soda cans, or riding the bus to reduce a carbon footprint, seems like laughably mundane green behavior compared to seeing a long-extinct species in the flesh. This techno-wizardry—this extravagant *ta-da!* showiness of producing a new organism—offers a neat, sleek “product” with a hazy go-to-market strategy that somehow manages to acknowledge human-perpetrated species loss without the bother of having to solve big, complicated problems associated with our human-driven environmental destruction.

Woolly mammoth calves are, purportedly, expected in 2025.

Twenty years ago, de-extinction was still, more or less, the stuff of science fiction. “In 2003 the word ‘de-extinction’ didn’t exist,” cultural geographer Adam Searle pointed out to me in an interview. “De-extinction is something we’re currently in the process of trying to figure out. And part of that is how we tell stories of de-extinction now.”

Incidentally, amid the techno-brouhaha of bringing a thylacine and a woolly mammoth back to life, Celia is curiously—tellingly—absent. Colossal’s website, for example, has a primer on how CRISPR technology works, but there is no mention of Celia or her story. (There is a page on their site devoted to elephant conservation with the note, “Preservation is a key component of de-extinction. From

***Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica* is, to date, the only species humans have caused to go extinct a second time.**

the Asian to the African elephants, all Elephantidae species are in trouble due to climate change, disease and habitat loss. Colossal is working to help them. Before it's too late.")

In the current zeitgeist of de-extinction, Celia and *Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica* slide into the background. It's almost as if we can't decide whether Celia's de-extinction story should be read as a proof of concept or as a cautionary tale, so we simply don't engage with it. "You have to wonder what the story will look like and how it will be told in 50 years," Searle observed.

It's possible that the story of Celia and current de-extinction attempts are, actually, not as removed from *Jurassic Park* as we might like to think. Searle spent his graduate career studying Celia's story, compiling a cultural history through a series of ethnographic interviews. He found that most tellings of the "Celia the ibex" story focus on cloning, and on the hope that we hang on a technological fix for addressing threatened species. But Searle also found that in Torla, the village near where Celia died, she was known as "Laña the bucardo," where she was a symbol of conservation and a firm connection to people's geographic identity. In other words, there is more to the animal than her double extinction.

"What might it mean, then for ibex to return?" Searle wrote in one of his academic publications about Celia in 2020. "These animals are not bucardo—rather, they are ecological and cultural proxies. The ways in which they are understood to *belong* in the Pyrenees is not straightforward, but shaped by myriad issues linked to tourism, hunting, and nationalism, among others."

In other words, even if another ibex is cloned in another lab, it will never be a bucardo—that moment is gone, as well as the species. (Crichton actually made this very point back in 1990, before Celia's clone had eked out seven minutes of life, and before bio-engineering startups were actively working to recreate iconic, extinct species.) Take that one step further and any mammoth, any thylacine, any organism without its context and narrative is simply an organism without a species. It's a character in search of a narrative.

Today, conservation efforts for two other subspecies of ibex have created cautious optimism about ibex populations rebounding in the Pyrenees. In a different sort of de-extinction story, populations of ibex—primarily western Spanish ibex—have been introduced in the French Pyrenees in an effort to rewild the species in much the same way that the takhi (Przewalski's horse) has been rewilded into

Mongolia. Fall 2020, for example, saw something like 70 ibex kids born in France, in a part of the Pyrenees where the ibex had previously been found and then hunted to local extinction, much as they had been in Spain. These ibex—this population—is a uniquely twenty-first century animal, filling the niche of the extinct Pyrenean ibex.

The population now stands at roughly 400 individuals. ■

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Transcending Barriers

A Behind-the-Scenes Conversation on the Making of *Rare Earth*

Jacqueline Chao, Dennis Kratz, Robert J. Stern, and Robert Lavinsky

Rare Earth: The Art and Science of Chinese Stones, recently on view at the Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas, explores the different ways that Chinese and Western cultures have celebrated the beauty found in, and created from, natural stones. Reflecting the educational mission of The University of Texas at Dallas to unite scientific and artistic thinking, the exhibition pairs works of Chinese art from the Crow Museum's permanent collection with connoisseur-level samples of raw minerals from China. It uniquely displays these natural and reshaped minerals in contexts that invite multiple, interrelated responses: to appreciate their beauty, ponder their cultural significance, and be inspired to understand the natural forces that created them.



Figure 1. Scholar's Rock. China, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), 19th century. Stone, wood stand. 22 x 21.5 x 10 in. Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas, 1986.25.

Collecting rocks and stone carvings has been popular in many countries, but particularly in Chinese culture for thousands of years. This tradition is rooted in the philosophical and spiritual inspiration drawn from the artistic beauty of natural stones, such as jade. Unusually-shaped stones called “Scholars Rocks” or “Philosopher’s Stones” carved by natural processes have also been long valued in China in particular, where there is a multibillion dollar market in such stones. Seen as embodiments of the dynamic transformational processes of nature, these stones were also admired for their resemblance to mountains or caves, particularly the magical peaks and subterranean paradises believed to be inhabited by immortal beings (Figure 1). Although mineral collecting, a practice based on the aesthetic appreciation or the scientific characteristics of the naturally symmetric and patterned crystals and minerals that make up rocks, has a long history in the United States and in Europe since the 1300s, it was not commonly practiced in China. The country’s abundant mineral resources were, instead, historically used as raw material for both art and industrial purposes only. In the mid-1980s, this changed when remarkable Chinese specimens entered the Western market, not only amazing collectors worldwide, but also stimulating a rising interest within China to collect fine minerals.

This exhibition was co-organized by the Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas and the Center for Asian Studies of The University of Texas at Dallas, in partnership with the UT Dallas Department of Geosciences and the Dr. Robert Lavinsky Mineral Collection.

On the occasion and as a reflection of the collaborative spirit of the exhibition, we wanted to provide an honest behind-the-scenes look at how the exhibition came to be amongst the organizers—from the selection of objects, to the various discussions, debates, arguments, and ensuing discoveries. In this conversation are Jacqueline Chao, former Senior Curator of Asian Art of the Crow Museum and curator of the exhibition; Dennis Kratz, Senior Associate Provost and Director of the Center for Asian Studies at UT Dallas; Robert J. Stern, Professor of Geosciences at UT Dallas; and Robert Lavinsky, lifelong fine mineral collector and educator.

How did this exhibition come to be?

Jacqueline Chao (JC): I have known Rob Lavinsky for several years now, and a few years ago I and several members of the Crow Museum’s staff had visited the Arkenstone Gallery, to see Rob’s mineral collection. I remember that I was blown away by the size and scale of his collection, which included minerals from all over the world, along with a particular special private area of the collection dedicated to minerals from China, many types and samples of which I had never heard of, or ever seen before. In those early visits, many years ago, Rob and I discussed what an art exhibition could look like that blended aspects of Chinese art and culture with natural minerals. Also at the time, we had been in communication with the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, as they were in the process of re-installing their Gems and Minerals Hall with a focus on minerals from China, and our two museum teams had met to see if there was a way to possibly collaborate on the timing of both our exhibitions. With our Museum’s subsequent merger with UT Dallas and the

ensuing pandemic, all of our Museum's plans were delayed. I am grateful to Dr. Kratz for having helped to pick this conversation back up again last year through the Center for Asian Studies (CAS) Faculty Advisory Board, and for reconnecting me with Rob (Lavinsky) as well as introducing me to Bob (Dr. Stern).

Dennis Kratz (DK): As I recall, the project slowly emerged from a series of conversations involving various combinations of the four partners. For me, it began with a tour of the Arkenstone Gallery and a conversation with Rob about our shared interest in connecting science with art—for him, using art to attract students to scientific thinking; for me, merging scientific, artistic, and humanistic thinking in education. Subsequent conversations with Bob Stern and Jacqueline Chao—and I assume their conversations with one another and Rob—inevitably developed the idea of connections; and Jacqueline had an impressive ability to translate this generative concept into the form of an exhibition.

Robert Stern (RS): I have been on the UT Dallas Geosciences faculty for 40 years. In that time I have seen amazing growth at UT Dallas. We have added so many groups of people with a wide range of talents, certainly new degree programs, departments and schools but also things like the Center for Asian Studies (CAS) and the Crow Museum of Asian Art. I am increasingly concerned that UT Dallas's growth has not been matched by efforts to link these groups together, and to involve our students and communities in more of our activities. Nearing the end of my career, I enjoy trying to help build some of these connections and getting involved with CAS provides a great opportunity to do so. I also

enjoy working on new projects, like CAS and *Athenaeum Review*, because the ground rules for these babies are still flexible, encouraging innovation and experimentation. When CAS formed, I was interested to help involve science in its purview and reached out to Dennis, who was kind enough to invite me to join the CAS faculty advisory board. I was very happy to join because I am very interested in Asian geology and resources, partly because I am a geologist and understanding how Asia and its important mineral resources formed is very interesting, and partly because I am Editor-in-Chief of a journal, *International Geology Review*, which gets a lot of manuscripts about Chinese geology. I knew about Rob Lavinsky's world-class mineral gallery, the Arkenstone, and also have been a big fan of the Crow Museum for many years before it became part of UT Dallas. Before the COVID pandemic, Dennis was looking for ideas about how CAS could announce itself to the larger DFW community and, as I recall, I suggested that we somehow marry the Chinese art in the Crow with the Chinese minerals in Rob's collection. Rob and Jacqueline did the heavy lifting to make it happen.

In your own words, how would you describe your role in this project? What was your approach? What were your main concerns regarding this project, if any?

JC: My role, at least as I understood it, was to curate the exhibition, particularly the Chinese art works on view. I worked closely with Rob to identify particular mineral examples from his Chinese mineral collection, and we continued to adjust the list of mineral samples right up until beginning the exhibition installation. My main concern and approach was to

make sure that Chinese art and culture was presented authentically and respectfully, and also that the mineral examples were being presented authentically and respectfully as well. My first idea was to create thoughtful and intentional pairings of like object and mineral, where each case would showcase a particular mineral. However, when reviewing the museum's Chinese art collection, it became clear that I did not necessarily always have certain minerals represented in works of art, because those minerals were not used as the base for Chinese art production historically. While minerals such as gold and silver were more easily represented and could be thoughtfully paired with existing works from the museum's permanent collection, other minerals such as hemimorphite or aragonite had not been traditionally used for art production, instead having been more often used historically for industrial purposes. I was faced with a conundrum: how do I showcase these fantastic natural mineral examples, while still making a respectful and authentic connection to Chinese art and culture?

After several rounds of case mock-ups and thoughtful discussion, I proposed taking what I called "aesthetic leaps" in thinking about the display of certain artworks and certain minerals. For example, I paired the hemimorphite "cloud" and aragonite "tree" with our Duan stone table screen to highlight the landscape motifs of the screen. I placed the large pink Pyrite on Calcite (Figure 2) on its own in one case, and in its object label, I connected it to the tree peony, discussed the significance of the peony flower in Chinese art and culture, and so on and so forth. I wanted to allow visitors to the exhibition to be able to participate in creating the story of these objects in a way, and to be able to make these aesthetic connections on their own, in order to appreciate each work, whether a

piece from the museum's collection, or a stunning natural mineral example. Every conversation with Dennis, Bob, and Rob was incredibly helpful. Both Bob and Rob were especially helpful in drafting more detailed scientific explanations for each mineral, which I think was critical in cementing the collaborative theme of science and art in this show.

DK: My role (at least as I imagined it) was to keep the exhibition focused on the process of thinking that the objects on display inspired. At the time, I was involved in a cross-centuries conversation with Alexander von Humboldt. I had just finished reading a biography (*The Invention of Nature* by Andrea Wulf) and was in the midst of *Cosmos*, Humboldt's grand attempt both to describe the natural world as a living whole, all its parts inextricably and intricately interconnected, and to show that a full understanding of nature required the fusion of intellect and imagination. I wanted the exhibition to evoke a similar kind of "interconnected" response. The decision to juxtapose "natural" and human-sculpted pieces was a brilliant start. It wouldn't be enough, however, simply for a science-minded observer to see beauty, or for an artful-minded observer just to become more interested in the natural processes that created the minerals on display. Somehow, I hoped, some observers would become participants in seeing and imagining multiple kinds of connections between works displayed side-by-side and among works displayed separately.

RS: I helped with the original idea, and also provided some explanations for various minerals. I knew from many years of teaching at UT Dallas that the equally intelligent Chinese art history and mineral communities were equally knowledgeable of their own field and equally ignorant of



Figure 2. Pyrite on Calcite – ‘Big Blanket’. Manaoshan, Chenzhou, Hunan Province, China. Dr. Robert Lavinsky Mineral Collection.

the other, so the explanations of various minerals in the displays needed to be short, simple, and without too many unnecessary details. I really had no concerns about the project.

Rob Lavinsky (RL): Minerals, crystals, and beautifully shaped rock formations have a profound place of honor as treasured objects in many human cultures and in the art they create. We’re used to seeing human creations that owe their coloring to these raw, natural minerals in carvings, jewelry, and paintings. In Western culture, historically, we have tended to focus less on appreciating their natural forms. In Asian cultures, there is a particularly strong cultural relevance to displaying naturally-shaped stones as art objects with imbued cultural meanings to enhance the home and even health. This rising trend in popular culture is now fusing with the

longstanding tradition of Americans and Europeans curating focused mineral collections. We’re proud to develop this cooperative effort between the Crow Museum of Asian Art, UT Dallas, and my own collection to share the unbelievable natural beauty, history, and cultural relevance of these natural works of art in synergy, blurring the lines between the seemingly separate worlds in how we classify nature, science, and art. My hope for this exhibition is to show people the unbelievable, and collectible, beauty within the earth, which is just now gaining a new level of awareness and appreciation. I have collected minerals all my life, since I first saw these treasures as a child, and it is my belief that through telling stories of connections to culture and art, people will see these objects in new eyes, not as reductionist “rocks on a shelf” as if the same objects were in a science museum.



Figure 3. Aragonite "Tree". Wenshan, Yunnan Province, China. Dr. Robert Lavinsky Mineral Collection.

Were there things that happened in the process of planning this exhibition that surprised you? What was something new you discovered?

DK: Not so much as surprised by how much I learned from listening to the multi-perspective conversations among my three colleagues—especially Jacqueline’s process of juxtaposing pieces and creating the possibility of connections among distantly placed objects.

RS: I knew Chinese carvings of jade but was very surprised to learn that these incredible artists also carved quartz crystals.

JC: Echoing what Dr. Stern said earlier, I admit I am one of those art historians who did not have a very strong scientific knowledge of minerals going into this project. As a result, there were many discussions and debates that occurred during the planning of this exhibition that surprised me. For example, the question was raised about whether to include jade in the exhibition, as jade is not considered a mineral! I had always understood jade to be a mineral, and it was difficult to imagine this exhibition without including fine examples of Chinese jade carving, perhaps the largest and most important aspect of our museum’s Chinese collection. I was

conscious of being careful to not misrepresent the various mineral examples either. From these conversations, I realized it was important and necessary to expand the scope of the show to include a broader discussion on the appreciation of stones in Chinese culture, from Scholar's Rocks to other stones such as marble or soapstone—stones that are not technically classified as minerals, but rather, as metamorphic rocks. I think by expanding the scope of the exhibition to include the celebration of stones in Chinese art and culture in general, which includes gems and minerals, we were able to create a more rich and innovative presentation of these works. In the end, I am grateful for this wonderful partnership, the invigorating conversations, and everything that I have learned from this project.

RL: First, letting go of my traditional ways of viewing minerals—even though I see beyond, I am still constrained by the past—and letting Jacqueline go with it and make the selections herself...had a huge impact and change from what I might have picked, and yet I love them all. Secondly, the idea of less is more—this is not a science museum. We do not need quantity to convey impact, only quality and the right story.

What is your favorite piece in the show, and why?

DK: Two “pink” flowers sculpted by nature (a large pink manganoan calcite, and two flowers formed by calcite on calcite). During a visit by the Chinese Consul General, I was showing the First Secretary (Lian Shuyu) the exhibit and pointed out the two flowers. Her response was immediate—and from a wholly different emotional perspective: Pink is her daughter’s favorite color. We

then searched out other pieces mainly or just tinged with pink, while talking about our families, and reminding me of other ways that works of art—natural and human made—have the power to remind individuals from different cultures of our common humanity.

RS: I have five favorites: The scholar’s rock (Figure 1), the pyrite turtle, the chrysanthemum stone, the tunnel rock, the big blanket, and a carved quartz vase. The Scholar’s Rock captures a sensibility that doesn’t exist in the West. These are natural pieces of limestone that were first fractured into vertical slabs and exposed to the elements, which over thousands of years were slowly carved by slightly acid rainwater into ruggedly intricate shapes. These are found wherever limestone landscapes are fractured, uplifted, and exposed. Such landscapes are called karst, and the spectacular karstic limestone landscapes of Yunnan, southwest China, are famous; this is probably the region that many Scholars Rocks come from.¹

Among the carved pieces, I very much admire the quartz pieces, especially the quartz vase. Quartz has a Mohs scale hardness of 7, and I can’t imagine the skill and patience it took to carve those! I also like four natural pieces that make you stop and ask: Is that natural or carved? These are the pyrite concretion (turtle), the slab of yellow sandstone laced by iron oxide to resemble a tunnelscape, the big black slab of limestone with white “Chrysanthemums” of the mineral celestine, and the pink manganoan carbonate edged with pyrite (big blanket).

The first three of these are the result of subsurface chemical reactions that

¹ See “South China Karst Stone Forest, Yunnan, China,” March 20, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppayvk8pYBs.

geologists call diagenesis. Diagenesis involves the physical and chemical changes that happen to sediments underground as they transform into sedimentary rock.

Diagenesis happens in many ways and these three objects show three of them: 1) forming concretions (the turtle); 2) infiltrating chemical-laden fluids (lacy sandstone tunnel); and 3) growing new minerals (Chrysanthemums). The turtle concretion is exquisite; its rounded body is permeated with pyrite crystals marking original sedimentary bedding planes. Concretions form in sediments after they are buried, as diagenetic chemical reactions begin to cement the loose grains, beginning from some nucleus and expanding outward, so that concretions are typically sub-spherical, like a turtle's shell.

The big slab of sandstone laced with iron oxides is also a product of diagenesis. I got lost imagining myself going down this crenulated tunnel. This slab seems to have been cut out of a larger stone and polished. The lacy crenulations of reddish iron oxide formed when iron-rich fluids infiltrated the sandstone. The chrysanthemum rock is a black shale in which diagenesis sweated elements of strontium, sulfur, and oxygen to migrate slowly out of the surrounding rock and combine to form clusters of large celestine (strontium sulfate) crystals, radiating from a few nuclei thought to be caused by sulfur-rich bacteria trapped in the rock. The effect is stunning, with a few big white Chrysanthemum blossoms set against a jet-black background. The last of my favorite five is big blanket. This beauty has many pink, dainty calcite leaves that are exquisitely rimmed with metallic flakes of pyrite; it reminds me of a Dale Chihuly glass piece.

RL: The Tree of Life (Figure 3), an organic looking “natural sculpture” that reminds me of so many mythological constructs, really

transcending all cultures. It is an aragonite from China, that I purchased there perhaps around 2010.

JC: This is an incredibly tough question to answer; every piece in the show is truly stunning and has an important place in this exhibition. I am particularly fond of our museum's cloisonné vase (Figure 4), and my favorite mineral example in the exhibition is this beautiful azurite with malachite (Figure 5), and thinking about the relationship between the two. Cloisonné was known in the Byzantine world, and from there it spread to Europe and to China under the expansive Mongol empire. In this method, enclosures known by the French term cloisons, made of copper or bronze wires that have been bent or hammered into the desired pattern, are generally pasted or soldered onto a metal body. Glass paste, or enamel, is colored with metallic oxide and painted into the contained areas of the design. The vessel is usually fired at about 1470° F (800° C). When enamel is fired, it shrinks; therefore, the firing process is repeated multiple times in order to complete filling in the design. The surface of the vessel is then rubbed until the edges of the cloisons are visible and finally gilded.

The earliest appearance of Chinese cloisonné dates back to the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), and the technique reached full maturity by the eighteenth century, as exemplified by the types of dense, complicated cloisons seen on the museum's vase. Strong, vibrant colors, such as turquoise, lapis blue, and golden yellow, made cloisonné an ideal medium that suited the Qing imperial aesthetic. The museum's vase may have been made in the imperial cloisonné workshop established in the Forbidden City by the Qing dynasty emperor Kangxi.

From the late seventeenth century onward, cloisonné was popularly used at



Figure 4. Vase. China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–1795), 18th century. Cast bronze, cloisonné enamels, and gilding. 29.25 x diam. 14 in. (74.3 x diam. 35.6 cm). Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas, 1999.29.

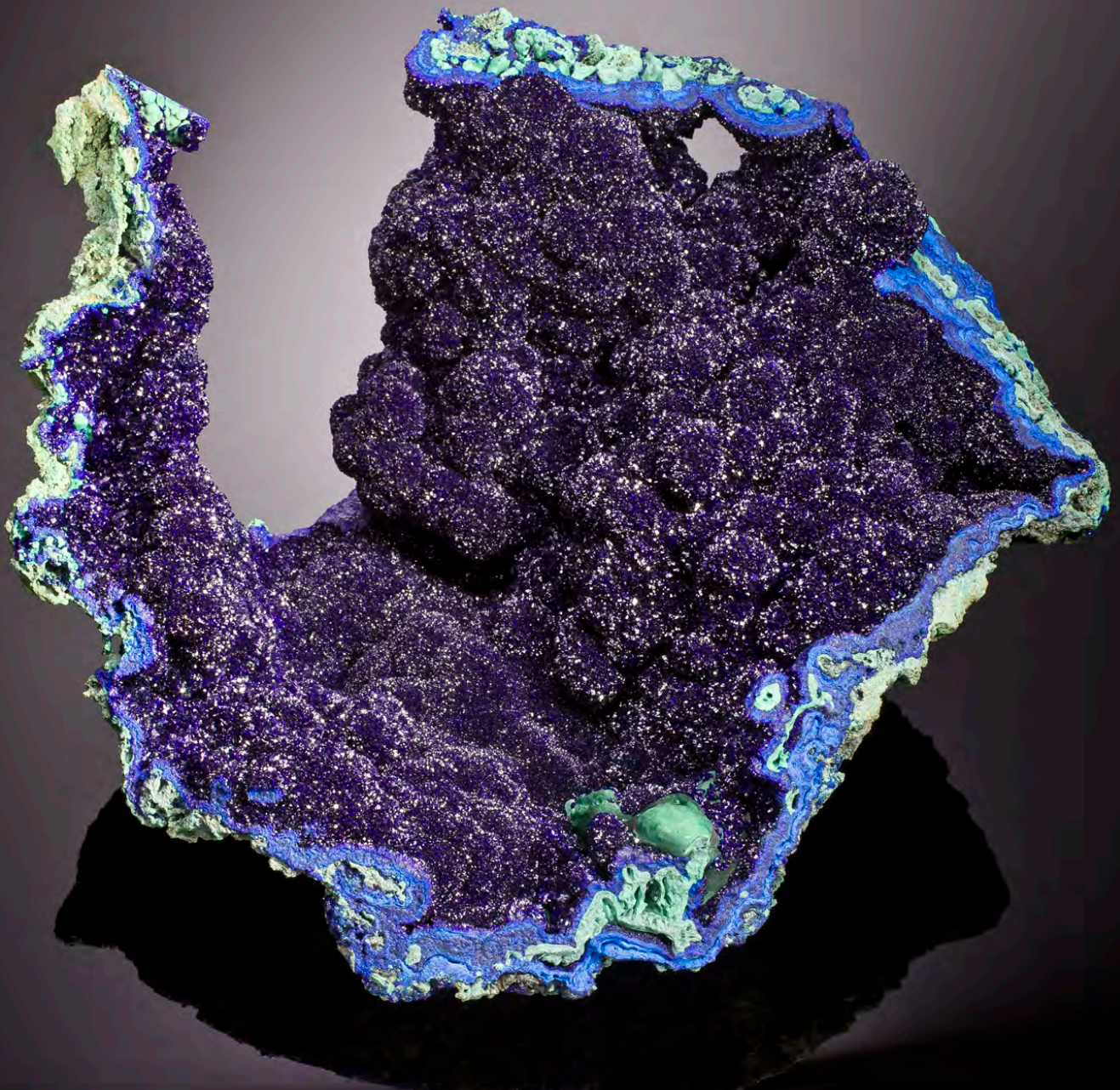


Figure 5. Azurite and Malachite. Liufengshan Mine, Anhui Province, China. Dr. Robert Lavinsky Mineral Collection.

court for domestic goods, ritual vessels, and purely decorative items intended primarily for the furnishing of temples and palaces due to their flamboyant colors. The tapering neck of this work has two gilded handles in the shape of stylized chi, or hornless dragons. This vase is covered with magnolia, peony, lotus, chrysanthemum, and prunus motifs that represent the four seasons. They are interspersed with archaic

bi discs in purple and green. The details of the vase are absolutely incredible! The deep blue color of the azurite in the exhibition is so rich and draws the eyes in immediately. I have always known azurite as traditionally used as the base for the color blue in Chinese ink paintings, ceramics, and cloisonné, and malachite was also used for green, but what I learned through the course of this exhibition is that azurite is

also an ore of copper, and has also been mined and broken down for its copper properties, as was malachite. When you see this azurite in person, it is so hard to imagine that such a beautiful example like this could have been mined and broken down for its copper!

What was your biggest takeaway from this experience? Final thoughts, messages, etc.

DK: Thinking and imagining along a new path toward a shared goal with colleagues and friends should happen more often. Can we design or happen upon more ways to nurture such experiences? At one point in our conversations, Bob Stern used the metaphor of “injuring” gemstones to make them more beautiful—and thereby of greater value (in multiple senses of the term). That comment gave the exhibition an underlying ethical level. We injure the

earth when we imagine it as a “source” of economically valuable resources; but we are appalled by the thought of damaging nature’s “stone art” that is magnificently visible—Grand Canyon and Uluru, for example. Should it be equally troubling to injure an underground artisan workshop where unceasing geological forces are creating beauty?

RL: That I can share these treasures I have always felt a visceral, gut-level love for, with others. That other people can see them in association with “real treasures” and come away with the impact of seeing nature’s art on its own, as worthy connoisseur-level collectibles that have a place outside the realm of mere science.

Rare Earth: The Art and Science of Chinese Stones was on view at the Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas through February 26, 2023. **A**

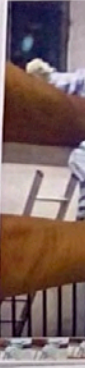
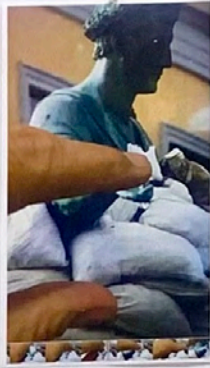
A large, stylized outline of the number 3, composed of two thick black lines. The top part is a horizontal bar that tapers to the right, and the bottom part is a curved shape that loops back to the left.

FOLIO



Thomas Locke Hobbs, "NoHo" (top) and "Inglewood" (bottom), both 2017. Photographs, dimensions variable.





Kristen Cochran, *Life Support*, installation view. PRP Agency, Dallas, January 2023.



Pooran Lashini, *The Flight*. 2021. Oil on canvas, 72 x 56 inches.

This painting is inspired by the poem *The Bird May Die, You Remember the Flight!* by Forough Farrokhzad.

Originally composed in Farsi, the poem examines the suffering from social injustice of her time. In the poem Farrokhzad declares her sorrow of darkness and seeks an invitation to the birds' feast. Farrokhzad's poems are full of the aspect of femininity, fighting for feminine rights and equality.

Artist Pooran Lashini created this painting during a time of grief and loss, following the death of her father. "His memory stays with me, as long I live." In this painting, the bird is a symbol of freedom. Life will eventually pass; just remember the voyage.

Moonlit Night

Alone this night now in her room,
Fu Zhou's moon stirs her reverie.

She aches for children far away;
Changan's not yet a memory.

Her hair seems moist from fragrant mist;
her arms, like jade, glow chillingly.

When will they nestle near thin shades?
Both crusts of tears shine brilliantly.

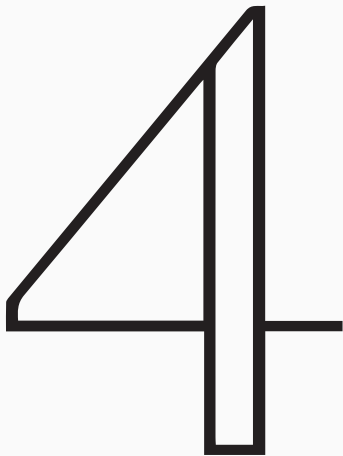
(Translated from the Chinese of Tu Fu by A. M. Juster)

All the backup material I used for the translation of Tu Fu's "moonlit Night" is available online at homepages.ecs.vuw.ac.nz/~ray/ChineseEssays/YueYe

The very first item has the original Chinese characters and a phonetic translation that shows the rhyme scheme.

A short distance below this item are similar "literal" translations by Peter Ditmanson & Wai-lim Yip.

A talented poet from mainland China, Aiden Heung, helped me with the nuances of my word choices.

A large, hollow outline of the number 4, rendered in a simple, clean, sans-serif style. The number is positioned on the left side of the page.

LITERARY LIVES

Joel Barlow's Eccentric American Vision

Ed Simon

"America—the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power, and so the country belonged to the people; for the will of the people—if the locks of their life could be given the art to turn—was then the will of God. Great and dangerous idea!"

—Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night*

DESIRING TO BE THE REPUBLIC'S FIRST GREAT POET, but having rather to settle as its first great diplomat, Joel Barlow contracted pneumonia somewhere outside of Zarnowiec, Poland in 1812, the year that Napoleon was routed in Russia; there he fell into unconsciousness and died the day after Christmas, entombed at the brown wood-timbered Church of the Nativity of Our Lady, very far from his beloved Hartford. Other than perhaps his name on a plaque at the State Department, and his Washington DC estate Kalorama, which gave its name to that tony neighborhood a few dozen blocks north of Foggy Bottom, Barlow is a ghost of the early Republic.

A wit, rhapsodist, polemicist, and writer, Barlow fulfilled his desire to pen a national epic for the new nation, in the form of a strange, turgid, and at times beautiful poem entitled *The Columbiad*, with its idiosyncratic injunction to "sing the Mariner who first unfurl'd / An eastern banner o'er the western world, / And taught mankind where future empires lay / In these fair confines of descending day." An ardent Jeffersonian, Barlow spent much of 1812 trailing Napoleon's doomed campaign in the east, hoping to get an audience with the emperor in his role as United States Minister Plenipotentiary to France on behalf of President James Madison who desired a treaty against the British. Instead, he found himself retreating back towards Paris along

with the entire Army of the French Empire, falling far short of his destination and eventually buried in a frozen graveyard in a forgotten corner of Poland.

***The Columbiad* is “more than an epic... no mere call to arms but a celebration of the worldwide inculcation of American principles and a new, Deistic universal language.”**

“Almighty Freedom! give my venturous song / The force, the charm that to thy voice belong,” incants Barlow, “Tis thine to shape my course, to light my way, / To nerve my country with the patriot lay, / To teach all men where all their interest lies, / How rulers may be just and nations wise: / Strong in thy strength I bend no suppliant knee, / Invoke no miracle, no Muse but thee.” Drawing directly from Book XI of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, wherein the archangel Michael unfurls before Adam the entire coming history of creation, Barlow imagines his titular epic hero Christopher Columbus during his Spanish imprisonment learning from an angel how the continents he discovered (or “discovered”) would become the landscape for a millennial republic—a celebration of both geography and history whose western terminus signals a providential destiny, America revealed as Hesperus, Paradise, Eden, Utopia.

When Barlow promises to “Invoke no miracle, no Muse but thee,” he enlists himself as a partisan of freedom to which he dedicates those verses, rejecting the supernatural in favor of the democratic, but he didn’t lack a theological imagination so much as he grabbed the prophetic laurels that gave him the right to create a new religion. When reading *The Columbiad*, it is imperative not to confuse the historical medieval-minded Catholic zealot and genocidal explorer Columbus with the character in Barlow’s poem: the latter is written in a mythopoeic vernacular, a fictional creation in the penning of a new scripture. Barlow’s Columbus is more Virgil’s Aeneas than he is the navigator of the *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*. The poet wished to craft a new history for his nation, placing America’s beginnings in a past both transcendent and universal.

Dying in the borderland between the French and Russian Empires, the poet dreamt rather of a coming Empire of Liberty, having longed to work towards that promised day on which Danton had envisioned the last king hung by the entrails of the last priest. “Barlow saw the American Revolution as the opening skirmish of a

world revolution on behalf of the rights of all humanity,” writes William H. Goetzman in *Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism*. Commensurate with that millennial cause, Barlow advocated for a new scripture that would do for the United States what Dante had done for Italy or Milton for Britain, a scripture that “because of its high moral and republican message, could exceed in grandeur even Homer,” as Gordon Wood writes in *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States*. That Barlow’s 1787 *Vision of Columbus* and its more radical nine-book 1807 revision *The Columbiad* doesn’t reach the sublimity of *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* is incontrovertible, indeed, totally uncontroversial. Other than the students at Joel Barlow High School in the poet’s hometown of Redding, Connecticut, few have ever heard of *The Columbiad*, and one doubts that even most of those students are familiar with their institution’s namesake.

Even among specialists, *The Columbiad* is spoken of in less than valedictory terms. Goetzman writes that Barlow’s epic may be “Rich, eclectic, highly charged emotionally, full of ornament,” but despite that, or maybe because of it, *The Columbiad* is “clumsy and derivative.” Meanwhile, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradburn in *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* snark that Barlow “did more to herald literary greatness than achieve it,” while Goetzman’s final appraisal is somehow even more damning—*The Columbiad* is “hardly a literary masterpiece.” Much of this is a bit harsh, at least in my estimation. The epic is indeed turgid at some points, the Augustan rhyming couplets audibly of the eighteenth-century, embarrassingly archaic to ears trained on Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, Williams, Eliot, and Pound. More than in issues of prosody, arguably, it was Barlow’s poetic vocation itself that strikes many as irredeemably absurd; to write an epic poem for a modern, democratic republic seems at best strange and at worst pointless, an appropriation of a literary spirit so ancient that it appears a meaningless oddity for a nation whose origins are not shrouded deep in the mysteries of the past, like all those European countries with their medieval national epics from Spain’s *El Cid* to France’s *Song of Roland*. As Herman Melville would write, “We want no American Miltons.”

For Americans in the first generation after the Revolution, however, there was very much a desire to have, if not a few Miltons, at least a couple of Drydens, Richardsons, Popes, or Swifts, especially when *The Edinburgh Review* would ask with cavalier cruelty in 1820, “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” John Adams had famously claimed that he studied war so that his children could study economics and his grandchildren could engage in art and literature, but for men of Barlow’s disposition there was a desire to skip some of these steps. Emory Elliot writes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature* that the “host of celebratory

poems... called for the creation of a cultural climate in America in which the arts and letters would reach their highest form.” Novelists like Charles Brockden Brown in Philadelphia, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge on the western frontier, adapted the gothic and the picaresque to American climes, respectively, while the “Hartford Wits” such as Timothy Dwight (later president of Yale), John Trumbull, and Barlow, attempted to craft a novel American verse. “Columbia, Columbia, to glory rise, / The queen of the world, and the child of the skies!” intoned Dwight, for what he lacked in subtlety he made up for in enthusiasm. Much of this poetry existed as a specific rejoinder to the idea that only the British could produce English literature, but also—as in the case and cause of Barlow—to commemorate what they saw as a remarkable and unprecedented eschaton in the form of the American Revolution, which had turned the world upside down and leveled the feudal hierarchies that had dominated human civilization until that point. At least, that was their interpretation of 1776’s significance.

Compared to his peers, such as Dwight or Philip Freneau, Barlow was by far the most adamant, zealous, and messianic in his New World expectations, unusual as he was the most religiously free-thinking of the three. Perhaps this is not as unusual as might be expected at first consideration, once it’s admitted that Barlow replaced God with America. Writing in *The Columbiad*, a poem that culminates with what Goetzman describes as the poet’s “inevitable future of all mankind united in one religion, one language, and one Newtonian harmonious whole,” and that sees the establishment of a world capital built in Mesopotamia, Barlow imagines that:

Then shall your federal towers my bank adorn
All hail with me the great millennial morn
That gilds your capitol. Thence earth shall draw
Her first clear codes of liberty and law;
There public right a settled form shall find,
Truth trim her lamp to lighten humankind
Old Afric’s sons their shameful fetters cast,
Our wild Hesperians humanize at last,
All men participate, all time expand
The source of good my liberal sages plann’d.

While Barlow’s language is supremacist—imagining the indigenous “Hesperians” as needing to “humanize,” for example—it’s also ecumenical in a manner that eluded that presumptuous advocate of human equality, Thomas Jefferson. The poet envisions a fraternity of

humanity, with Africans emancipated and Indians given equal rights. This is, despite Barlow's secularism, a theological vision that is explicitly associated with his own jarring version of Christian eschatology in which, as Goetzman writes, the diplomat believed that "Science and republican progress, coupled with religion and the growing humanity of man, portended the millennium, which he believed would take place on earth before the second coming of God." There is an uncanny prophetic verisimilitude to the excerpt, those "federal towers" perhaps evoking the Washington Memorial, the "lamp to lighten humankind" recalling the Statue of Liberty, and yet it would be a mistake to interpret Barlow as a rank nationalist. As a supporter of the American Revolution, Barlow's loyalties were always with the latter word more than the former. Insomuch as he was an American, it was because like his friend Thomas Paine, he thought that the cause of the American Republic was the cause of mankind. Ruland and Bradbury argue that *The Columbiad* is "more than an epic... no mere call to arms but a celebration of the worldwide inculcation of American principles and a new, Deistic universal language."

A mythopoeic language, not just giving a litany of the features of the continent or recounting narratives about its discovery, but enchanting that same landscape with a significance beyond the literal, what Brackenridge and Philip Freneau expressed in their 1772 poem *The Raising Glory of America*, delivered on the steps of Princeton's Nassau Hall, as this transcendence of the "western world, / Where now the dawning light of science spreads. / Her orient ray, and wakes the muse's song." So much of what makes this verse ironic is that the poets who ham-handedly penned it wrote self-consciously in an almost absurdly old-fashioned idiom, its archaisms yoked to radical politics in an attempt to convey seriousness, just at the moment that all of this invoking of muses and singing of heroes became passé, since the novel had begun to supplant the epic as the consummate literary form. "No more of Britain, and her kings renown'd" earnestly write Freneau and Brackenridge, even while it's clear that theirs was an education which involved copious memorization of passages from Sir Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. "American writers were caught in a series of paradoxes," notes Goetzman. "They must look outward over the globe and yet inward at American soil and American things. They must speak with their own voices in the language of a disowned mother country," and they also had to financially compete with superior British writing which could sell more cheaply on an American market.

With all of those considerations, a poet like Barlow believed that American literature could be proven worthy by penning an epic, by giving the United States its *Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*. Radical in all matters other than aesthetics, Barlow's epic was the literary equivalent of the conclusion offered by the 1793 architectural commissioners planning Washington DC, who advocated for a

neoclassicism based on “a grandeur of conception, a Republican simplicity, and that true elegance of proportion, which correspond to a tempered freedom excluding Frivolity, the food of little minds.” From the moment of the Revolution onward, America was messier than all of this, of course. Epic, with its flat heroes and its didactic morals, would never be the operative mode for a complex, modern society. We speak of the “Great American Novel”; we have our *Moby-Dick* and our *The Great Gatsby*, *Beloved* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but we’ve no *Faerie Queene*—certainly not *The Columbiad*—because, by 1807, it would be impossible to write anything epic that didn’t sound at best like exercise and at worst like satire. Because it couldn’t be anything other, *The Columbiad*, it must be said, was a failure.

Yet to write only of literary success is fallacious, for the vast majority of literary attempts are literary failures, and we can learn something altogether different from those blessed blunders. Furthermore, if the United States themselves are essentially the greatest of poems (with apologies to Whitman), any honest and judicious accounting most also admit that with the gulf between intent and execution, the United States must also be accounted as among the greatest of *failed* poems. Barlow fell short in his desire to pen an epic on the “importance of republican institutions; as being the great foundation of public and private happiness, the necessary aliment of future and permeant ameliorations in the condition of human nature.” Still, his failure was no greater, and no more condemnatory, than the failure of the state that he celebrated as living up to its promise in the dedicatory preamble to the Declaration of Independence that “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,” but that was already a hypocrisy in a nation built on genocide and slavery the moment that quill hit parchment. This, of course, speaks to the central problem in *The Columbiad*, and that is Barlow’s Aeneas.

To valorize Columbus today—and it should be unequivocally stated that the navigator countenanced ethnic cleansing, committed atrocities, and initiated the exchange which resulted in millions of deaths—is problematic, to put it gently. But as concerns the epic, his Columbus is very much a fiction, a cipher, a symbol, a stand-in—a being who exists to be narrated toward, rather than to narrate. His status as a non-English origin for the United States—of a *republican* origin for the United States—animated some American progressives from Washington Irving to the immigrant rights groups that championed the Columbus Day holiday as an answer to nativist bigotry at the turn of the twentieth-century. As statues of the explorer come down throughout the nation—rightly so—*The Columbiad* provides a fascinating example of a work where the changing mores of a society contribute to the worth of the poem, because fundamentally what Barlow’s epic is about is *failure*. The gulf between what Barlow

promised and what he delivered is vast, but far less of a chasm than that between the highest ideals of the United States and the nation that actually exists. If the best of reading is an act of charity and grace, then returning to *The Columbiad* and understanding how Barlow intended it as a map not to the real United States, but to an imagined Edenic and utopian America, might get us, if not to the promised land, at least to a type of momentary respite.

Advocating for *The Columbiad* on aesthetic grounds, with its lapses into purple pabulum (for instance, describing how “freedom’s cause his patriot bosom warms”), would be a quixotic critical endeavor—though Barlow has a charm and earnestness which can be read separately from our own jaundiced irony. In a more charitable disposition from his earlier evaluation, Goetzman writes that *The Columbiad* “gave form to the revolutionary American’s quest for a world civilization... [a] sweeping, eclectic work of global scope” which is best described as a “poetic Palladian villa—almost a literary Monticello.” Such a description isn’t far-off, as the neo-classicism of Barlow’s Virgilian exercise is as conspicuous as the columns and dome on Jefferson’s plantation house, and yet in 2023, parallels between the poet and the president might not seem as laudatory as they did when Goetzman paid the faint compliment in 2009.

If promoting *The Columbiad* as worthwhile poetry might seem a bit eccentric, then in our current season of discontent, claiming any political utility in an epic celebrating Columbus as penned by a (minor) founding father would be borderline suicidal. Which is why I should steadfastly emphasize that that’s not what I wish to do; there are few literary historical essay types more tired and often unjustified than the variety whereby the overly clever critic attempts to mutilate this or that otherwise politically unacceptable past works into the Procrustean bed of currently approved sentiments. That being said, if one thrills to the clarion call for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness but rejects the hypocrite who penned those noble thoughts, Barlow does provide an opportunity for a Jeffersonianism without Jefferson, otherwise warm correspondence between the poet and the president showing the former vociferously denouncing slavery’s immorality to the latter.

What must be said about Barlow is that his politics weren’t just progressive, they were Jacobin—literally. This is reason enough to revisit Barlow the diplomat, who in matters of politics was much closer to Paine than Jefferson, going so far as to secure that oft-wretched pamphleteer from the Bastille when his commitment to liberty, equality, and fraternity proved even a bit too consistent for Robespierre’s liking. Detesting Napoleon as much as he did King George III (of whom he once wrote a song entitled “God Save the Guillotine”), Barlow was both a citizen of the United States and of France (even elected to the National Assembly), as well as a radical

republican and a committed democrat. His was an undeniably fascinating life—Barlow was a Deistic free-thinker and a veteran of the Battle of Long Island, a land speculator who sold plots in the Ohio Territory to wealthy Europeans, while unbeknownst to him his employers had no ownership to said claims, an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution, confidant to Jefferson, Paine, and the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, and the author of the U.S. treaty with the Barbary Coast Pirates, which helped to end centuries of kidnapping and forced servitude in the Mediterranean by the various corsair states of North Africa. A masterful diplomatic missive, Barlow's 1796 *Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States of America and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary* not only established commercial relationships between the U.S. and the privateering North African principalities, it also effectively ended the Barbary Coast slave trade that had existed since the sixteenth century, while also firmly and unequivocally defining his new nation as radically secular.

“As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion,” read Article II of *The Treaty of Tripoli*, and “as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility of Mussulmen; and as the said States never entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.” Only the second unanimously approved bill in the Senate, with the first a pro forma dedication honoring George Washington. If *The Columbiad* wasn't to be Barlow's great epic of American possibilities, then perhaps his *Treaty of Tripoli* was, though written not in prosody but statecraft (Barlow made the Arabic translation himself, incidentally). Barlow, diplomat and poet, democratic and republican, Jacobin and revolutionary, was a steadfast radical secularist who enshrined that value into the Congressional record, and yet who wrote an epic that though excoriated amongst religious conservatives (such as Dwight) as being an apostate's blasphemy, is still filled with temples and towers, rising suns and proverbial Sons, the future millennium and the brotherhood of man. His “many activities as well as his vision made him famous as a New World prophet,” as Goetzman writes.

What must be remembered is that secularism doesn't actually exist, at least not really. Yet it's one of the most important political virtues to be defended by our sacred honor. Epics like *The Columbiad*, Elliot argues, are “neoclassical in form but echo Puritan writing in content and imagery,” though I'd argue something similar for *The Treaty of Tripoli*. When Barlow assumes the possibility of a state not founded upon a religious foundation, he must draw from Protestant political assumptions, ranging from disestablishmentarianism to anti-episcopacy, for American secularism

is a particular Puritan heresy—in the same way that the French secularist tradition of *laïcité* could only have been derived from a Catholic context. Nothing is *sui generis*, not even secularism, and the assumptions made behind the separation of church and state are themselves “religious” assumptions, even if they are agnostic on questions of Christology, soteriology, eschatology, or whatever.

The gulf between what Barlow promised and what he delivered is vast, but far less of a chasm than that between the highest ideals of the United States and the nation that actually exists.

Secularism is itself one of the most radical of theological concepts; it transcendently imagines that we can exorcise ourselves of religious authority, the better to more fully and freely practice faith itself. In his epic, Barlow was not fleeing from religion—he was creating one. Keeping the pieties of the Puritan post-millennialism he would have imbibed during a Connecticut childhood, he replaced the promise of the Second Coming with that of universal revolution, and God was dethroned—just like a king—in favor of the idea of “America.” This America was not the nation bounded at the time by the Atlantic and the western frontier, the Canadian border and Key West, but rather a mystical, transcendent, universal America that signified the highest and most noble of aspirations, which Barlow found in the National Assembly of France, or on the road to Zarnowiec, or in an imagined future. This America is a theological concept, a specifically covenantal one.

At the culmination of *The Columbiad*, the angel describes to the navigator a distant future of iconoclastic rebellion, where the peoples of the earth heap into a pile various idols (including Christian ones) so that “Beneath the footstool of all destructive things, / The mast of priesthood and the mace of kings, / Lies trampled in the dust; for here at last / Fraud, folly, error all their emblems cast... Swords, sceptres, miters, crowns and globes and stars, / Codes of false fame and stimulates to wars / Sink in the settling mass.” It is almost a ridiculous Enlightenment image in its democratic enthusiasms, and in keeping with Barlow’s Jacobin sympathies, but it is also, ironically, a religious vision as well (in keeping with the angel who narrates it).

Barlow’s cagey theological brilliance, which is lacking in crasser critics of organized religion, consisted in his understanding of the intrinsic power of narrative to impart transcendence, enchantment, and most of all meaning. With his poem, Barlow attempted to generate a new scripture for a new faith. He failed, but he wasn’t wrong to

understand that faiths need scriptures. Communities are bound in common purpose, by the stories which they tell, and in an anticipation of the best of the American tradition, Barlow envisioned a covenantal definition of Americanness that had nothing to do with ethnicity or language, race or religion, or even nationality for that matter, but to a promised and perfected “interminable reign” of freedom, justice, equality, and prosperity. That “America,” the word which he uses to describe that imagined state, bears little similarity to the United States of America, with its growing void between the wealthy and the rest, its massive imprisoned population, its disenfranchised swaths, and its terrorized communities of the marginalized. This is less a matter of Barlow’s error than of *The Columbiad’s* promise.

Like all prophetic poet-priests, Barlow knows that although the exact nature of a sacred scripture is arbitrary, the need for some kind of scripture is incontrovertible. America wasn’t born in 1776—or 1619—or 1492. No people are ever so clearly birthed; the work of the historian is just as much the vocation of the poet. The question becomes what should our scripture be, and Barlow deftly tried to square the contradictions of a barbarous place into a tale of universal redemption that would speak to everyone, even while such a goal was not possible—though the attempt is never without purpose. Like America, Barlow’s poem finds a certain victory in its failures, for while the narrative is still being written there remains room for hope. “American art was a promise as yet unredeemed,” write Bradburt and Ruland, and that remains true of the nation as well, for “America was the present, rushing, potential, time-bound, political... the prodigious but still unwritten and unfelt grandeur of prairie, river, mountain and forest,” the same today as it was when Barlow’s epic was written. That Barlow’s purpose and subject are so divergent is a divine contradiction that inadvertently speaks to the complexities of the country which he celebrated; a gesture towards not a nation that exists, but towards an imagined utopia to which we can ever strive, and towards the nature of that covenant itself.

God's Friends

Natalie Van Deusen

Sigrid Undset, *Olav Audunssøn I: Vows*. Translated by Tiina Nunnally. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 376 pp., \$18 paper.

Sigrid Undset, *Olav Audunssøn II: Providence*. Translated by Tiina Nunnally. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 280 pp., \$18 paper.

SIGRID UNSET, WHO WAS AWARDED THE NOBEL PRIZE IN Literature in 1928, is without question one of Norway's most famous and influential novelists. That she became her country's first female Nobel laureate "principally for her powerful descriptions of Northern life during the Middle Ages" seems a natural consequence of her upbringing.¹ Her father, an archaeologist working at the Museum of Antiquities in Oslo, introduced her at a young age to the material and literary worlds of the Middle Ages.² Her mother, who homeschooled her until she was eight, taught her Scandinavian folktales and Danish history, and at the age of ten, during a visit to her father's family in Trøndelag, Undset read the Old Norse-Icelandic epic *Njáls saga*, which she later referred to as "A Book that was a Turning Point in my Life."³

Undset is perhaps best-known for her *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-22) trilogy, which factored greatly into her receipt of the Nobel Prize, and which centers on the young woman for whom the work is named and follows her life in fourteenth-century Norway. The *Olav Audunssøn* tetralogy (1925-27), too, is set in Norway's Middle Ages, and Kristin Lavransdatter's parents make a brief appearance in one of the volumes. The books were originally translated to English between 1928

1 Horst Frenz, ed., *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967* (Amsterdam: Elsevier), p. 250.

2 Claudia Berguson, "Sigrid Undset," in *Twentieth-Century Norwegian Writers*, ed. Tanya Thresher (Detroit: Thomson Gale), p. 298.

3 Tordis Ørjasæter, *Menneskenes hjertes. Sigrid Undset—en livshistorie*, second edition (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2011), p. 25-28, 38.

and 1930 by Alfred G. Chater; the first and second volumes, which were originally published in Norwegian in 1925 under the title *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken* (Olav Audunssøn at Hestviken), are given the titles *The Axe* and *The Snake Pit*. The third and fourth volumes, translated from the Norwegian *Olav Audunssøn og hans barn* (Olav Audunssøn and his Children, 1927), were titled *In the Wilderness*, and *The Son Avenger*. These remained the sole English translations of the Olav Audunssøn saga until Tiina Nunnally's new translation of the first volume appeared in 2020 with the University of Minnesota Press, followed in 2021 by the second volume; the third volume appeared in 2022, and the fourth, that will complete the tetralogy is presumably in progress or forthcoming. Nunnally, who is both a novelist herself as well as an award-winning translator of works from Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, also translated the *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy (1997, 1999, and 2000), as well as Undset's more contemporary novel *Jenny* (1998).

The present two works—published as the first and second volumes of the larger tetralogy—are translations of the two parts that comprise Undset's 1925 *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken* (Olav Audunssøn at Hestviken). Rather than using Chater's *The Axe* and *The Snake Pit* as titles for these first two volumes, Nunnally opted for *Vows* and *Providence*, which reflect the dominant themes on which each volume centres, and which connect to the larger influences on Undset's writing at the time.

The first volume, *Vows*, is set in eastern Norway (in the Oslo fjord region) during the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century, at the time of the country's turbulent civil war era. As a child, Olav Audunssøn is given as a foster child to his father's old friend, Steinfinn Toressøn, and betrothed to Steinfinn's daughter, Ingunn. The book follows the children's upbringings at Frettastein as foster brother and sister and the evolution of their

relationship to that of a betrothed couple, and the many trials and tribulations they endured as a result of a variety of fateful events and decisions, including betrayal, infidelity, and murder. The second volume, *Providence*, follows the couple as they settle and begin a family at Olav's ancestral home at Hestviken with a hope of starting anew. However, the tragedy of Olav's life and of his and Ingunn's love story continues to unfold with the events of the first volume looming large over both husband and wife, as well as their children.

A significant influence on many of Undset's works was her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1924.⁴ She credited the stories of holy men and women, which she read at the age of eighteen when she borrowed C.R. Unger's *Heilagra manna sögur* (1877) from her local library, as one of the reasons she turned to Catholicism: "...I had ventured too near the abode of truth in my researches about 'God's friends,' as the Saints are called in the Old Norse texts of Catholic times. So I had to submit."⁵ Consequently, hagiography became a significant focus of her literary production, and from 1920 on she wrote numerous works on saints—both Norwegian and foreign, from the Middle Ages and later periods. The influence of Undset's Catholic faith is also apparent throughout the first two volumes of the *Olav Audunssøn* tetralogy translated thus far, particularly in Olav's inner battle between his own will and his Christian piety, which Nunnally captures elegantly in her translation. Vivid pictures are painted of the medieval Catholic church in Norway, of the lives of monks and clergy, and of the broader importance of Christian repentance and forgiveness of sins.

Tiina Nunnally breathes new life into the first two volumes of the *Olav Audunssøn* tetralogy, reflecting beautifully Undset's Norwegian prose and her eloquent storytelling style. This reviewer very much looks forward to reading the next two volumes, which will bring the tale of Olav Audunssøn (and his children) to a conclusion. A

4 Anna Clara Törnqvist, "Legendens etik och erotik: Ett möte mellan Sigrid Undset, Selma Lagerlöf och Santa Caterina av Siena." *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 34:4 (2005), p. 47.

5 Stanley Kunitz, ed., "Sigrid Undset." In *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (New York: Wilson), p. 1433.

A large, stylized outline of the number 5, rendered in a clean, modern font. The number is positioned on the left side of the page.

**THE PAST
IS PRESENT**

“My Side of the Line”

The Punisher and Vigilante Violence in Contemporary America

Peter Ingrao

ON JANUARY 6TH, 2021, thousands of Donald Trump supporters stormed the Capitol Building where Congress was beginning the electoral vote count. Five deaths and well over a hundred injuries to Capitol Police Officers, among others, were the result.¹ Even before this unprecedented show of vigilante violence, Americans had suffered a string of mass shootings dating back several years. CBS News reported that 417 mass shootings took place in 2019, noting that this number surpasses the number of days in a single year, and this heartbreaking trend continues.² If, as Rand Richard Cooper astutely argues in “Devilish Adaptations,” cinematic and televised representations of superheroes “offer us a view of our collective self, revealing the underlying urgencies of the moment,” how do we now assess antiheroes such as the Punisher who take the law into their own hands and seek “justice” at the smoking muzzle of a gun?

1 Duignan, Brian. “United States Capitol attack of 2021.” *Britannica*, 2021, www.britannica.com/event/United-States-Capitol-attack-of-2021. Accessed 1 February 2021.

2 Silverstein, Jason. “There were more mass shootings than days in 2019.” *CBS News*, 2020, www.cbsnews.com/news/mass-shootings-2019-more-than-days-365. Accessed 7 December 2020.

For Cooper, the 2004 *Punisher* film, directed by Jonathan Hensleigh and starring Thomas Jane as Frank Castle, aka the “Punisher,” comments on the War on Terror that began shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, with the Punisher as “a Special Forces veteran” who “takes brutal action to punish ‘the evildoers’ for spilling innocent American blood”; as the Punisher states, “Those who do evil to others... will come to know me well.”³ Here a clear definition of “evil” is put forth in evoking the terrorist attacks of 9/11, but superheroes also diachronically function to emphasize changing cultural concerns and shifting definitions of “evil.” Throughout his now forty-seven-year career that has included “11 ongoing series, 25 limited series, 33 one-shot titles, 11 crossover events and several standalone graphic novels... feature-length movies and shorts... video games... animated television programs and films... and endless licensed products, from socks, hats and t-shirts to action figures,” the Punisher has emblemized not only American military might, but also the vigilante cinema of the 1970s, and the

3 Cooper, Rand Richards. “Devilish Adaptations: *The Punisher and Hellboy*.” *Commonweal*, vol. 131, no. 10, 21 May 2004, pp. 19-20.

concept of the antihero who seeks to do “good” but in a manner that all too well reflects the evil of recent mob violence and mass shootings.⁴

Created by Gerry Conway, who states that his “idea of the Punisher was that he was a guy who was driven by his need for vengeance but was not so driven that he couldn’t see what was going on around him,” the character first appears in a story entitled “The Punisher Strikes Twice!” in *The Amazing Spider-Man* Number 129 (February, 1974) where he foils Spider-Man. In that story, the Punisher’s permanent solution, of killing criminals whom he deems guilty, is opposed to Spidey’s practice of remanding them to police custody, only to escape to fight our friendly neighborhood web-head once again.⁵ Renowned comics scholar Peter Coogan argues for the manner in which a character’s costume reflects their mission and identity, and Kent Worcester, in “The Punisher: Marvel Universe icon and murderous antihero,” comments upon the manner in which the Punisher’s costume mirrors his insistence that in permanently putting down criminals he is simply doing what has to be done: “The character’s morbid outfit—black Kevlar bodysuit, ammunition belt, oversized skull-face emblem, white gloves and boots—underscored the binary nature of his thinking and implicitly disdained the snazzier-clothing styles favored by Spidey and others.”⁶ Even the Punisher’s name, “Frank Castle,” speaks to an immutable binary, an impervious fortress of determination.

Worcester argues for the significance of the Punisher’s 1974 introduction as a form

4 Worcester, Kent. “The Punisher: Marvel Universe icon and murderous antihero.” *Antihero*, edited by Rebecca Stewart. Intellect, 2016, pp. 35.

5 DiPaolo, Marc. *War, Politics, and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*. McFarland, 2011.

6 Worcester, pp. 36-37.

Worcester notes that the Punisher, unlike previous cinematic vigilante characters such as Dirty Harry, “derives pleasure from killing... despite his protestations.”

of escapism, occurring at a time when American culture embraced “the crusading vigilante [who] was flourishing on the movie screen” in such films as *Billy Jack* and *Dirty Harry* (both 1971), and *Death Wish* (1974), as a reflection of “the bitter impact of the Vietnam War on service personnel, their families and their local communities, as well as the larger crime rates of the 1970s.”⁷ Such commentary places the vigilante if not in a sympathetic light, then at least in an optic of anti-war critique. By comparison, Marc DiPaolo shifts focus away from the Vietnam conflict, but adds further political gloss to Worcester’s argument in *War, Politics, and Superheroes*, when he states that the Punisher represents the fears of the New Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s that a liberal permissive establishment were too soft on crime. DiPaolo defines *Dirty Harry* as: “A reflection of the grim mood gripping the nation... Enraged with an incompetent mayor and cadre of officials who seem unable to do anything... Dirty Harry goes rogue... frees the children, and summarily executes [their kidnapper] with his impressive .44 Magnum.”⁸ Again, the vigilante emerges from DiPaolo’s analysis of *Dirty Harry* as an escapist figure; a vicarious realization of “justice” where established

7 Worcester, p. 36.

8 DiPaolo, p. 122.

forms of law enforcement fail. Greg Garrett identifies the failure of established forms of law enforcement as key to the definition of a “vigilante”: “the word... first came into usage in English in America in the mid-nineteenth century to describe ‘a member of a self-appointed group of citizens who undertake law enforcement in their community without legal authority, typically because the legal agencies are thought to be inadequate.’”⁹ By this definition, heroic and inspirational characters such as Batman and Spider-Man, among many others, are all vigilantes, but, on the other hand, so are the vigilantes who comprised the mob that stormed the Capitol, and the Punisher seems closer in his methodology to these real-life vigilantes.

Speaking to the ideology of intolerance that led to the attack on the Capitol, DiPaolo notes that, “The Punisher reflects and amplifies the tendencies of conservative readers to, in a racist fashion, scapegoat entire groups for the problems of society without thinking of meaningful ways of dealing with poverty and crime,” This idea is well-expressed in episode one, season two of Netflix’s *Daredevil*, entitled “Bang,” in which the Punisher (Jon Bernthal) slaughters a group of stereotypical Mafiosi.¹⁰ In a scene that pays homage to Garth Ennis’s gritty, ultraviolent approach to writing the character for Marvel Comics, bullets rip through the window of the room where the Mafiosi have gathered and tear them to pieces in slow motion. Notably, the Punisher’s primary targets consist of Italian-Americans, Black, and Latinx characters, groups, as DiPaolo argues, that have traditionally been blamed by racist individuals as the cause of crime and urban

decline in America’s inner cities. In the “Whirlwind” episode that concludes the second season of *The Punisher* on Netflix, the Punisher walks calmly into a meeting between two gangs composed of primarily Black members. When his presence is noticed, he sweeps back his coat to raise two fully automatic rifles. The final image is of Frank screaming with rage (and perhaps glee) as he unloads both rifles, the Punisher skull logo illuminated by muzzle flare. Although such a moment is an obvious appeal to fandom—in concluding not only the season but also the series with an iconic pose which engages Liam Burke’s definition of “fidelity” as a comic book film adaptation remaining faithful to its source—it simultaneously informs DiPaolo’s reading of the character as a “racial purist” whose approach to crime represents a “white-supremacist, wish-fulfillment fantasy” that fails dialogue about “thinking about how to fix the problems of the decaying inner cities in America.”¹¹

The primary point of dialogue surrounding the Punisher, then, and one that does classify him more as an antihero than a superhero, is his willingness to resort, unlike Batman or Spider-Man, to a permanent solution in killing those he deems criminals, the majority of whom, moreover, are minorities. Consider that as of 2016 Worcester attributes a staggering body count of approximately 48,000 to the character across his numerous iterations.¹² As both progeny and prodigy of the vigilante films in which one man’s action becomes necessary because of a failure in society, Worcester nevertheless notes that the Punisher, unlike previous cinematic vigilante characters such as Dirty Harry, “derives pleasure from killing... despite his protestations.”¹³ He concludes that, “The

9 Garrett, Greg. *Holy Superheroes: Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 67.

10 DiPaolo, p. 135.

11 DiPaolo, pp. 135-136.

12 Worcester, p. 35.

13 Worcester, p. 41.

Punisher's open-ended war on crime provides a template for what *should never be allowed to happen*," a point that DiPaolo also acknowledges: "the Punisher may be read as a morality tale warning against the spiritual emptiness, never-ending horizons, and perpetually escalating cycle of violence that ensues when the thirst for vengeance overtakes the need for justice."¹⁴ Even though we might vicariously understand the appeal of vigilantes such as Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) in 2008's *Taken*, after all "who would not go to extreme lengths to protect one's family?," characters such as the Punisher become problematic "after the family member in question has been rescued or avenged, and the angry white male protagonist continues to wage an indiscriminate war on crime with the same savage intensity he had employed while out to avenge a wronged family member."¹⁵

Worcester and DiPaolo raise important questions in light of Cooper's assertion that superheroes provide a palimpsest for a collective cultural self. In "Le Western Noir': *The Punisher* as Revisionist Superhero Western," Lorrie Palmer further argues for a collective self that longs to see and experience "both darkness and light in our heroes."¹⁶ In so doing, Palmer seeks to mitigate the Punisher's heart of darkness by balancing it against the belief that "family is about sanctuary and... provides a human element to the nearly machine-like Frank Castle."¹⁷ Levi-Strauss argues that the fundamental dichotomy in human society is civilization versus wilderness, and from this Palmer derives a series of oppositions such as good versus evil, or the Punisher's

solitary violence in contrast to the redemptive power of his family.

The Punisher might then be read as a character divided between two power systems and who thus must navigate shifting dynamics of male power.¹⁸ Though speaking explicitly to the 2004 Thomas Jane film, Palmer's commentary concerning the mitigating influence of family on the Punisher applies well to characters in both Netflix's *Daredevil* and *The Punisher*. Though Frank makes alliances with characters such as Curtis Hoyle and David "Microchip" Lieberman in *The Punisher*, here I have chosen to focus upon Karen Page as representative, due to her presence in both the *Daredevil* and *Punisher* series.

Karen (Deborah Ann Wohl) meets Frank in season two of *Daredevil*, and she views him not as a machine-like killer, but rather as a veteran suffering from the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This presentation of Frank agrees with DiPaolo's argument that the true origin of the Punisher lies not with the murder of Frank's family, but rather with overseas American military action. While the comic books, such as those penned by Ennis, do position Frank in Vietnam, both *Daredevil* and the two seasons of *The Punisher*, as well as the 2004 film, retcon the character as a veteran of American military action in the Middle East. Such an approach does introduce into the Punisher origin story the possibility that the character, rather than embracing his own heart of darkness, suffers from PTSD: "Even though most veterans did not return to witness their families killed by the Mafia, many did effectively lose their families to the war. They found themselves unable to reconcile the events they had witnessed... with a placid domestic life."¹⁹

14 Worcester, p. 42; DiPaolo, p. 128.

15 DiPaolo, p. 125.

16 Palmer, Lorrie. "Le Western Noir': *The Punisher* as Revisionist Superhero Western." *The Amazing Transforming Superhero*, edited by Terrence R. Wandtke, McFarland, 2007, p. 192.

17 Palmer, p. 199.

18 Palmer, p. 194.

19 DiPaolo, pp. 117-118.

Instead of the Punisher confronting an enemy who, he deems, needs to be killed, for a moment we might see Frank as one traumatized veteran attempting to connect with another.

The “New York’s Finest” episode of *Daredevil* concludes with Karen examining an X-ray which shows a traumatic injury to Frank’s skull that he received during combat. Though the manner in which the camera frames the X-ray foreshadows the skull that Frank creates as the Punisher’s logo, it also presents him as a damaged man worthy of sympathy and understanding, and Karen tries to fill this role for Frank. After the police arrest Frank, Karen is instrumental in Matt Murdock’s defending him in court and argues for a defense based upon his injury in tandem with PTSD in episode seven, “Semper Fidelis.” Moreover, in season two, episode six, of *Daredevil*, “Regrets Only,” it is Karen who helps Frank remember the happiness he felt with his family. Tearfully, he thanks her for this and two will continue to bond, with Frank saving Karen’s life in *The Punisher* series.

In episode ten of the first season of *The Punisher*, “Virtue of the Vicious,” Frank rescues Karen from Lewis, another soldier who has been driven to violence as the result of PTSD. In the kitchen of a grand hotel, Lewis has strapped Karen with a bomb. Frank, unarmed, first seeks to reason with Lewis. Even unarmed, the viewer knows that Frank represents more than a formidable opponent, so that the departure from his usual modus operandi as the Punisher is worthy of commentary. Instead of the Punisher confronting an enemy who, he deems, needs to be killed, for a moment we might see Frank as one traumatized veteran attempting to connect with another. He tells Lewis, “You and me, we

are the same. We try to pretend that there is something more, something noble. Brothers-in-arms, right?”²⁰

Simultaneously, Frank’s distancing himself from the usual violence he employs comes from concern, as Palmer argues, for Karen, his “family.” Following her rescue, Karen herself states of Frank that, “He was looking out for me. Frank Castle is not a terrorist,” when a police SWAT team corners him.²¹ Though such moments do provide another optic for viewing Frank’s characterization as the Punisher, it might be asked if these same moments are not as equally and rapidly deconstructed. After Karen is safe, Lewis locks himself in a storage room in the kitchen and the viewer witnesses a sharp change in Frank’s demeanor as he now encourages a cornered Lewis, who is safe from him behind a reinforced door, to take his own life and die “like a soldier” by denotating a bomb.²² As Frank notes in the previous episode of season one, “Front Toward Enemy,” he plans to kill rather than redeem Lewis, since “This piece of shit is going after Karen.”²³

In line with such examples concerning Karen from the Netflix *Daredevil* and *Punisher* series, Worchester disagrees with Palmer’s thesis concerning the humanization of Frank via surrogate familial ties, arguing that “When the Punisher dons his costume, it is more like a

²⁰ Lightfoot, Steve, creator. *The Punisher*. Netflix, 2017.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

uniform than a disguise. The character has no family or friends to protect, nor does he struggle to contain his inner demons.”²⁴ Though he does attract allies such as Karen, Worchester asserts that the Punisher fails to form meaningful relationships. For example, in episode thirteen, season two, of Netflix’s *Daredevil*, entitled “A Cold Day in Hell’s Kitchen,” Frank returns to his family’s home. On the one hand, Frank has lost touch with his former life and cannot re-incorporate himself, as we see when he opens the piano but then stops before beginning to play. Frank is next seen in his family’s kitchen, a room with an abandoned, haunted feeling. Sitting in a chair at the kitchen table which is still set for a meal which never did nor will take place, Frank opens an old newspaper which bears the headline: “FRANK CASTLE DEAD.”²⁵ In the family garage where all his tools are still neatly on display, Frank “gets to work” by creating the Punisher’s infamous skull logo. Palmer reads the skull as the part of Frank “that died with his family as well as his own eventual status as a bringer of death to those he hunts.”²⁶

In a dramatic final image, Frank sets fire to his home. As it burns in the background, Frank walks ever closer to the camera in the foreground until the skull on his shirt fills the entire frame. The overall symbolism is quite clear: Frank has died and now only the Punisher remains. As Frank tells *Daredevil* in episode eleven, season two, entitled, “11.03.88,” he is a man who needs a war and

once “You cross over to my side of the line... You don’t get to come back from that.”²⁷ We note a similar treatment of the character in DiPaolo’s discussion of Michael France’s idea for the 2004 film screenplay: “Frank Castle the family man dies with his family and he reverts to... a completely ruthless psycho who goes after the mobsters who killed his family.”²⁸ Even the introductory credits of *The Punisher* series conclude with an arsenal of guns coming together to form the show’s title suggesting in terms of architextuality that the Punisher is nothing more than a walking personification of mob and gun violence in America.

The pattern that emerges is one in which Frank Castle, the Punisher, is a more complex character than we might at first assume. He is capable of moments of human connection, but these never last for him. In the same manner, his memory of his family during his night with Beth Quinn (Alexa Davalos) in episode one of season two of *The Punisher*, “Roadhouse Blues,” quickly transitions into another memory of his brutally beating the man who killed his family. In the same episode, he continues to wear his wedding ring against his chest, though this is covered by his body armor and skull logo. Ultimately, in the multitude of readings surrounding him, he is an emblem of a violence that has become all too common, as well as a call for discussion of the importance of connecting with others in an honest and compassionate manner to try to prevent the same. A

24 Worchester, pp. 39-40.

25 Goddard, Drew, creator. *Daredevil*. Netflix, 2015.

26 Palmer, pp. 202-203.

27 Goddard, op. cit.

28 DiPaolo, p. 133.

Rape, Race, and the Politics of Feminist Armed Resistance

Anne Gray Fischer

IN OCTOBER 1974, A HALF-DOZEN WHITE WOMEN IN DALLAS formed Women Armed for Self-Protection (WASP) and posted a blistering open letter to the city: “WE SUPPORT IMMEDIATE AND DRASTIC RETALIATION AGAINST ALL RAPISTS.” Since the early 1970s, predominantly white women in cities across the U.S. had begun to gather together and publicly testify to their experiences of sexual assault. Nikki Craft and the unnamed co-founders of WASP reflected this new generation of activism, outraged by the elemental and everyday sexist violence proliferating in what feminists were increasingly naming rape culture. Rape, they argued, was not a pathological excess of male lust, but rather a political tool to enforce women’s subordination. Because rape was an expression of power, and not desire, political institutions sustained sexual violence. In their letter, WASP outlined the structural failures of the legal system to protect women. Marital rape, for example, was legal, and would remain so in Texas for two more decades. In cases of non-spousal assault, agents of the state—police, prosecutors, public defenders, and judges— “[put women] on trial instead of the rapist.” Rape only became a real, urgent crime when the alleged perpetrators were “minority and low income males,” the members of WASP wrote. “White, middle and upper income males often have seeming immunity.”

WASP argued that only white men had uncontested claims to one of this nation’s “most cherished freedoms”: the right to bear arms. White men’s monopoly on Second Amendment rights bolstered gender inequality in political citizenship “that encourages rape.” For the women of WASP, there was tremendous power in refusing the dubious protections of patriarchy, and in turning white men’s own weapons

against them. WASP members educated themselves and trained other women on gun precision and safety. They argued that by engaging in armed self-defense, women were demonstrating their inherent value in a society that insisted on their subjugation. “Women must perceive themselves as being worth defending,” WASP wrote in an undated statement of purpose. “In a life threatening situation there must be no hesitation to pull the trigger.” WASP’s activity was brief, lasting less than a year, and their public-facing work primarily revolved around graffiti stunts, leafletting, and court-watching. But their activism demands a reckoning, not because of what this group of white feminists believed, but because of what they neglected to confront: the specific operation of white womanhood in the modern history of violence in the U.S.

The brutal overthrow of Reconstruction was powered by the sexual politics of patriarchal white supremacy. In the years before the Civil War, abolitionists had exposed how enslavers sexually assaulted enslaved women and, in this way, reproduced the legal institution of slavery. After emancipation, white southern men deployed a campaign of white moral panic and “flipped the antebellum script,” as historian Crystal Feimster has written, recasting Black men as rapists of white women and inaugurating a reign of lynch terror on behalf of pure white womanhood. At the turn of the twentieth century, antilynching journalist and activist Ida B. Wells was exiled from the South after she broke the prevailing silence on the “myth of the Black rapist.” She unmasked the pretense of white chivalry that authorized anti-Black violence in service to the white reclamation of political and economic power. “No one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of the million mulattoes in the South,” Wells wrote, referring to the systematic white sexual abuse of Black women in her 1895 pamphlet *The Red Record*, “will for a minute conceive that the southern white man had a very chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his own race or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power.” Wells defied white vengeance to document the blood-soaked regime that had been built on appeals to the protection of white womanhood—a regime that murdered Black men and women, obscured the vulnerability of Black women to sexual violence, and enforced white women’s submission to the patriarchal authority of their white “protectors.”

As Wells labored to publicize her findings, she issued a call to arms to Black people that the white women of WASP would take up eighty years later: “A Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give,” she wrote. Wells and WASP would surely agree that “women must perceive themselves as being worth defending.” But white women also had to recognize the ways in which their defense could generate new forms of violence against Black men and women.

The histories of racism, rape, and reproductive coercion—and the women harmed by this violence—are bound up together in the U.S. It follows, then, that white women’s struggles for bodily autonomy are incomplete if they aren’t connected with struggles for Black freedom.

Albert Perry grew up in Austin, Texas, but while stationed in Monroe, North Carolina during World War II, he met and married a local woman, Bertha. After the war, Perry earned his medical degree at Meharry Medical College in Tennessee, the first historically Black medical school in the South, and returned to Bertha’s hometown to start his practice. As a successful Black professional, a treasured community physician, and vice president of the local NAACP chapter, Dr. Perry was a frequent target of white supremacist hate. In 1957, Monroe police arrested Perry, charging him with performing a “criminal abortion on a white woman” named Lily May Rape. As historian Timothy Tyson writes, Rape’s striking name was too poetic, “as though she were a fictional character created especially for the part of defiled white womanhood.” Perry insisted that he had not provided criminalized reproductive healthcare for Rape; but Perry *did* provide reproductive healthcare for the Black women of Monroe. When it was dangerous for any Black person, to say nothing of such a prominent community leader, to be out at night in the South, “many were the nights when Dr. Perry risked his life against Klan threats to deliver a baby for a woman who didn’t have a penny,” one woman recalled. Through the control of white women’s bodily autonomy—the criminalization of “abortion on a white woman”—North Carolina authorities enforced racist hierarchies that blocked Black women’s access to their own reproductive healthcare provider.

Doubtless, the “illiterate and impoverished” Rape was just as desperate as Black women in Monroe for control over her reproductive destiny: she and Perry agreed that she had visited his office three times begging for an abortion, after all the white doctors she had approached refused her. Regardless of whether Perry reluctantly provided the service or Rape took matters into her own hands, Rape was hospitalized shortly thereafter and reportedly miscarried. Feverish, scared, and in serious trouble as she likely underwent the routine interrogation that white women suspected of illegal abortions were subjected to, Rape was able to deflect punishment by turning the police on Perry—by leveraging a well-worn and readily accessible script of her violated white womanhood against predatory Black manhood. Depending on their target, white women defending themselves could potently challenge, or violently support, white supremacy. But the Black women of Monroe, like Wells before them, recognized that the Black freedom struggle necessarily meant the conjoined struggle *for*

women's bodily autonomy and *against* the patriarchal ideology of white purity. And they were determined to practice what Wells called "self-help": to take up arms in this fight.

As Perry sat in jail, detained by the police chief who refused to let the doctor go, Black women rushed to his defense. Dozens of women armed themselves with butcher knives, hatchets, shotguns, and pistols and crowded into the police station demanding Perry's release. "And when the chief seemed slow about arranging bail, and bringing the doctor up from the basement, where he was being held alone," *Jet* reported, "the crowd got fidgety, surged against the doors, fingered their guns and knives until Perry was produced." When at last the doctor was brought upstairs, the women cheered. In their armed mobilization, they had not just recovered their doctor. They had won a battle in the long struggle for reproductive control over their own bodies.

Black women were governed by a state that was at once actively hostile to, and negligent of, their physical protection. Many of them refused Black men's patriarchal authority over "their" women, and claimed their own power to defend themselves and their community. By seizing white men's customary means of domination, the Black women who armed themselves in the name of their bodily sovereignty were an inherent threat to the white social order. This is most clearly seen in the state's typical response to armed Black women: the centuries between enslavement and the present day are rife with the punishment of Black women who engaged in self-protection, from Celia—an enslaved woman executed by the state of Missouri in 1855 for killing her enslaver-rapist—to contemporary incarcerated survivors of intimate partner abuse fighting the criminalization of their self-defense through the organization Survived and Punished. The women's victory in the packed Monroe police station was as rare as it was brief: in 1958, the North Carolina Supreme Court denied Perry's last appeal and sentenced him to five years in prison. The incarceration of a Black doctor for allegedly performing an abortion on a white woman served no one except the enforcers of the white patriarchal regime. Lily May Rape may have been spared legal punishment, but the same laws that structured the lives of Black men and women in the South harmed Lily May Rape, too—even as the law was enforced in her name.

Twenty years later, WASP's racial myopia stunted the reach of their activism. As part of their messaging campaign, WASP created posters featuring a white woman in a leather jacket holding a rifle. The caption read: "Men and women were created equal...and Smith & Wesson makes damn sure it stays that way." Writing themselves into the Declaration of Independence—deliberately standing shoulder to

shoulder with the nation's white colonial founders—WASP members showcased the instability of white women's armed defense, leaving open a pathway to white women's gender equity made possible by Black and Indigenous subjugation. WASP's targets were clear—white patriarchy and the cultural and legal systems that upheld white men's power—but their analysis reproduced a classic form of intersectional erasure that universalized the experiences of womanhood as white and rendered Black women invisible. "In Texas the right to bear arms is not only a constitutional one, but it's a god given one," WASP leader Nikki Craft wrote. "This applies to everyone except blacks and women." Where were the Black women in Craft's "blacks and women" formulation? Black feminists Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith named the invisibility of Black women in the title of their 1982 anthology, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*: some Black women had practiced armed self-defense for generations.

WASP was certainly not alone in their failure of feminist imagination. Intersectional erasure was characteristic of dominant white second-wave feminism. In 1975, one year after WASP circulated its open letter to the city of Dallas, Susan Brownmiller published *Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, delivering white feminist analysis of sexual assault to mainstream readers. Brownmiller severed the historic interconnections of race and gender when she wrote, "Rape is to women as lynching was to blacks: the ultimate physical threat by which all men keep all women in a state of psychological intimidation." By focusing exclusively on the harms of white patriarchy to a universal womanhood drained of its racial specificity, these white feminists erased a century of lynching terror enforced in the name of raped white womanhood and the enduring neglect of Black women who were profoundly and unequally vulnerable to sexist and racist violence.

WASP's first action involving Black women was also the group's finale. It did not involve any weapons. Instead, WASP members observed a rape trial for a "white middle-class male" charged with the rape of a Black sex worker, during which the white man stayed silent while the Black woman endured an extended interrogation about her previous sexual and drug histories. The all-white jury found him not guilty and the WASP members "went into a frenzied rage that lasted for days." Working with the Black survivor and two of her friends, WASP members printed thousands of leaflets with facts of the trial alongside the white man's address, workplace, and photographs the women had taken of him outside the courtroom. Rather than circulating the leaflet to the Black sex workers who would be most exposed to this man's predations, WASP members worked to maximize shame and extralegal punishment by targeting the man's white neighborhood and workplace. Craft reported that within a week, he had been fired from his job of ten years. We don't know what happened to the Black woman

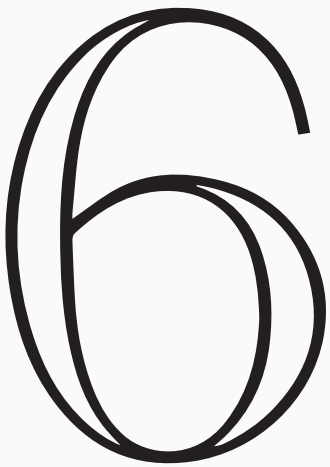
and her friends who worked on this action: were they empowered to defend themselves? Did they generate the ideas and agenda for this action? Did they consider one white man's economic punishment a victory in a city structured by sexist, anti-Black violence? We don't know because the white women—"badly in need of rest"—decided that WASP had "ceased to meet our needs" and disbanded.

WASP consistently receives a brief mention in histories of armed feminist resistance to male violence, the group's name doing sufficient work to index the outer limits of women's activism during this era of self-defense classes, battered women's shelters, and legal defense campaigns for women charged with killing their attackers. Even if WASP was merely a brief provocation, the political instability of white women with guns, and the unrelenting persistence of violence against women, demands a careful accounting of the group's work. WASP addressed the city of Dallas in their open letter and observed court proceedings—they developed a gender analysis of how women were made structurally vulnerable to state-sanctioned rape—but they directed their outrage to punish individual men without a simultaneous effort to help build interracial analysis and community among women. The choice to target individual men rather than the sprawling power of interlocking state systems that enable violence against women made strategic sense for a group that had never planned "to build an institution," as Craft wrote. But by resorting to a politics of targeting monstrous men rather than the racially distinct harms of structural violence, WASP's work sits comfortably in a genealogy of white women boosting the National Rifle Association as a

source of feminist empowerment and guns as the “great equalizer.” In this contemporary form of white women’s armed politics, scholar Caroline Light argues, “the promise of ‘gun rights’ for women thereby instrumentalizes feminist rage” in service to militarized white supremacists, the inheritors of the lynch regime.

WASP’s focus on rape foreclosed any links between other harms of patriarchal control. Formed one year after *Roe v. Wade*, when the ruling’s weaknesses had not yet been tested, WASP did not connect reproductive subjugation and sexual assault. But Nikki Craft’s feminist mentor, Andrea Dworkin, did. “Women are an enslaved population—the crop we harvest is children, the fields we work are houses,” Dworkin wrote. “Women are forced into committing sexual acts with men that violate integrity because the universal religion—contempt for women—has as its first commandment that women exist purely as sexual fodder for men.” The universalization of women’s experiences—the presumption that all women shared the same historical relationship to the legal regime of enslavement and male violence—guaranteed that this branch of white feminist politics would remain volatile in its commitments and unsteady in its targets.

Without an explicit mapping of different women’s distinct relationships to power, feminist campaigns like WASP’s could reproduce, even as they aimed to resist, white patriarchal violence. Ida B. Wells relentlessly documented and drew connections among the specific varieties of harm under her present conditions of domination. She understood, in other words, that the politics of resistance must be as finely detailed as a single moment and as expansive as the future. 1



ART WORLDS

Mark and Dot

Jack Tworokov and Yayoi Kusama

Jason Andrew

ON JANUARY 5, 1962, AT A DINNER party hosted by the dealer Beati Perry, the worlds of Jack Tworokov and Yayoi Kusama collided. Others present at the party included the art critic Clement Greenberg and the Colombian painter Fernando Botero. But it was the “fierce Japanese painter” Kusama who made a lasting impression on Tworokov. Their budding friendship, which has never been critically explored, would soon evolve into a mutual exchange of instinctual and strategic impulses. Tworokov, nearly thirty years her senior, would play a pivotal role in Kusama’s career, advocating for her at a time when contemporaries, critics, and elder statesmen of painting viewed her work with indifference.¹

Kusama had arrived in New York City on June 28, 1958. The male-dominated territory of the post-war New York art scene may have presented a familiar challenge to Kusama, for whom Japan had been “too scornful of women,” as she told a journalist in 2018.²

1 Yayoi Kusama and Ralph F. McCarthy, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 157-186.

2 Priscilla Frank, “Japanese Artist Yayoi Kusama Is About To Make 2017 Infinitely Better,” *Huffington Post*, February 9, 2017. Accessed September 18, 2018: www.huffpost.com/entry/yayoi-kusama-retrospective_n_589c8b55e4b0c1284f2af521

She spoke very little English and knew very little about American art, nor about the expanding art scene. According to scholar and biographer Midori Yamamura, “Kusama first mingled with the local Japanese and Japanese-American communities in order to gather information about the New York art world.”³ Once settled, she made herself aware of art openings and began attending them. “She made herself a regular on the scene,” explains Yamamura.⁴

She revered the Abstract Expressionists, with their “dynamic attempt to face the complexity of modern life head-on, and to break through to something new.”⁵ Her first major series of paintings successfully negotiated the frontiers of the movement without submitting entirely to its influence. She would call her new series *Nets*.⁶

3 Midori Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” in *Making A Home: Contemporary Artists in New York*, ed. Eric Shiner and Reiko Tomii (New York: Japan Society; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 28.

4 Midori Yamamura, interviewed by the author, June 25, 2018.

5 Kusama and McCarthy, *Infinity Net*, 34.

6 According to the research of Midori Yamamura and furthered by her conversation with Mario Yrissary, New York, August 29, 2008: “Kusama originally designated these paintings as ‘Net’ or ‘netto’ in Japanese.”

Tworokov, meanwhile, was an established artist, already heralded by *Art News* in 1949 as “one of the most masterful artists of his generation.”⁷ A charter member of the Eighth Street Club of first-generation Abstract Expressionist painters, Tworokov was a peer of Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock.

Kusama was quickly accepted into avant-garde circles, but the development of wider acclaim was, at times, glacially slow. Recalling her early challenges, she wrote, “Action painting of the New York School still held sway, even though Jackson Pollock had been dead for ten years,”⁸ and acknowledged that “transcendence of the times”⁹ was out of reach.

While Tworokov did share some of the period’s assumptions surrounding gender, his character was endowed with a unique sensitivity that distinguished him from his contemporaries, particularly in his encouragement of women artists and gay male artists. These marginalized individuals were often his students, but they also included friends such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Dorothea Rockburne, and later Jennifer Bartlett, Chuck Close, and Brice Marden, to name a few. Tworokov advocated for these rising talents regardless of age, sex, or race. He measured them instead against a standard of integrity, intellect, and perseverance. Tworokov, then, was uniquely positioned to take in the fiery and ambitious Kusama.

By the late 1950s, Tworokov had scaled the heights of his Abstract Expressionist period. His gestural paintings were celebrated for their dramatic flame-like strokes, and he and his contemporaries were gaining the

ability to support themselves on the sale of their work.¹⁰ Yet Tworokov had grown weary and eventually critical of a movement that he feared had become academic, noting in a published article:

*But if you grant the possibility that painting can be non-representational and non-geometric, and still be expressive, that is, reflective of experience, insight and awareness, then the birth of such painting is a cultural event and not at all subject to sudden obsolescence.*¹¹

Tworokov was not yet aware of Kusama’s *Net* paintings, which would constitute the very “cultural event” he was defining. By 1959 she was pouring every penny she had into materials and canvas.¹² She would later say, “my commitment to a revolution in art caused the blood to run hot in my veins and even made me forget my hunger.”¹³ The *Net* paintings renounced all notions of composition, turning the Abstract Expressionist stroke backwards upon itself, looping and interlocking the painted mark. She described the process as “inscribing to my heart’s content a toneless net of tiny white arcs, tens of thousands of them.”¹⁴ With no discernible beginning or end, the paintings’ “endlessly repetitive rhythm and the monochrome surface, which cannot be defined by established, conventional structure or methodology, present an

7 Thomas B. Hess, “Reviews and Previews: Jack Tworokov at Charles Egan Gallery,” *Artnews*, 48:7 (November 1949), 44.

8 Kusama and McCarthy, *Infinity Net*, 34.

9 *Ibid.*, 34.

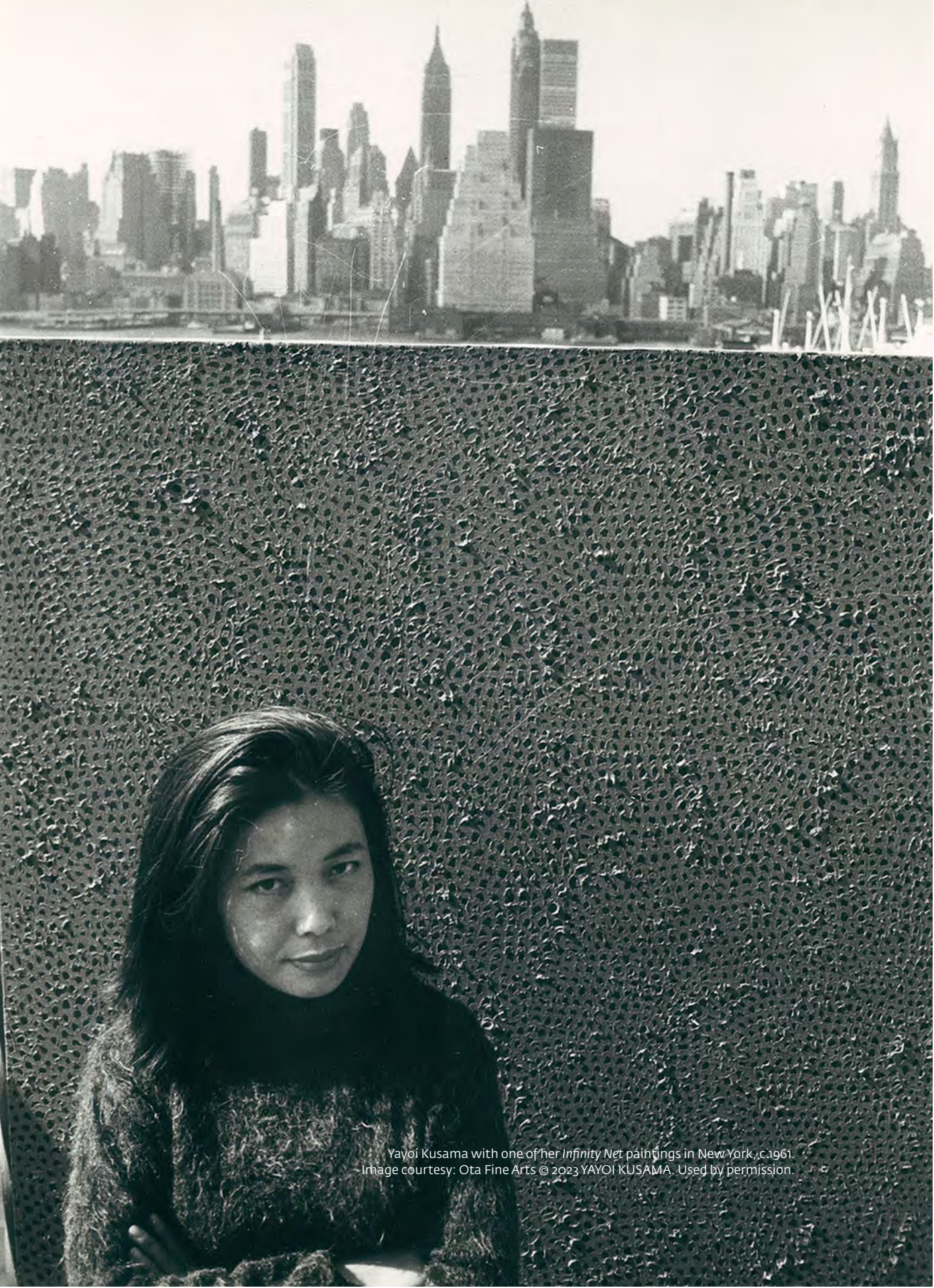
10 Jack Tworokov, journal entry, November 12, 1958: “I finally turned down the offer from Princeton to take a three-year teaching stint at a lovely salary for nine hours teaching a week (\$9000). It depressed me to do it since I also plan to give up all Pratt teaching and risk for the first time to live entirely by painting.” Published in Jack Tworokov, *Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworokov*, ed. Mira Schor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 86-87.

11 Jack Tworokov, “Is There a New Academy,” *Artnews* 58:6 (September 1959), 38.

12 Kusama and McCarthy, *Infinity Net*, 20.

13 *Ibid.*, 18.

14 *Ibid.*, 18.



Yayoi Kusama with one of her *Infinity Net* paintings in New York, c.1961.
Image courtesy: Ota Fine Arts © 2023 YAYOI KUSAMA. Used by permission.



Jack Tworok in his Provincetown studio, 1960.
© 2023 Arnold Newman / Getty Images.

attempt at a new painting based on a different light.”¹⁵

Vulnerable to episodes of severe neurosis, Kusama nonetheless continued painting with a characteristic intensity.¹⁶

When Kusama’s New York solo debut opened at the Brata Gallery on October 9, 1959, Tworikov was likely among the many revelers.¹⁷ The show was a critical success, receiving positive reviews in nearly every art publication. However, even as Donald Judd celebrated Kusama as “an original,”¹⁸ she received lukewarm attention from the older generation of respected artists, such as Earl Kerkam, who was close to de Kooning and Tworikov.¹⁹ Remarking that her show was “nothing but walls,” Kerkam paused to add, “but she certainly knows about space.”²⁰

The following spring, Beatrice “Beati” Perry, the collector and dealer who is credited with introducing Kusama to Tworikov, gave Kusama a solo show at her gallery, Gres Gallery, in Washington, DC.²¹ Opening in April 1960 and lasting just under a month, this show featured the introduction of color to her ongoing series of *Net*

paintings. Perry sold ten paintings, five pastels, and a watercolor to important collectors such as Mr. and Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd, whose collection also included work by Tworikov.²² A *Washington Post* critic who had praised Tworikov’s work a year earlier received Kusama with similar enthusiasm: “Only such an artist as Mark Tobey or Jackson Pollock in our country has gone so far in making each single and minute thread of paint count in an overall composition.”²³ Soon, Kusama’s sculpture *Accumulation No. 1* (1962) as well as Tworikov’s painting *Crossfield I* (1968) would become the cornerstones of Beati’s personal art collection.

Tworikov and Kusama’s paintings were in dialogue even before the two artists met. In the fall of 1961, they participated in the *Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* at the Carnegie Institute, with Kusama exhibiting *The West* (1960), lent by Gres Gallery, and Tworikov exhibiting *Brake I* (1959–60), lent by Leo Castelli. Two months later, in December, they both showed in the *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting* at the Whitney Museum in New York. It would be the first time Kusama appeared at the Whitney, exhibiting *Number 3 P.B. (Red)* (1960), and Tworikov’s ninth, exhibiting *Changes on Wednesday I* (1961). For Kusama, these exhibitions represented a substantial achievement—despite the critic John Canaday referring to her as “he” in his review of the Whitney.²⁴ “And so, I was steadily consolidating my position in the avant-garde of New York,” Kusama wrote, “I marveled at my luck.”²⁵

15 Ibid, 26.

16 Ibid, 20.

17 A journal entry of January 8, 1960 indicates Tworikov was “making the rounds of exhibitions, meeting the artists again, going to the bar.” Tworikov Family Papers, New York (unpublished).

18 Donald Judd, “Reviews and Previews: New Names This Month—Yayoi Kusama,” *Artnews* 58:6 (October 1959), 17.

19 Earl Cavis Kerkam (1891–1965) exhibited regularly at the Charles Egan Gallery. Kerkam was considered by Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Mark Rothko to be “one the finest painters to come out of America.” Published in Marika Herskovic, *New York School Abstract Expressionists Artists Choice by Artists* (Franklin Lakes, N.J.: New York School Press, 2000), 198.

20 Earl Kerkam quoted in “Brata,” in *Tenth Street Days: The Co-ops of the 50s*, exh. cat. (New York: Pleiades Gallery and The Association of Artist-Run Galleries, 1977), n.p.

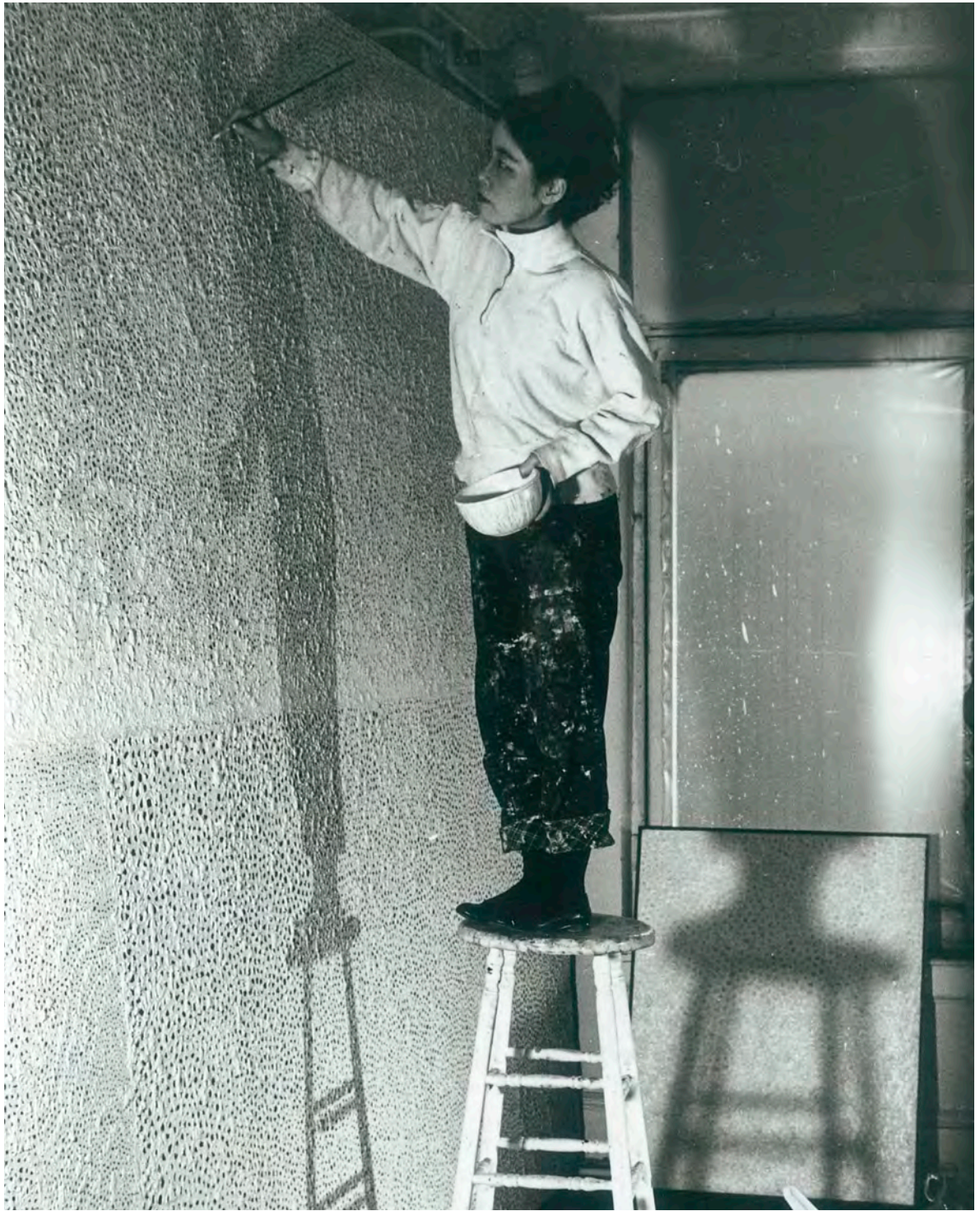
21 Founded by Tania Gres, the gallery’s legacy was formed under the direction of its eventual owner, Beatrice “Beati” Perry. She is credited with giving Fernando Botero, among the many other international artists she promoted, his first solo exhibition in the U.S.

22 From archive of Midori Yamamura, “Gres Gallery: Sales of Kusama Painting To Date, May 21, 1960.”

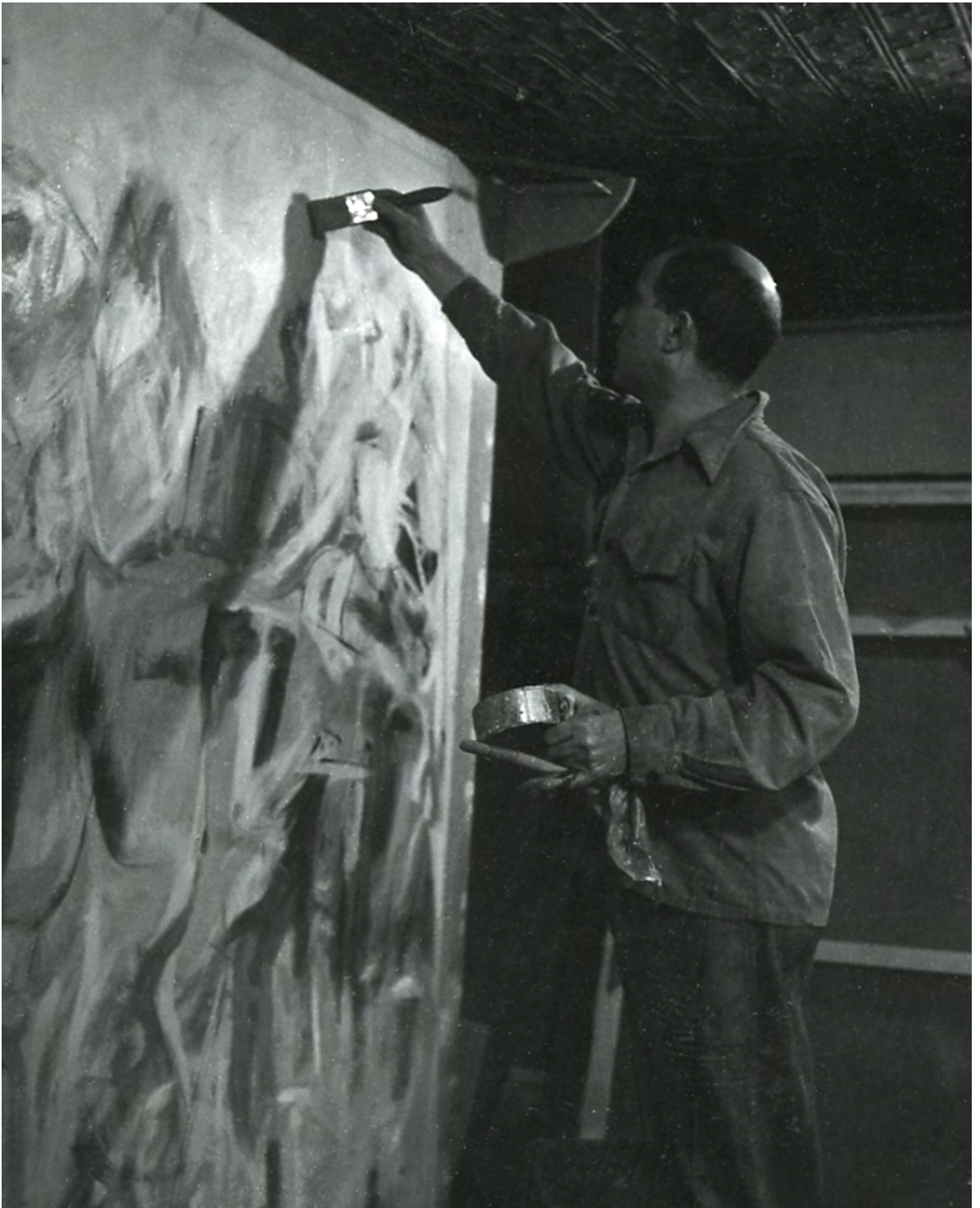
23 Ahlander, Leslie Judd. “Two Oriental Shows Outstanding,” *The Washington Post*, May 1, 1960, E7.

24 John Canaday. “Whitney Again: The Annual Shows Regulars Along With Twenty-Two Newcomers,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 1961, X21.

25 Ibid, 34.



Yayoi Kusama in her New York studio, c.1961. Image courtesy: Ota Fine Arts © 2023 YAYOI KUSAMA. Used by permission.



Jack Tworok in his New York studio with the painting "*Daybreak*," c.1953.
Photo: © 2023 Jean Herman, courtesy Tworok Family Archives, New York

Both Kusama and Tworkov recorded the fateful Beati Perry dinner, where they were officially introduced, in their diaries. Kusama recalled visiting the Green Gallery the day before, spending the next day at the Art Students League, then going to the “Perry House” at 7:30 p.m.²⁶ Tworkov recalled the dinner party in his journal, naming the host, her husband, and other friends, as well as the art critic Clement Greenberg, “a Colombian painter [Fernando] Botero, and that fierce little Japanese painter Yayoi Kusama.”²⁷ Evidently, Kusama brought with her a copy of *Asahi Journal* which had a reproduction of one of Tworkov’s paintings on its cover.

For Kusama, this “chance” meeting with Tworkov was keenly anticipated. “Though wildly spontaneous,” Midori Yamamura explains, “Kusama was calculating and strategic, and it is likely that she knew in advance that Tworkov would attend the dinner. It seems like she really prepared to meet him. I do think that this is Kusama’s first personal encounter with Tworkov and their friendship grew very quickly after—there is no gradual speed in Kusama’s life. To me it is as though Kusama knew [who Tworkov was] and came prepared to impress herself on him by bringing along the *Asahi Journal* to show him and to draw his attention.”²⁸

Kusama’s calendar-diaries from around the time of Beati’s dinner party also reveal a growing interest in Jasper Johns and Leo

26 Kusama’s Calendar-Diaries (1960-63) were shared by Midori Yamamura and copied from the originals in the personal archives housed at Kusama Yayoi Studio in Tokyo. Kusama’s Calendar-Diaries (1960-63): January 1962 / January 4th: Green Gallery; January 5th: Art Students League; 7:30pm Perry House.

27 In addition, the party included Vivi Rankine, Calvert Coggeshall and his wife Susanna Wilson, Kenneth Noland, and Dorothy Dehner. Jack Tworkov, journal entry, January 5, 1962, Tworkov Family Archive, New York (unpublished).

28 Midori Yamamura, interviewed by the author, April 8, 2018.

Castelli. Tworkov had a close friendship with both, and Kusama sought this connection. Kusama and Tworkov likely crossed paths again later that month at an opening for Louise Nevelson at Martha Jackson Gallery²⁹ and again on February 17 at a closing party for James Rosenquist’s first solo show at the Green Gallery.³⁰ Kusama’s infatuation with Richard Bellamy rarely allowed her to miss an opening there.³¹

On April 13, Kusama invited Tworkov to her studio. Tworkov accepted her invitation, visiting from noon to 2 p.m., according to Kusama’s calendar-diaries.³² Tworkov recalled the visit:

Friday, April 13, 1962

*Lunch with Yayoi Kusama at her studio. Seaweed soup. Fish tempura. Meat in a sweet soy sauce. Tea. I was surprised at the lunch, since I came to visit and I was going to ask her for lunch! She gave me a magazine that reproduced Friday in color.*³³

*I never met a feminine creature that gave off as much physical energy and intensity as this one. Incredibly ambitious and hard working. What wouldn't I give for even a small part of such drive.*³⁴

29 “Nevelson: Terra Cottas, 1938-1948,” Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, January 24-February 17, 1962.

30 “James Rosenquist,” Green Gallery, New York, January 30-February 17, 1962. Tworkov’s journal confirms he attended “Gorky Show at Janis, Rosenquist at Green, [Alexander] Liberman at [Betty] Parsons.” Jack Tworkov, journal entry dated February 17, 1962, Tworkov Family Archive, New York (unpublished).

31 Kusama’s obsession with the Green Gallery and its director, Richard Bellamy, in particular, is well apparent in Judith E. Stein’s *Eye of the Sixties: Richard Bellamy and the Transformation of Modern Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2016).

32 Kusama’s Calendar-Diaries (1960-63): April 1962 / April 13th: 12-2pm: Tworkov Came.

33 The publication was *Bijutsu Techo* or *BT Magazine* and featured a special issue on the Tokyo Biennale, which featured Tworkov’s painting *Friday* (1960).

34 Tworkov, *Extreme of the Middle*, 136.

報道
解説
評論

朝日ジャーナル

Vol. 3
No. 33 50 円

8・13

増大号

60年代の戦略と外交 — 渡辺誠毅 / 特別読物 レジスタンスの
ころ — ポーポール回想録「働きざかり」より — 朝吹登水子訳



Asahi Journal: New Report / Commentary / Criticism, 3:33 (August 13, 1961). Cover features Tworokov's painting *Friday* (1960), Courtesy Tworokov Family Archives, New York.

Nov. 25, 1962

Nov. 23, 1962

Mr. Jack Tworkov
234 East 23rd St.
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Tworkov,

I haven't see you long time, although I have thought about you and your family, and hope things are well with you.

I trust your European show has been fruitful and hope you to have continued success in future. What hs your commen@ about your European trip?

In order to continue my work in New York, I am trying to get some grant from the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation and three references are necessary *in* applying this grant. Would you be good enough to give me a brief comment on my works? I appreciate very much for your assistance on this matter. Though I realize that you are busy and I am not certainly in a position to ask you this sort of favor, I do not have many friends who are in a position to give me recommendation and have any weight to give me any preference.in getting the Grant.

Currently, I have a one-man show at one of galleries in Belgium, and I will have my work shown at Green Gallery in New York City. Please keep me inform any interesting works you are doing.

Very sincerely,

Yayoi Kusama

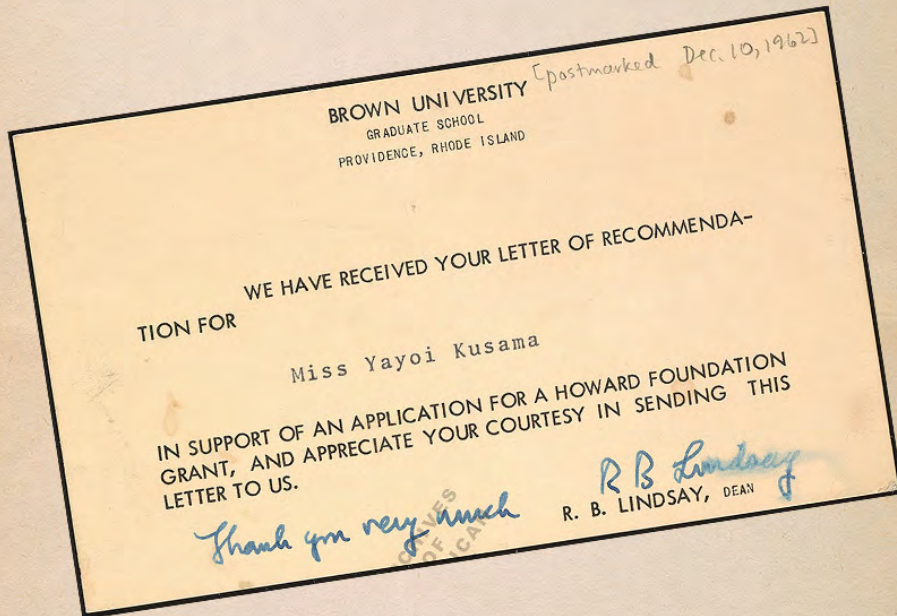
Yayoi Kusama

Encl.

Letter to Tworkov from Kusama, November 23, 1962. The date in the upper left in Tworkov's handwriting is the date he responded: November 25, 1962. The Tworkov Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

[ca. Dec. 1962]

To the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation:
It gives me great pleasure to support the application of Miss Yayoi Kasama for a grant from your foundation. Miss Kusama's work made a deep impression on me for its originality and energetic experimentation. She has won for herself a prominent position among the younger artists now ^{gaining} winning public attention. She has an extraordinary exhibition record for her age. She has exhibited widely in New York and has won the attention of artists, gallery directors and interested laymen in spite of the intense competition that exists here. In a letter to me she indicates that the grant would help her to continue working in New York. I believe the purposes of the foundation would be well served in considering Miss Kusama's application favorably.



Draft of Tworok's recommendation for Kusama's application to the Howard Foundation Grant with postmark acceptance receipt by Brown University, December, 1962. The Tworok Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

Kusama's career was clearly moving beyond the early days when dinner for her, as she wrote once, "might be a handful of small, shriveled chestnuts given to me by a friend."³⁵ The studio visit and lunch did much to establish their friendship. Kusama subsequently received an invitation to dine with the Tworkovs at their home on West 23rd Street two days later.

"My father's ability to see Kusama as a serious artist and recognize that her work demanded his attention must have been extremely important and meaningful to her," Hermine Ford, Tworkov's eldest daughter, explains. "It could not have been that easy for her, despite her successes. Especially going up against the guys in Tworkov's gang."³⁶

Moreover, the two shared a common struggle over identity. Because both were foreign-born (Tworkov often referred to himself as "a ghetto-Jew born in Poland"), the only time they felt that they belonged was when they were in their studios making art. Their respective practices defined their identity against the prevailing atmosphere of American nationalism, which included the McCarthyism of the 1950s and, in the 1960s, the war in Vietnam.

Later that year, on November 23, 1962, Tworkov received a letter from Kusama:

I haven't seen you long time, although I have thought about you and your family, and hope things are well with you.

I trust your European show has been fruitful and hope you to have continued success in future. What is your comment about your European trip? ³⁷

35 Kusama and McCarthy, *Infinity Net*, 18.

36 Hermine Ford, interviewed by the author, April 6, 2018.

37 In the late spring of 1962, Tworkov went to Europe for a rare six-week-long trip. It was his first trip to Europe after World War II.

In order to continue my work in New York, I am trying to get some grant from the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation and three references are necessary in applying this grant. Would you be good enough to give me a brief comment on my works? I appreciate very much for your assistance on this matter. Though I realize that you are busy and I am not certainly in a position to ask you this sort of favor, I do not have many friends who are in a position to give me recommendation and have any weight to give me any preference in getting the Grant.

Currently, I have a one-man show at one of the galleries in Belgium,³⁸ and I will have my work shown at Green Gallery³⁹ in New York City. Please keep me inform any interesting works you are doing.

*Very sincerely,
Yayoi Kusama⁴⁰*

Having just returned to New York from Provincetown on November 20, Tworkov wasted no time replying to Kusama's request. He responded to her letter on November 25 and submitted his recommendation to the Howard Foundation, a draft of which reads:

It gives me great pleasure to support the application of Miss Yayoi Kusama for a grant from your foundation. Miss Kusama's work made a deep impression on me for its originality and energetic experimentation.

38 Research into the name of the Belgium gallery was not available at the time of this writing. As confirmed by Midori Yamamura, although Kusama sent work to the gallery, the exhibition never took place.

39 September 1962: Group exhibition, Green Gallery, New York. Kusama showed her first sculptures, *Accumulation No. 1* (1962), an armchair covered with stuffed phallic protuberances and painted white, and *Accumulation No. 2* (1962), an eight-foot couch similarly covered. Other artists included were Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, George Segal, Richard Smith, and Andy Warhol. Founded by Richard Bellamy in 1961, the Green Gallery was the cradle of Pop Art activity in New York.

40 Original is located in the Jack Tworkov Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

She has won for herself a prominent position among the younger artists now gaining public attention.

She has an extraordinary exhibition record for her age. She has exhibited widely in New York and has won the attention of artists, gallery directors and interested laymen in spite of the intense competition that exists here. In a letter to me she indicated that the grant would help her to continue working in New York. I believe the purpose of the foundation would be well served in considering Miss Kusama's application favorably.⁴¹

Tworkov's letter could not have come at a more crucial time. Increasingly anxious about her future, Kusama suffered a nervous breakdown on November 19, was hospitalized on November 24, and released in early December. On December 18, having regained her strength, she telephoned Tworokov to thank him for his support.⁴²

Around the summer of 1964, their friendship expanded to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Tworokov had purchased a home on the West End in 1958. Kusama visited Tworokov there while regularly exhibiting at the Chrysler Museum, which had originally been established in Provincetown.⁴³ Her *Body Festival* opened at the Chrysler on September 1-2, 1967.⁴⁴

As the Sixties progressed, the artists' friendship continued to evolve, as they shared a resistance to the escalating American war in Vietnam. Still feeling out

of place in New York, Kusama ultimately abandoned the city for Japan in 1973.

One of the final letters from Kusama to Tworokov, who was now Chair of the Art Department at Yale University, was received on February 15, 1968:

Dear Jack,

Since I met you at Provincetown how are you? I am sure you are very busy with your important position. Yesterday I spoke with your wife because I wanted to talk with you. I am now sending a letter. Mr. Kuchta⁴⁵ of the Chrysler Museum visited me and he talked with me about you. Mr. Kuchta suggested Yale as a place for me to have one of my happenings and show my film which won an award at an international film festival in Belgium.⁴⁶ I showed this film to Adolph Gottlieb who was very impressed with it. He is arranging to show my film at the Whitney Museum in March. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City is also interested. Many people are saying it is the best movie of this year. It is a color film called "Self-Obliteration." In another letter I will send you material on this film.

Is there a possibility of showing this film in your art department? If I could I would [be] very grateful since your department at Yale is one of the best and most important in the country. I am very proud of my friends [sic] is chairman of this department. I am sure you will be able to help me.

Do you remember Hart Perry, Jr., the son of Mrs. Beatrice Perry? He is now in the Columbia University film department. He is very interested in my happenings and is making a documentary film about my happenings.

Three weeks from now I am having a fashion show at the New School in their auditorium [sic] which seats five hundred. They invited me and are giving me a complete fellowship

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Kusama's Calendar-Diaries (1960-63): December 1962 / Tuesday, December 18th: Called Tworokov.

⁴³ From 1958 to 1971, the Chrysler Museum of Art was a smaller museum consisting solely of Chrysler's personal collection and housed in the historic Center Methodist Church in Provincetown, MA.

⁴⁴ Kusama's exhibitions at the Chrysler Museum of Art included *New Eyes*, (April 1965); *New Collection*, (Summer 1966); she also staged a *Body Festival* (September 1-2, 1967).

⁴⁵ Ronald Andrew Kuchta (1935-2020) was the curator at Chrysler Museum, Provincetown, MA, 1961-1968.

⁴⁶ The 1968 *Fourth International Experimental Film Competition* at Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium.



Yayoi Kusama, *Accumulation No. 1*, 1962, Sewn stuffed fabric, paint, and chair fringe, 37 x 39 x 43 in (94 x 99.1 x 109.2 cm) Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. J. Hall (by exchange), 1182.2012. This work was formerly owned by Beatrice "Beati" Perry.

for the expenses of this show. They are preparing all the publicity now so I am very busy now.

Please write to tell me of the possibility and time of doing a showing of my film and happening at your university. My happening is a combination of cinema, beautiful dancing, and fashion show with a background of my own rock band (five musicians working for me here at my studio). My manager is Eric Reilly who will handle all of this business.

Yours truly,

Yayoi Kusama⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Original is located in the Jack Tworokov Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

Tworokov again wasted no time in replying. It is certain that his return letter sent on February 21 imparted that he would do everything he could to help.⁴⁸ He must have felt great satisfaction following the many aspects of Kusama's rising career as it moved beyond painting and into performance. "I was becoming an artist not just limited to fine art," she wrote, "but one who was able to express herself in a wider spectrum of activities."⁴⁹

Tworokov envied this freedom:

One thing I'd love to do [...] is go away for

⁴⁸ There are no copies of Tworokov's return letters to Kusama. Regarding this letter specifically, there is no mention of any activity associated with Yale University in Kusama's biography and chronology.

⁴⁹ Kusama, 99.



Jack Tworkov, *Crossfield I (SSP-68 #4)*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 80 x 70 in. (203.2 x 177.8 cm)
Private collection, New York. © 2023 Estate of Jack Tworkov / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. This work was formally owned by Beatrice "Beati" Perry.

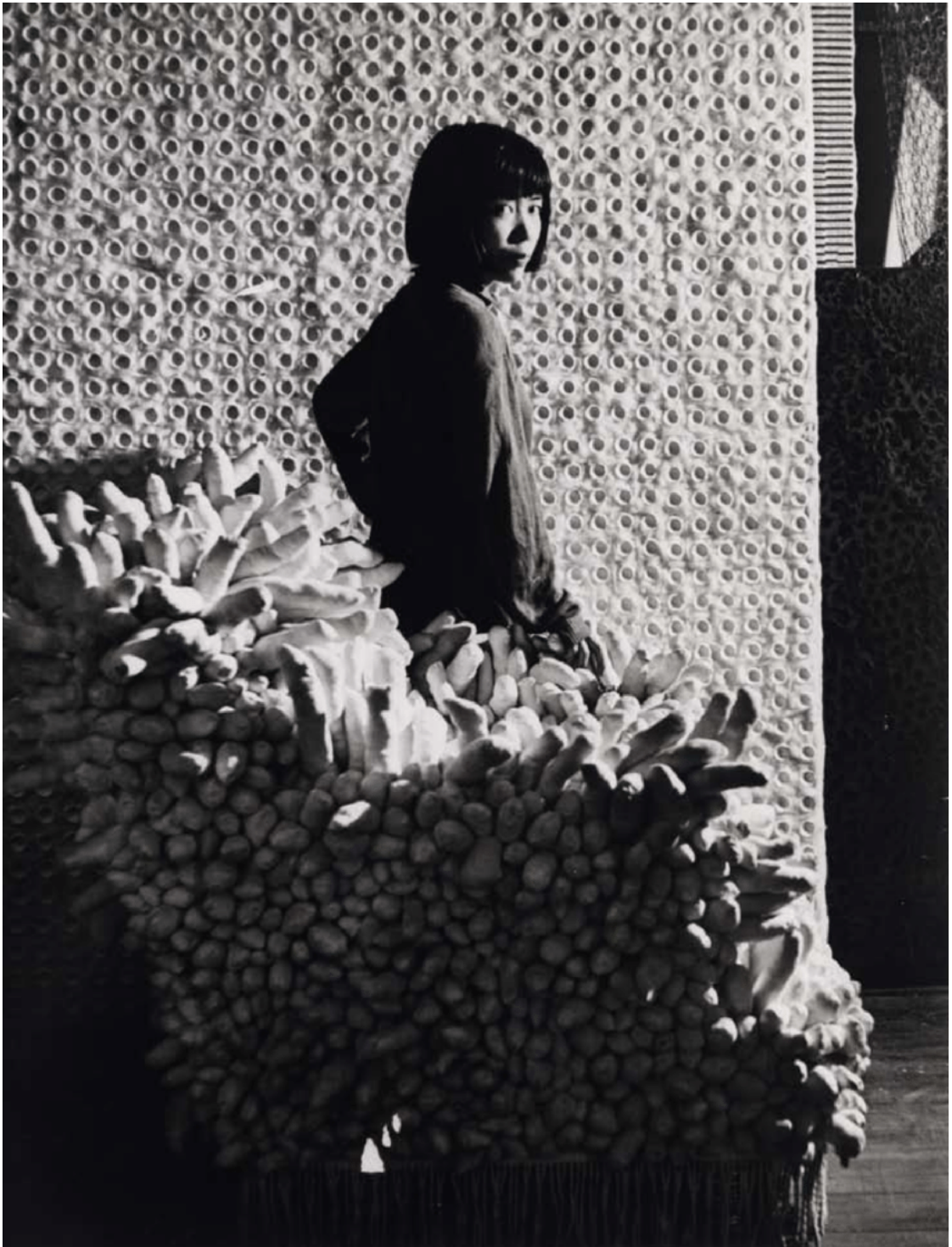
*a year and live alone in an entirely new environment, especially where I know nobody and where nobody knows me. Why this instance on anonymity? To gain as much freedom as possible. The greatest handicap to freedom is the unconscious trying to meet the expectations of others.*⁵⁰

Kusama maintained her connection with Tworkov even after she abandoned New York for Japan in 1973. A copy of her original manuscript, *The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul*, her earliest known autobiographical writings, was only recently discovered among Tworkov's personal papers. Kusama mailed it to him shortly after it was completed in 1975.

⁵⁰ Jack Tworkov, letter to Janice Biala, Provincetown, August 8, 1977. Published in Tworkov, *Extreme of the Middle*, 341.

While their careers took vastly differing paths—Tworkov had the mark and Kusama had the dot—their philosophical and gestural strategies ran in parallel, sharing a skepticism of prevailing aesthetic orthodoxies. “Tworkov sought a kind of objectivity of painterly practice as he began to tire of the subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism,” Mira Schor explained, “especially as that subjectivity became a pose.”⁵¹ His brushstroke became more and more analytic and abbreviated as he strove to paint himself out of his pictures, first through the repeated mark and later through the introduction of geometry, which slammed the brakes on any lingering

⁵¹ Mira Schor, email to the author, April 18, 2018.



Yayoi Kusama with *Accumulation No. 1*, 1962, in her New York studio, c. 1963-64. Photo: Hal Reiff.



Jack Tworokov in the apartment of Morton Feldman with Robert Rauschenberg's *Black Painting*, 1952-53, c. 1953. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg, courtesy Tworokov Family Archives, New York

threads of emotional inauthenticity. Locked into this technique, Tworokv shielded himself from his insecurities and doubts. “Can you accept a painting just for its marks, not reading into it more than the eye can see?” he wrote.⁵²

Similarly, Kusama discovered a way to use first repetition and then the multiplicity of the dot, creating a form that ecstatically expresses both emotion and neutrality. As if in response to the gradual compression of Tworokv’s mark, Kusama’s dot expanded into a performance that spread beyond the individual to engulf the environment. Dots eventually became the medium for emotional outbursts that channeled Kusama’s anxieties. “I had been spellbound by the polka dots,” she says in her autobiography.⁵³ In contrast, Tworokv layered his anxieties in the painted mark and its implied geometry “perhaps to erect a thick glass wall through which I saw myself, but mercifully could not hear myself though I saw my mouth moving and often in anguish.”⁵⁴

Hang a painting by Kusama alongside a work by Tworokv and their common urge toward a single repetitive gesture—what Tworokv called “characteristic rhythms”⁵⁵ and what Kusama called “repetitive rhythm”⁵⁶—is plainly manifest. Whether mark or dot, both artists shared a logic

“based on a voluntary ordering of chance,” as Tworokv described the making of his work.⁵⁷ Tworokv and Kusama both spoke romantically about their process, with the latter stating, “the creative philosophy of art is ultimately born in solitary meditation and rises from the quietude of a reposed soul to glitter and flutter in the splendor of five colors.”⁵⁸ For Tworokv, the creative edge “is the residue reflected in the painting of the artist’s pleasure in the making of it, especially the pleasure, the joy the artist experiences in the stages when the painting uncovers itself to the eyes.”⁵⁹

Art remained the very pulse of life for both artists, and both of them had nearly identical ways of describing this. For Kusama:

What saved me was making my way—blindly and gropingly [sic] at first—down the path to art.⁶⁰ [...] no matter how I may have suffered for my art, I will have no regrets. This is the way I have lived my life, and it is the way I shall go on living.⁶¹

And for Tworokv:

I’m not ashamed to confess that I’ve seen my work primarily, not merely as a “way of life” but as a way to save my life [...] only in the studio does my life take form. This is what I mean when I say “art saves my life.”⁶² .A

52 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 257.

53 Original photocopy mailed to Jack Tworokv: Kusama, *The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul*, 1975, 3. Tworokv Family Archives, New York.

54 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 393.

55 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 105.

56 Kusama, 26.

57 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 105.

58 Kusama, *The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul*, 5.

59 Jack Tworokv, letter to Andrew Forge, June 30, 1981. Published in Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 422.

60 Kusama, 93.

61 Kusama, 230.

62 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 406.

On the Multipart Works of John Wilcox

A Report from the Artist's Archive

Sarah K. Kozlowski

AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH IN Dallas in June 2012, the Texas-based painter John Wilcox left two unfinished canvases: *Radio/Cell Tower (Mother)* and *Transmission Tower (Father)* (Figures 1 and 2).¹ Begun in 2009, the paintings measure 50 x 40 x 1 inches each, and bear layer upon layer of white and deep blue acrylic, with each coat left to dry and then sanded before the application of the next. Wilcox had begun to engrave the painted surfaces with an awl, working from almost forty sketches and preparatory drawings that he had made for the compositions, but the paint had so hardened, and in the last years of his life the peripheral neuropathy that resulted from multiple medical conditions had so advanced, that he could no longer apply enough pressure to the tool. Although the canvases remain unfinished, the drawings reveal carefully proportioned, diagrammatic reimaginations of these monumental structures, at once fragile and totemic.²

¹ John Wilcox Archive (hereafter JWA), cat. nos C.085.2012 and C.086.2012. I am grateful to David Wilcox for generously making this material available for study.

² The sketches and preparatory drawings consist of a wire bound sketchbook with several loose sheets (JWA cat. no. PB38), as well as individual sheets (cat. nos 4009.1-6, PL.153.2010, and PL.154.2010).

Radio/Cell Tower (Mother) and *Transmission Tower (Father)* are portraits of industrial architecture that Wilcox knew well from his north Texas childhood. His father had once owned a radio station, and later headed a company that built transmission towers. But the paintings also portray two modes of social relation that Wilcox associated with roles of the archetypal Mother and Father: to receive and relay signals, and to harness and channel power.³ Lines and angles echo across the two compositions; white and blue reflect and absorb light to create a pulse or flash that is not sequential but simultaneous. Together, *Radio/Cell Tower (Mother)* and *Transmission Tower (Father)* form a diptych: a work of two parts related in form and subject to make an integral whole whose meaning is constituted by this bipartite structure.

From fall 2015 through spring 2016, Ben Lima and I curated a two-part installation called *John Wilcox: Diptychs and Polyptychs*, the fourth in a series of six exhibitions at The Wilcox Space, the painter's former loft and studio on Exposition Avenue in Dallas. In these

³ See Wilcox's remarks on the subjects of the paintings in his personal correspondence (JWA cat. no. 4008), as well as David Wilcox's notes in the catalogue of his brother's work.

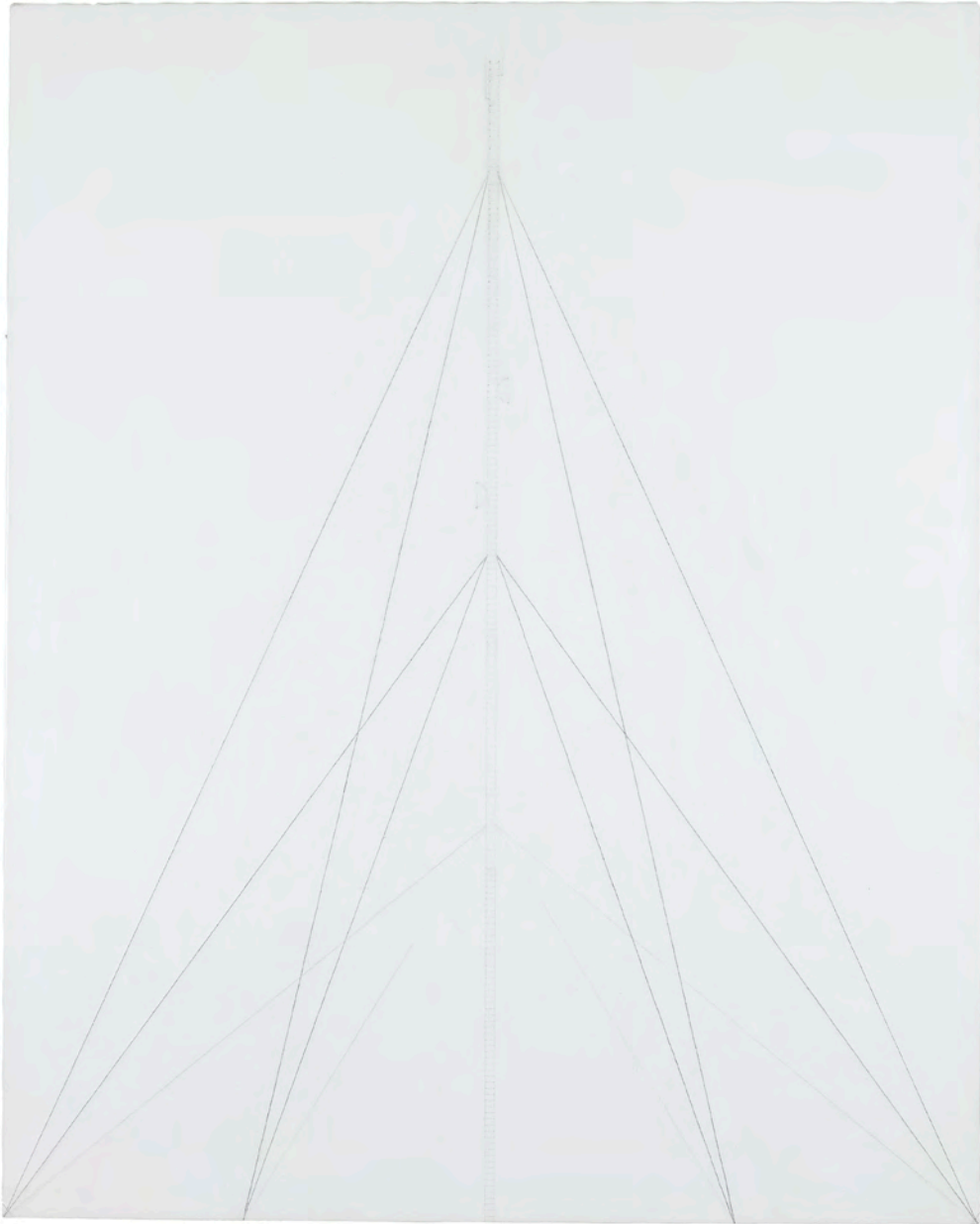


Figure 1. John Wilcox, *Radio/Cell Tower (Mother)*, 2012 (unfinished), acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 x 1 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project



Figure 2. John Wilcox, *Transmission Tower (Father)*, 2012 (unfinished), acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 x 1 in.,
image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

installations and their accompanying catalogue, we traced Wilcox's engagement with multipart formats over the course of thirty years: from the early, tentative diptychs he made in California in the 1980s; through crucial periods of intensive work in New York in the late 1980s and in Texas in the early 1990s, when he pressed the diptych and polyptych formats to their visual and conceptual limits; to the *Mother and Father* diptych he left unfinished at his death in Dallas in 2012.⁴ Formally, technically, and in the ways in which they create meaning, we showed, John Wilcox's multipart paintings and works on paper were at the heart of his work and practice.

In the time since that exhibition took place, the project to organize, document, and study Wilcox's work has continued, and the formation of the artist's archive has shed new light on his multipart works. Headed by David Wilcox, the archive comprises the paintings and works on paper still held by the artist's estate; material including notebooks, loose notes and sketches, photographs (prints, slides, transparencies, and negatives), correspondence, and ephemera; digital images of artworks and archival material; and a database in which all artworks and archival material are catalogued. Together, the John Wilcox Archive and the recently completed series of six catalogues published in connection with the exhibitions at the Wilcox Space are the foundational sources for Wilcox's life and work.⁵

Recent research in the archive has yielded new information about the

paintings and works on paper that we had studied for the exhibition and catalogue, as well as the discovery of multipart paintings that we had not known at all. Just as significantly, materials in the archive reveal the ways in which making multipart works—and remaking them in new configurations and assemblages—was central to John Wilcox's artistic practice. In this essay I report on findings in the archive related to the multipart works, drawing on several kinds of evidence: formal and informal photographic documentation of exhibition installations, as well as exhibition checklists; gallery documentation including inventory notes, slides of works, and records of sales, payments, and artist invoices; Wilcox's notes, artist statements, and correspondence; and photographs that he took in the studio as he experimented with reconfigurations and assemblages of individual multipart works. In particular, a set of photographs from spring and summer 1992 shows how he brought together several multipart works to make a series of altogether new compositions. Together, this material allows us to understand the artist's practice of making—and making meaning—as both dedicated to formal integrity and rigor, and, at the same time, relational and open to change.

FIVE MULTIPART WORKS HAVE COME to light through study of documentation in Wilcox's archive.

Seven canvases from 1989, which Wilcox made with black oil paint that he then sanded or washed to develop tone and texture, represent the days of the week: *Sunday* measures 28 1/4 x 24 x 1 3/4 inches, and *Monday* through *Saturday* each measures 16 x 18 inches.⁶ As early as 1986, in the two-part *Phoenix*, he had begun to

4 David Wilcox, ed., *John Wilcox: Diptychs and Polyptychs*, with essays by Sarah K. Kozlowski and Benjamin J. Lima (Boston: The Ioannes Project and Dallas: The Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, 2017).

5 The archive is held in Massachusetts and Texas; for more information visit <https://arthistory.utdallas.edu/wilcox/>. David Wilcox et al., *John Wilcox*, 6 volumes (Boston: The Ioannes Project and Dallas: The Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, 2015-2022).

6 JWA cat. nos C.012.1989 and C.196-201.1989.

experiment with modulating the dimensions of individual parts within a multipart work, a direction he would explore further in the early 1990s in paintings like *Healing* (1993).⁷ In that work, by refining the dimensions and proportions of the four canvases, as well as the distance of the intervals between them, Wilcox created a visual rhythm both complex and unified.⁸ Although the series dedicated to the days of the week was most likely conceived as a single work, the relationship between the *Sunday* canvas and the *Monday* through *Saturday* canvases remained flexible. All seven were shown and listed as a single work at 416 West Gallery in Denison in winter 2005; the next year, in winter 2006, the six *Monday* through *Saturday* canvases were shown at Brazos Gallery and Lago Vista Gallery at Richland College.⁹ A set of slides recently discovered at Barry Whistler Gallery shows each of the seven canvases hung individually, and *Monday* through *Saturday* hung together.¹⁰ Only *Sunday* remains in the collection of the artist's estate. The other six canvases are untraced after 2006, and no records of sale or gift have been found.¹¹

Skulls (1991), consisting of twenty-one white canvases ranging from 10 x 8 inches to 9 x 6 inches and arranged in a row in gradually diminishing sizes from left to

7 JWA cat. nos C.096.1986 and C.098.1986 (*Phoenix*), cat. nos C.70-73.1993 (*Healing*).

8 See JWA cat. no. 2018b2.1993 (and Figure 8) for Wilcox's diagram of the dimensions and spacing of the four canvases in *Healing*.

9 For materials related to the show at 416 West Gallery (January 8-February 4, 2005), including the checklist and informal photographs (prints), see JWA cat. no. 2047.2005. For materials related to the show at Brazos Gallery (January 5-March 3, 2006), including the checklist and Wilcox's informal notes, see cat. no. 2050.2006.

10 JWA cat. nos 4316.13-20.

11 According to a conversation between David Wilcox and the owners of 416 West Gallery, the canvases were not sold during the show in 2005 (personal communication with David Wilcox, 20 August 2022).

right, was shown in spring 1992 in Wilcox's first solo exhibition, held in New York at the SoHo gallery of his friend and fellow Texan, Joe Fawbush (Figure 3).¹² There, the work hung with several multipart paintings including *Prayer No. 1* and *Prayer No. 2*, both from 1990, in which Wilcox reduced his palette to white and gray, layered and sanded the painted surfaces to a subtle, absorptive sheen, and created relationships between parts and whole through refinements of dimension, proportion, number, and interval.¹³ *Skulls* is last documented in 1993, when it was sold to collectors Joel and Zoë Dictrow.¹⁴

Wilcox's second solo exhibition at Fawbush, in fall 1993, in which the works he showed included *Land(Scape)* (1993), *Crucifix* (1992), and *Crucifix* (1993) (all discussed below), included another work that has only recently resurfaced.¹⁵ *Catechism* (1993) is made up of two tall, narrow canvases, hung vertically, with the larger above the smaller.¹⁶ As an instance of the painter's use of a vertical diptych format, the work falls chronologically between *Phoenix* and *Drain* from the later 1980s, and *Grief (Child's Grave)* from 2000.¹⁷ *Catechism* is currently

12 JWA cat. no. C.152.1991. For materials related to the 1992 Fawbush show (March 7-April 2, 1992), including professional photographs (prints and transparencies) of the installation and individual works, see cat. nos 2013.1992 and 4308. Fawbush ran the gallery along with his companion and business partner Thomas Jones. Wilcox had shared a loft with Fawbush and Jones when he first moved to New York in 1985.

13 JWA cat. nos C.005-009.1990 (*Prayer No. 1*), cat. nos C.039-040.1990 (*Prayer No. 2*).

14 For records of the sale see JWA cat. nos 1009.4a-b.

15 For materials related to the 1993 Fawbush show (October 16-November 13, 1993), including Wilcox's diagrams for the hanging of individual works and the installation as a whole, as well as formal and informal photographs (prints, negatives, and digital files), see JWA cat. no. 2018.1993; for the diagrams see also cat. nos 4401 and 4010.

16 JWA cat. no. C.154.1993.

17 JWA cat. nos C.096.1986 and C.098.1986 (*Phoenix*), cat. nos C.112-113.1988 (*Drain*), cat. no. C.115.2000 (*Grief*).

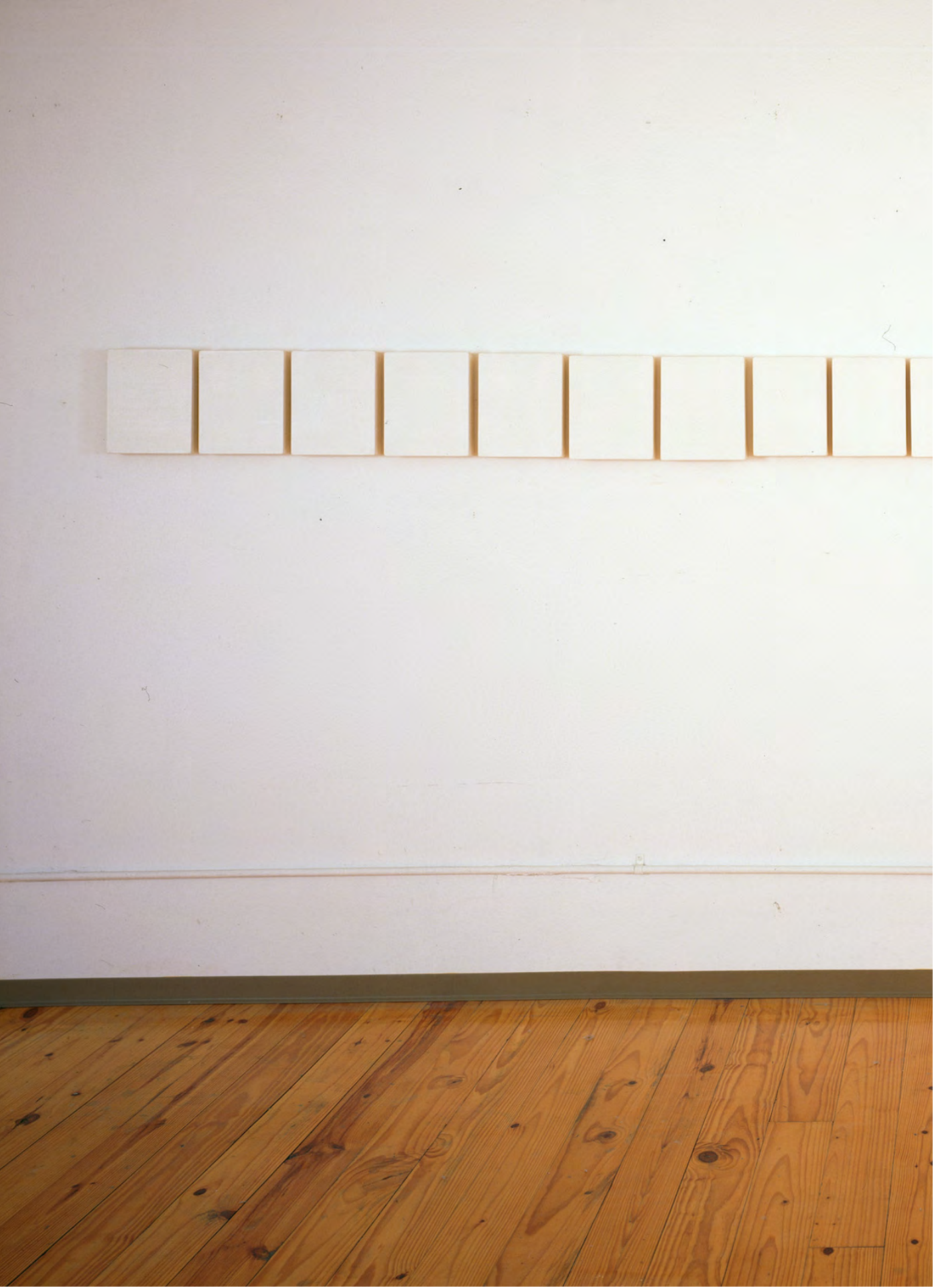




Figure 3. John Wilcox, *Skulls*, 1991, oil on twenty-one canvases, overall 10 x 162 in., as shown in photograph taken by Fawbush Gallery in 1992, image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

in the collection of Hilary and David Neidhart, who acquired the work from Fawbush in 1993.¹⁸

Two more multipart works, both diptychs, are now known only through photographs. *A.M.* (1996), which comprises two canvases of brilliant orange and deep blue, appeared in Wilcox's first solo show at Barry Whistler Gallery in Dallas in fall 1996.¹⁹ Its current location is unknown. *Spire* and *Spires* (1992) appear in a series of informal photographs that Wilcox took in his loft and studio on Commerce Street in Dallas in spring and summer 1992.²⁰ Here, the two canvases, which Wilcox painted in yellow and blue and then washed to reveal tonal compositions resembling pointed towers, form part of a series of experimental assemblages of individual works to make new wholes, in a practice to which I will return below.

To this archival evidence for unknown or untraced multipart works, I would add new evidence related to a diptych that we did not show in the installations in 2015 and 2016 (it was being restored at the time). *Sea*, which Wilcox painted in 1988 around the same time as a painting called *Land*, is a long, horizontal diptych formed by two canvases measuring 18 1/4 x 22 x 1 inches (left) and 18 1/4 x 40 x 1 inches (right) (Figure 4).²¹ Both *Sea* and *Land* were shown in a group exhibition at Barry Whistler

Gallery in summer 1988.²² After Wilcox's death, two unstretched canvases were found among his painting materials (Figure 5).²³ These appear to have served as working samples, in which the painter developed a process of layering and interweaving brushstrokes that he then used in the final paintings to create an intricate texture of hue and tone. Thematically but also technically, then, *Sea* and *Land* are closely related, and it is worth asking whether and how Wilcox intended to hang them together. His choice to use two canvases—and two canvases of different widths—to form the horizontal composition of *Sea* also calls for further consideration. David Wilcox has suggested that this compositional choice refers to force or movement in the formation of waves.²⁴

Throughout his career, Wilcox reoriented or reconfigured both single canvases and multipart works, sometimes as he was working on a painting but sometimes long after it was finished. This practice spanned his career: from *Enigma*, which he made in California in 1982, and which, in an informal photograph from 1992 at the family's lake house in Denison, is hung not horizontally but vertically; to *Eternal Rest from a World of Damages*, which Wilcox completed in early 2001 and which, before it appeared in a solo exhibition at Barry Whistler Gallery that summer, he photographed in the studio in different orientations and with various lighting.²⁵

18 See notes on correspondence between David Wilcox and Hilary Neidhart in the catalogue entry for the work.

19 JWA cat. no. C.167.1996. For materials related to the show at Barry Whistler Gallery (September 7–October 12, 1996), including the checklist, a review in *Art in America* in which Charles Dee Mitchell discusses and illustrates *A.M.*, and the only known photograph (a slide) of the work, see cat. nos 2027.1996 and 4301.34.

20 JWA cat. nos C.170–171.1992. For the photographs (prints) from spring and summer 1992, see cat. no. 4307 as well as the discussion below.

21 JWA cat. nos C.088–089.1988 (*Sea*), cat. no. C.097.1988 (*Land*).

22 For materials related to the 1988 show at Barry Whistler Gallery (July 2–August 27, 1988), including the checklist, see JWA cat. no. 2006.1988.

23 JWA cat. nos C.147.1985–1989 (for *Sea*) and C.142.1985–1989 (for *Land*).

24 Personal communication with David Wilcox, 26 August 2022.

25 JWA cat. no. C056.1982 (*Enigma*), cat. no. C.109.2001 (*Eternal Rest from a World of Damages...*). For the photographs (prints) of *Eternal Rest*, see cat. no. 4311. For materials related to the show at Barry Whistler Gallery (June 16 to July 28, 2001), see cat. no. 2038.2001.



Figure 4. John Wilcox, *Sea*, 1988, oil and acrylic on two canvases, 18 1/4 x 22 x 1 in. and 18 1/4 x 40 x 1 in. (overall 18 1/4 x 124 x 1 in.), image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

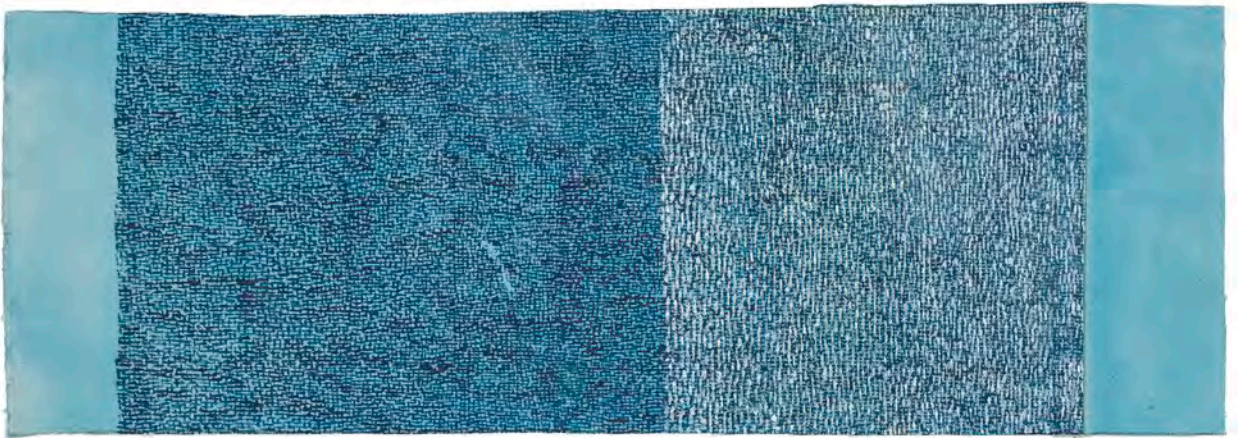


Figure 5. John Wilcox, *Preparatory canvas for Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 9 1/4 x 26 3/4 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

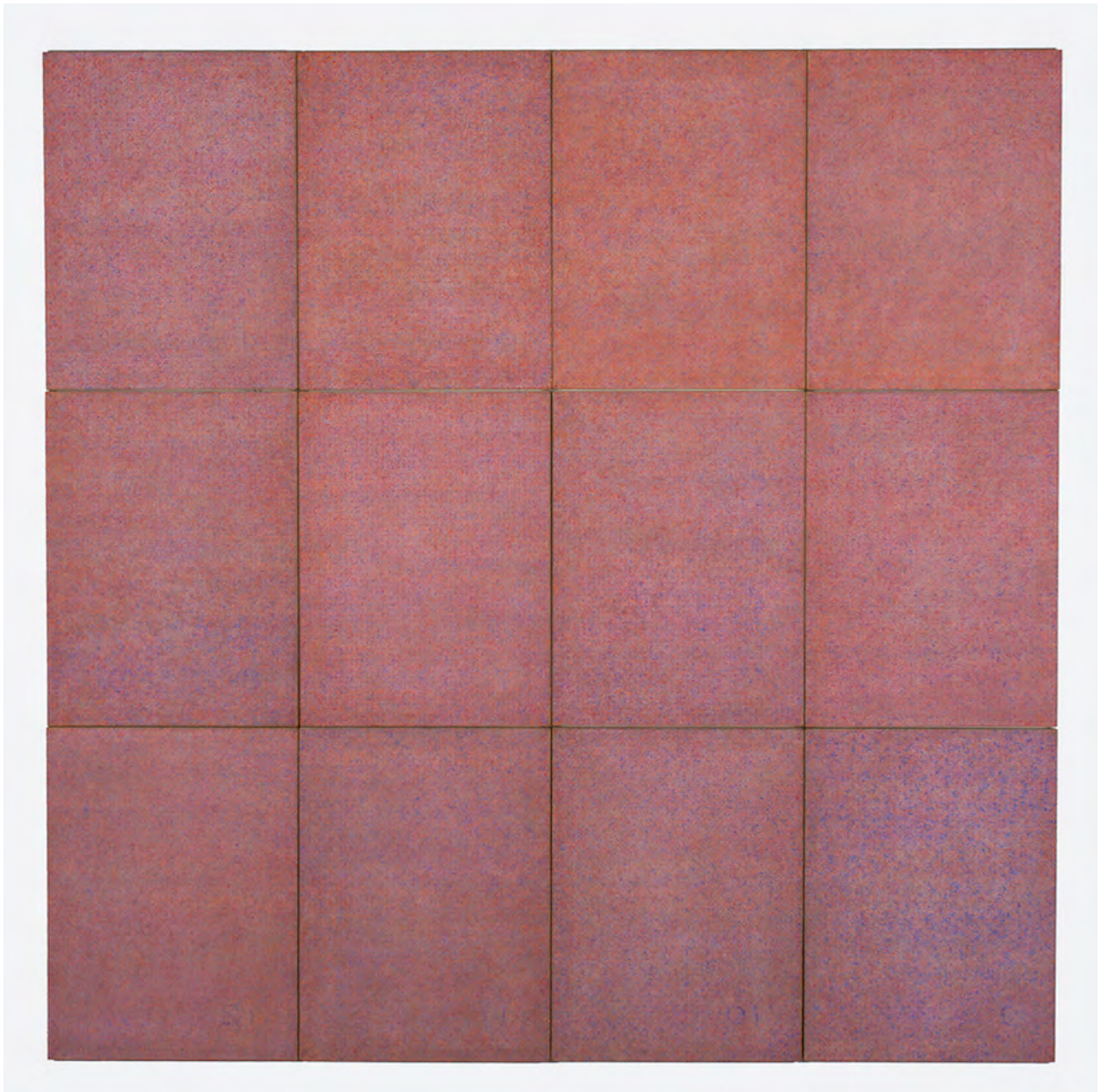


Figure 6. John Wilcox, *Paradise*, 1989, acrylic on twelve canvases, each 32 x 24 in. (overall 96 x 96 in.), image courtesy of The Ioannes Project



Figure 7. John Wilcox, *Paradise*, 1989, as shown in photograph of installation at Fawbush Gallery in 1992, image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

He played with the orientations of canvases in multipart works, too: the diptych *Make Time Kill Time* (1980) appears in an early slide with the left canvas rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise; and the top canvas of the diptych *Phoenix*, mentioned above, was hung both vertically and horizontally.²⁶

Sometimes, the individual elements of multipart works were not reoriented but reconfigured entirely. The twelve-part *Untitled: Paradise*, finished in 1989, is made up of twelve canvases measuring 32 x 24 inches each, configured in three rows of four to make a perfect square of 96 x 96 inches (Figure 6).²⁷ In the 1992 show at

26 JWA cat. nos C.015-016.1980 (*Make Time Kill Time*); for the slide showing the alternative orientation of the left canvas, see cat. no. 4300.2e. For the slide of *Phoenix* showing the top canvas oriented horizontally, see cat. no. 4301.17.

27 JWA cat. nos C.020-031.1989.

Fawbush, however, Wilcox rearranged the twelve canvases into two rows of six (Figure 7).²⁸ New evidence from the archive also shows that the four canvases of *Crucifix*, which he showed at Fawbush in 1993 in a carefully spaced configuration he had calculated down to the inch (Figure 8), were installed at 416 West in 2005 with the edges of the canvases joined together in a tightly compressed composition.²⁹ In each case, Wilcox might have been responding to the givens of the gallery space, but he was also working with what were essentially modular units that could be adapted from installation to

28 For the photographs (prints) of the work installed at Fawbush in 1992, see JWA cat. nos 2013j3.1992 and 2013j19.1992.

29 JWA cat. nos C.001-004.1993. For the diagram that Wilcox made for the installation of *Crucifix* at Fawbush in 1993, see cat. no. 2018b2.1993; for photographs (prints and negatives) of the installation, see cat. nos 2018d2.1993, 2018e8.1993, and 2018e9.1993. For an informal photograph (a print) of *Crucifix* at 416 West in 2005, see cat. no. 2047g2.2005.

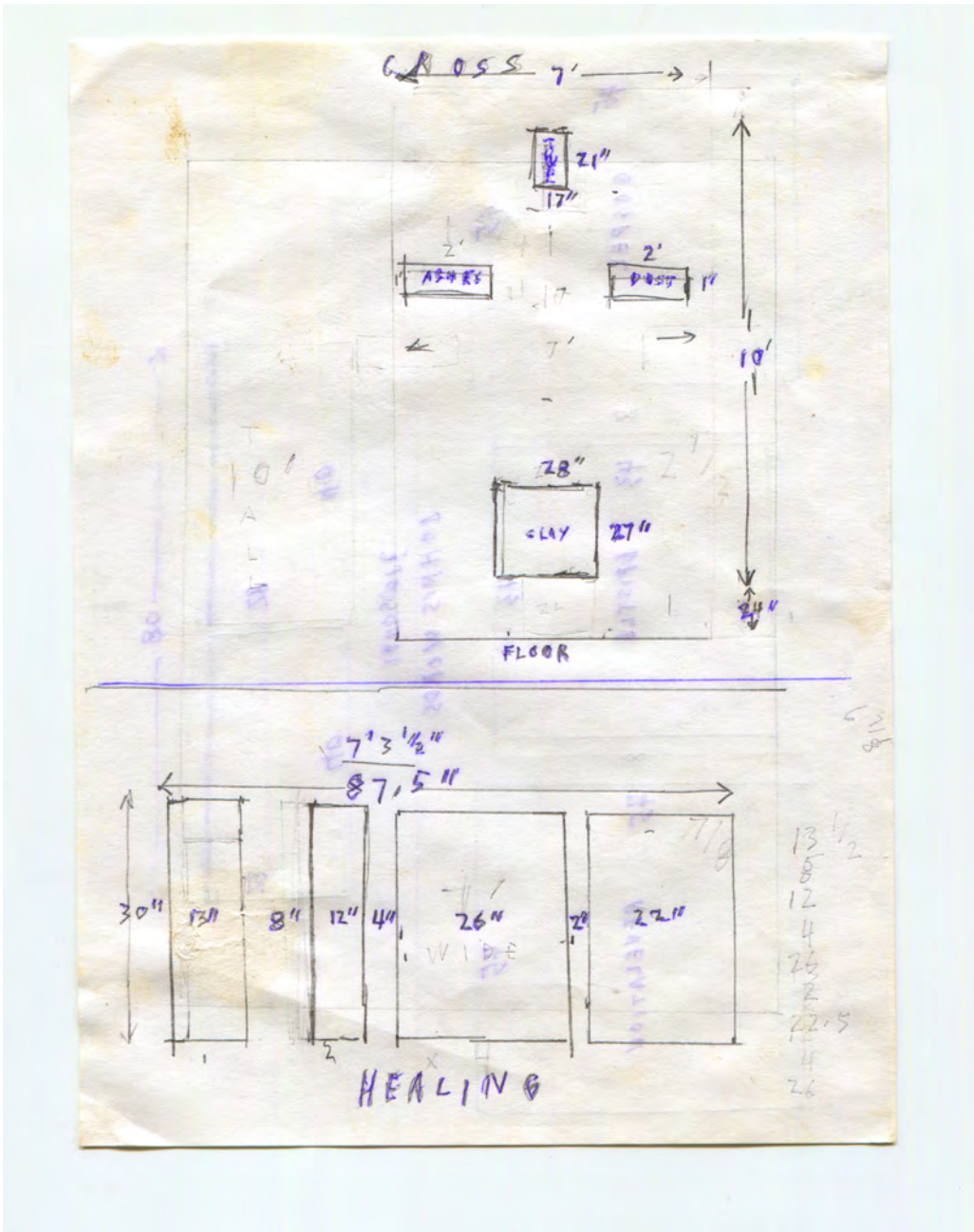


Figure 8. John Wilcox, Diagram for installation of *Crucifix* and *Healing* at Fawbush Gallery in 1993, pencil and pen on paper, 7 x 5 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project



Figure 9. John Wilcox, *Land(Scape)*, 1992, enamel, alkyd, and graphite on two linen canvases, each 27 1/4 x 39 1/2 x 2 1/4 in. (overall 27 1/4 x 79 x 2 1/4 in.), image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

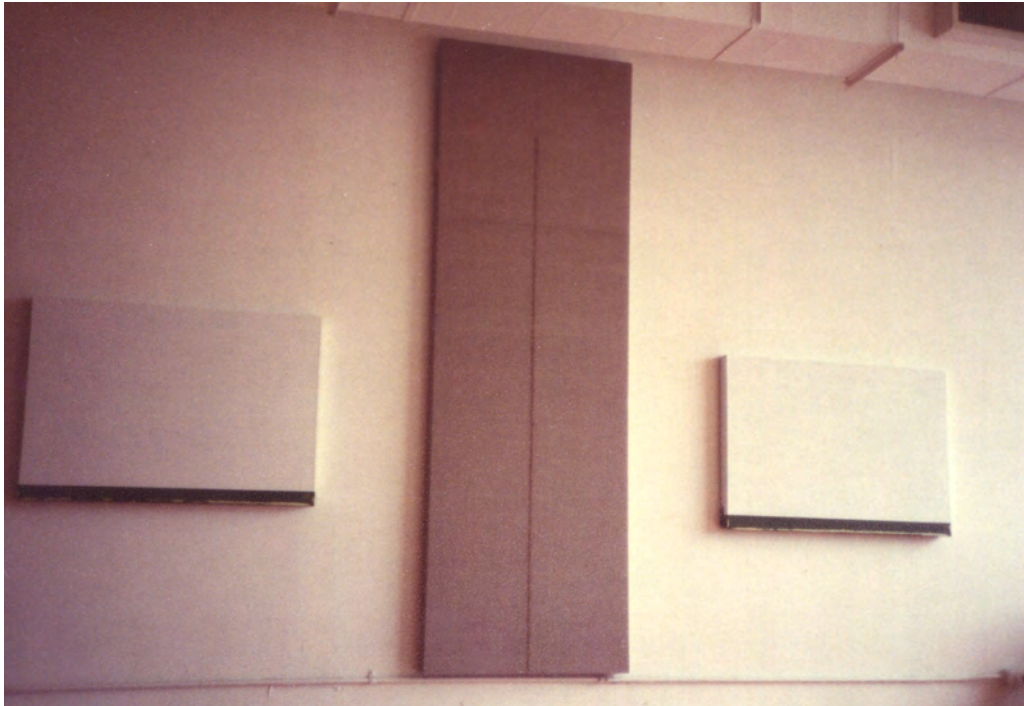


Figure 10. John Wilcox, Photograph of *Crucifix* and *Land(Scape)* taken by the artist in his studio in Dallas in spring and summer 1992, photographic print, 3 1/2 x 5 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

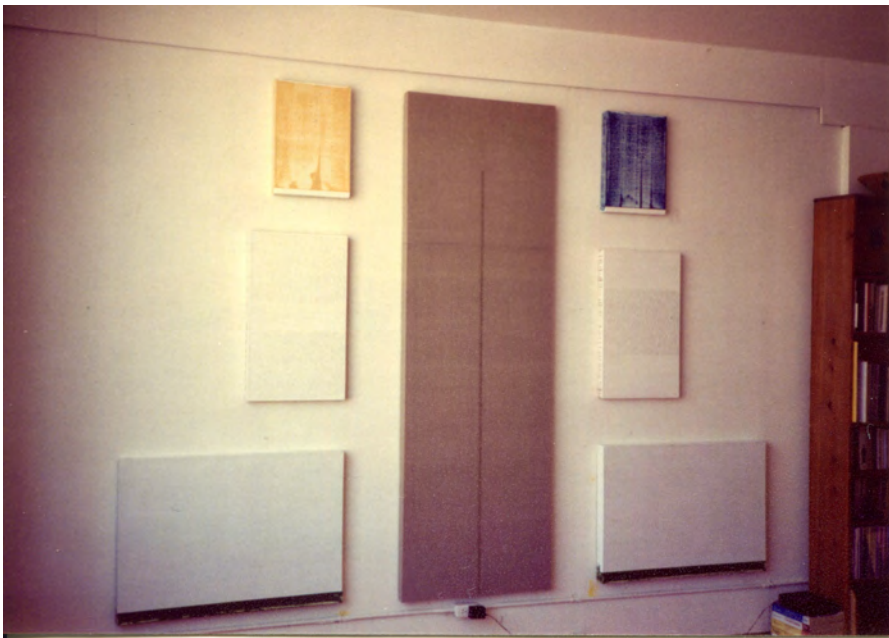
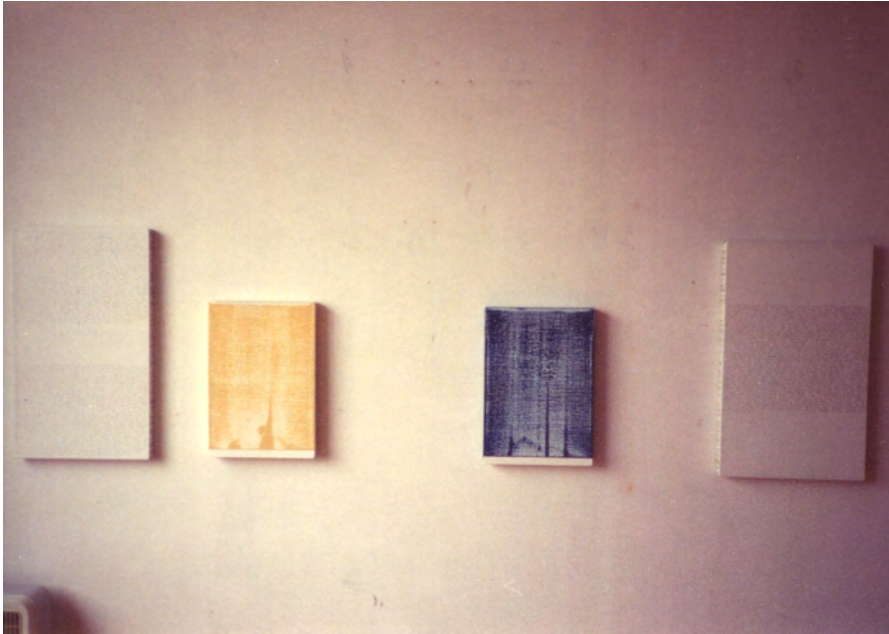


Figure 11. John Wilcox, Photograph of *Spire, Spires, Untitled: In Memory of WMR*, and *Untitled: In Memory of FOW*, taken by the artist in his studio in Dallas in spring and summer 1992, photographic print, 3 1/2 x 5 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

Figure 12. John Wilcox, Photograph of *Crucifix, Land(Scape), Spire, Spires, Untitled: In Memory of WMR*, and *Untitled: In Memory of FOW*, taken by the artist in his studio in Dallas in spring and summer 1992, photographic print, 3 1/2 x 5 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

installation. In each case, however, he observed the integrity of the overall work, not reducing the constituent parts in number but reconfiguring them in a new whole.

In the pattern of making and remaking that emerges from documentation in Wilcox's archive, most salient is a practice of bringing together individual multipart works to make a series of new assemblages. It's on a particularly vivid instance of this practice that I'll focus the remaining pages of this essay. March 1992 marked the opening of the artist's first solo show at Fawbush Gallery in New York; this event coincided with the deaths of Willa Mae Runelds, who had worked for Wilcox's family and became an important figure for him after the death of his mother, and Frank Owen Wilson, his close friend. Later that spring and into the summer, back in Dallas, Wilcox worked on new paintings that would appear the following year in a second solo show at Fawbush. It was during this period of endings and beginnings in his life and work that he took a series of informal photographs in his loft and studio on Commerce Street.

In the archive is a series of eighteen 3 1/2 x 5 inch photographic prints, which he kept in an envelope he labeled in his familiar uppercase lettering.³⁰

SPRING / SUMMER 1992

CRUCIFIX / NO TITLE IN MEMORY OF WMR
+ FOW

NO TITLE (LANDSCAPES) / SPIRE (YELLOW)
& SPIRES (BLUE)

Twelve of the photographs in this envelope show three assemblages of individual works, all dated to 1992, that he hung together on the walls of his studio to

30 JWA cat. no. 4307.

make variations on a new composition.³¹ A first assemblage consists of two works: *Crucifix*, a stretched linen canvas stitched along vertical and horizontal axes to form the shaft and crossbeam of a cross; and *Land(Scape)* (Figure 9), a diptych, here divided to flank *Crucifix* at left and right (Figure 10).³² The deep green band along the lower edge of *Land(Scape)*—like a wide north Texas horizon—is positioned a quarter of the way up from the bottom edge of *Crucifix*. In a second assemblage, Wilcox brought together two two-part works: a pair of canvases prepared with gesso and inscribed with passages from the Old and New Testaments, dedicated to Willa Mae Runelds and Frank Owen Wilson; and the now-untraced yellow and blue canvases called *Spire* and *Spires*, mentioned above (Figure 11).³³ Here, *Spire* and *Spires* are paired together, with *Untitled: In Memory of WMR* and *Untitled: In Memory of FOW* bookending them at outside left and right, to make a four-part composition that unfolds from an interval of empty space at center. Finally, in the photographs of a third assemblage, we find *Crucifix* flanked by three pairs of canvases in three registers: *Land(Scape)* at bottom, then the gessoed and inscribed canvases for Willa Mae and Frank, and *Spire* and *Spires* at top (Figure 12).

Wilcox had experimented with and then photographed arrangements of canvases and works on paper at least twice in the preceding few years: in 1988 in his studio and loft on Chambers Street in New York, he hung the word drawings *Sake*, *Drain*, and *Blacks* in a triptych (Figure 13) along with the corresponding canvases, for which they served as colophons, on the lateral walls; in 1990 on Commerce Street,

31 JWA cat. nos 4307.1a-d, 4307.1k-n, and 4307.10-r.

32 JWA cat. no. C.074.1992 (*Crucifix*), cat nos C.044-045.1992 (*Land(Scape)*).

33 JWA cat. nos C.011.1992 (*Untitled: In Memory of WMR*) and C.010.1992 (*Untitled: In Memory of FOW*); cat. nos C.170.1992 (*Spire*) and C.171.1992 (*Spires*).



Figure 13. John Wilcox, Photograph of *Drain*, *Sake*, and *Blacks* taken by the artist in his studio in New York in 1988, photographic print, 4 x 6 in., image courtesy of The Ioannes Project

he tacked the unstretched canvases *Soul* and *Shroud* to the wall, first individually and then with *Soul* laid against *Shroud* at center.³⁴ What is remarkable about the series of photographs from spring and summer 1992, however, is that they show Wilcox selecting four individual works (three of them multipart paintings), bringing them together, and arranging and rearranging them to make at least three different assemblages. Moreover, the three assemblages move through

34 For the photographs (prints and negatives) taken in New York in 1988, see JWA cat. no. 4305; the photographed works are the word drawings cat. nos PL.157.1988 (*Sake*), PL.156.1988 (*Drain*), PL.145.1988 (*Blacks*), and the paintings cat. nos C.110.1988 (*Sake*), C.112-113.1988 (*Drain*), C.111.1988 (*Blacks*). For the photographs (prints) taken in Dallas in 1990, see cat. no. 4306; the photographed works are cat. nos C.106.1990 (*Shroud*) and C.105.1990 (*Soul*).

variations toward a formal and narrative theme that sets people and places of his own present within deep historical and art historical time: the third composition is structured like nothing so much as a Renaissance painting by Rogier van der Weyden or Antonello da Messina, in which Christ's cross stands against a sweeping landscape, attended by the figures of Mary and John the Evangelist at left and right, with hills or buildings in the distance.

It is not clear when, exactly, in the course of Wilcox's work on these individual canvases, the idea emerged to bring them together in the series of assemblages now documented in the archive. Nor is it clear whether he intended to test possible installations for

an exhibition, or whether he hung and rehung the canvases in the course of making and remaking the space in which he worked and lived. It might have been both. In his lofts in New York and Dallas, at the lake house in Denison, and even in his childhood bedroom, objects and artworks and even furniture were in constant motion as Wilcox collected, arranged and rearranged things from paintings to fossilized ammonites.³⁵ In the case of the assemblages from spring and summer 1992, the fact that he photographed them so methodically, taking (or at least saving) four snapshots of each of the three compositions and then filing them together in a labeled envelope, suggests that this practice was integral to his way of seeing and

making—and making meaning. For Wilcox, artworks as units or instances of meaning were not discrete, static, and finished; even as they retained their formal and semantic integrity, they existed as relational, fluid, and open to change. New work and new meaning were generated in a play between what he called “control and non-control.”³⁶ In this way, making did not end when a painting or a work on paper was finished; rather, an artwork became another object in Wilcox’s world—like a fossil picked up on a walk, a phrase clipped from a newspaper, or the shape of a radio or transmission tower—whose meaning could be made and remade through ever-shifting relations with other objects to form a new whole. ▸

³⁵ I am grateful to David Wilcox for his reflections on his brother’s practice of making and remaking the spaces in which he lived and worked (personal communication, 12 July 2022).

³⁶ See Wilcox’s (remarkably early) statement on his work from 1977, at the time of his graduation from Colorado College: JWA cat. no. 4013.

A State of Speechless Wonder and Awe

Reflections on Robert Adams' *Beauty in Photography*

Daniel Asia

Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*. Aperture Foundation, 112pp., \$17 paper.

IN THE 1970S, ROBERT ADAMS WROTE VARIOUS ESSAYS THAT were collected under the title *Beauty In Photography*. These writings look at the subject from various perspectives, and address a set of themes that includes “Truth and Landscape,” “Beauty in Photography,” and “Making Art New,” among others.

For Adams—a practicing photographer—photography is art, because photographs, just like painting and sculpture, function in the domains of structure and form, composition, gradations of color and hue (he photographs only in black and white), and present the photographer’s view, his emotional response to, and thoughts about, the subject matter. Is this not what all visual art does? All media present the artist’s ideas about something of meaning to the artist.

Adams notes that “the pictures we treasure, the ones that sustain us, are independent of fashion.” Those pictures may not be coveted by large numbers, but they are the best, and have the most meaning. They must do what all great art does, and that is to stand the test of time. Fashion, by definition, is of the moment, transitory, and popular. Like commercial music, it is written for commercial reasons, and is usually entertainment, not art. Although occasionally, even these works can transcend their time and purpose, as do some of the fashion photographs of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, as in the musical realm, where Mozart’s serenades, many of which were written as background music for social events, are nonetheless among the finest music ever composed.

Adams proposes that landscape photography, which belongs to a genre that is also found in the realm of painting, offers three truths: geography, autobiography, and metaphor. It offers “an affection for life...a record of place.” These pictures respond to the human love of, and response to, nature. They provide a record not just of place, but also of feeling, of the artist’s experience of the place. A landscape may be seen as a metaphor: for grandeur, for loneliness, for solitude. Its “main business...is a rediscovery and reevaluation of where we find ourselves.” A landscape photograph is like a visual diary, a recording or representation of the feeling the place engendered. At the same time, it might be beyond our limited selves, and correspond to a universal understanding of something in, or out of, this world.

In talking about beauty, Adams quotes the poets William Bronk and William Carlos Williams, who said, respectively, “Ideas are always wrong,” and “No ideas but in things.” This is demonstrative of the artist’s distrust of ideas and speech, and the resultant greater emphasis on feelings and objects, and the either intentional or unconscious thoughts with which they are imbued. For Adams, ideas are not to be trusted, for an idea can’t validate a feeling or a thing. Feelings, not things, are of course the *métier* of the Romantics, for whom they are meant to be unleashed in the artistic process. However, are they not part of the inherent nature of *any* artistic object, Romantic or not? Don’t *all* artistic objects also contain an idea or ideas, whether present on the surface, or latent, or liminal?

For Adams, “Beauty that concerns me is that of form. Beauty is in my view a synonym for coherence and structure underlying life... beauty is the overriding demonstration of pattern that one observes.” For Adams, art, and its beauty, combats the unspoken notion that the world is a chaotic one, and it brings order to that chaotic world. Weston found that a photograph is the result of finding “amazement at subject matter,” which is to say the world. In this, Weston and Adams echo Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s way of understanding the world, and therefore the universe: one of “radical amazement.” Art gives witness to the splendor of the world, but that world is far too intense to examine or know directly, intimately, or in toto. This is the way Moses saw or approached God. We are told that God placed Moses between two rocks, and then allowed him to only see His back as he moved over him. If visual art is about seeing, then it is about light, which allows us to see. Light is then the manifestation of God’s benevolence at letting us see, or witness, the world; but we can never take it all in, but instead only encounter it in fragments, or see it in photographs or pictures, a small piece or chunk at a time. The apprehension of the totality of nature and its wonder is beyond the capability of humans.

“Photographing Evil” is really a meditation on whether there can, or should be, any intersection between the artist and social

The apprehension of the totality of nature and its wonder is beyond the capability of humans.

responsibility, or between art and the representation of evil, a problem that bedevils the larger art world today. There is an intrinsic friction between the artist and the problem of evil, or the various categories of bad human behavior (murder, avarice) or the problems of the human condition (poverty and the poor). It is Adams' contention that art combats this by finding and representing the order of the world, which creates an optimism about confronting the human condition. If good and evil are constants in the world—and they certainly seem to be so—the artist by his work, which is presenting beauty to humankind, performs a social good. That is his *greatest* responsibility. He also believes, with the exception of the portrayal of evil in Biblical stories, that the best art portrays an optimistic spirit. This flies in the face, and rightly so, of the current notion that all art should now be placed at the forefront in the fight against “systemic racism,” “poverty,” and climate change.

This has been demonstrated in the worst of times and places. The Jewish poet, Abraham Sutzkever, who survived life in the Vilna Ghetto during the Holocaust, described in his diary, the ghetto's cultural life of theatre, art, and music. The theatrical director Viskind said “Let us create a theater to delight and embolden the ghetto.” An art exhibit in March 1943 included colorful landscapes, graphic art, sketches by an architect, and a picture by nine-year old Samuel Bak. The orchestra of seventeen musicians, who worked as slave laborers during the day, gave a first performance that featured the *Caucasian Sketches* by Ippolitov-Ivanov, a Jewish potpourri of Max Geyger, and part of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. The Symphony inspired the ghetto population like mountain air for those with lung disease. It was worth fighting for beauty in the world.”¹ Adams thinks this is the optimistic spirit to which art and photography lead us. For him, all art is “the product of concern....it has social utility...it is designed to give us courage.”

Adams' take on the New is that there is really nothing much new, except for our particular angle taken on the old verities of coherence, form, and meaning. While there may be change over time, there is no such thing as artistic progress: “only innocence would be freedom, and one cannot recapture that: as long as we respond to our forebears they are with us.” This is not to say that art can't be

¹ Sutzkever, translated by Justin Cammy, *Jewish Review of Books*, Fall 2021.

improved, as the introduction of perspective in art proves, or that new formal ideas, like polyphony and harmony in music, can't bring wonderful developments. But the new doesn't negate the old, and is hardly "better."

Adams asks if it isn't still obligatory for the artist to at least be "fresh." Should his work not be "different from what has come before"? The answer is it should indeed be fresh, but with the caveat that all artists learn, borrow, and even steal from other artists. Their works, by necessity, must engage in a dialogue with the past. An artist must start his own artistic endeavors with previous examples: the young musician playing already pre-existent music; the artist or sculptor seeing paintings and sculptures as a youth; and the photographer seeing and taking pictures. And all these students study with masters of their craft. To suggest otherwise would be the height of foolishness, as "creations out of nothing are possible only for God." No serious artist, though, tries to recreate another's vision. The artist must know that he sees or hears something that has not been seen or heard before. If not, he should not be a creator, for he must produce something fresh because we treasure and seek this form of newness and surprise. The world has changed, certainly more in the last 200 years than in the previous two millennia, and artists help us learn, absorb, confront, and delight in these never-ending changes.

So while there is nothing completely new, there can be a fresh take on our present. Styles may change, but unless they cohere and bring meaning to their audience, they are sterile. Adams reveals a certain weariness even about his own medium: "photography is a cold medium: it can be expressive, but relatively less so than other kinds of graphics, and I occasionally enjoy more the warmth of pencil lines or brush strokes." This is an important caveat about the photographic art he has been pursuing and practicing his entire life, and may even reflect some hesitation about regarding photography as an art form on the same level as painting and sculpture.

Adams says that the notion of beauty in photography is ultimately not an ideational argument or matter, but rather something of human experience. The artist will find new media with which to express their ideas, feelings, and intuitions to their audience, and photography is one of those. After all, hasn't art always been in partnership with *techné*, moving from the wall to the canvas, and the wooden flute to one made of platinum? Adams knows that there will continue to be great photographers, painters and sculptors, and composers, who will bring freshness, skill and craft, and individuality to their art, who will bring us, their audience, to a state of speechless wonder and awe. That is, after all, the purpose of all true art. A

SUMMER ISSUE

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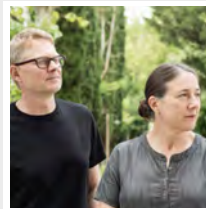
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