

The Aphoristic Moment: Modernist Literature and the Quotable Self

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Preface

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

The thesis does not exceed the regulation length, including footnotes, references and appendices but excluding the bibliography. The exact word count is 77,565.

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Abstract

I want in my thesis to consider the work of four writers working in or alongside canonical Anglo-American modernism, whose writing can better be appreciated if situated within the rubric of the aphoristic. Not seeking to advance a new theory of the aphorism, and not seeking either to suggest a vision for it that complicates an established view of a conservative form, my thesis starts by claiming just such a conservatism as the basis of its appeal to Oscar Wilde, who saw in it both an encapsulation of his theory of secluded artistic autarky and an instrument for this very autarky's furtherance. Wishing to see Wilde as breaking away from the truly decadent model for writing advanced and practiced by Walter Pater, my thesis proposes the aphorism as a central tool in this rupture, asserting a hardening of selfhood's integrity in the face of such social and environmental claims as might be made on it. My thesis foregrounds the way in which aphorisms, in promising a vision of sentences assured of their own frontiers – and functioning, within whatever textual body houses them, as discrete plots of their own – provided for Wilde a space wherein his artistic persona could most forcefully be developed and reproduced.

The advantage of framing this tendency as a 'moment' will be made plain, since I want in my second chapter to figure Henry James's decidedly non-aphoristic late fiction, particularly *The Wings of the Dove*, as a response to the idea that standalone sentences could or should be used to contain selfhood. I make the case for James as asserting a pragmatist contingency about stable boundaries that organises around the idea and practice of the parenthesis – with its momentary hardenings, framed as realisations, that are then folded back into the wider text – as a response to the aphorism's prefigured sense of closure: and how, in *The Wings of the Dove*, such distinctions are dispersed, character to character, such as to assume a moral valency in those who live by them. The following chapter, on Wallace Stevens, showcases a poet with many of the sympathies of James, yet one nonetheless captivated by that very aphoristic boundedness disparaged in James's writing. Too often understood – even by those emphasising Stevens's pragmatist affinities – as a valve for energies not accommodated in his wider procedures, the aphorism emerges from this chapter as the site of that temporary and oblique assertion of poetic presence that is literary pragmatism's hallmark, and a

hallmark of Stevens's poetry more widely. Finally, my thesis devotes a chapter to considering Ronald Firbank as a writer whose sentences are best understood not as truncated versions of larger texts – for such claims for Firbank's fragmentariness are made by commentators who would figure him a neglected high modernist – but genuine reversals of the aphorism's terms of trade. Looking, not as Wilde does, to make the unfamiliar familiar, but to make the familiar newly strange, Firbank's innovations are thus seen as the real legacy of Wilde's preferred stylistic vehicle.

Abbreviations

CPP	Stevens, Wallace, <i>Collected Poetry and Prose</i> , eds. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York, NY, 1997).
CPTSE1	Eliot, T.S., <i>The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Apprentice Years, 1905-1918</i> , eds. Spears Brooker, Jewel and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
CPTSE2	Eliot, T.S., <i>The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926</i> , eds. Cuda, Anthony and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
CPTSE7	Eliot, T.S., <i>The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, A European Society, 1947-1953</i> , eds. Iman Javadi and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).
CWOW1	Wilde, Oscar, <i>The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol.1</i> , eds. Fong, Bobby and Karl Beckson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
CWOW3	Wilde, Oscar, <i>The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol.3</i> , ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
CWOW4	Wilde, Oscar, <i>The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol.4</i> , ed. Guy, Josephine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

- HJLC1 James, Henry, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature; American Writers; English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, NY: Library of America, 1985).
- HJLC2 James, Henry, *Literary Criticism: French Writers; Other European Writers; The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, NY: Library of America, 1984).
- LWS Stevens, Wallace, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- WoD James, Henry, *The Wings of the Dove*, ed. Grey Gowrie (London: Everyman's Library, 1997).
- WPR Pater, Walter, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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Introduction

The Aphoristic Moment

On the nature of the aphorism

What is an aphorism? For summary answers, few have bettered Northrop Frye's definition of the vehicle he calls 'epigram', a form Frye names negatively: that is, by means of what it is not. The epigram, in Frye's words, is a form that comes into being exactly as it 'distinguishes [...] itself from platitude': by 'rhetorical wit'.¹ Grouped thus within methods of '[t]eaching' and 'persuasion', the form, in Frye's understanding, 'employs a dissociative rhetoric aimed at breaking down habitual response', one of several 'rhetorical strateg[ies]' with the intention of 'evoking the response: "I never thought of it that way before"'.² And if the aphorism (or epigram) is opposed to the 'platitude', it is thus always demonstrating a relational position to, or for, the author's self: by defining itself against doxa, or received wisdom, the aphorism asserts a personal voice expressly opposed to the general one of an imagined multitude to whom such doxa might appeal. The terminological elision – aphorism to epigram – which I make in the thesis that follows stems from an understanding of the aphoristic form as answering just as well to Frye's terms as the epigrammatic one. It also speaks to a general feeling that attempts to disentangle the two terms on contextual grounds have failed to arrive at a difference either significant or terminologically reliable.

W. H. Auden, for instance, who was one of the form's most avowed exponents in the postwar era, prefaced his selection of historical aphorisms with the assertion that the form 'must convince every reader that it is either universally true or true of every member of the class to which it refers', whereas an epigram need be 'effective only in a particular polemical context'.³ This distinction, similar to R.J. Hollingdale's assertion that an aphorism must be 'philosophical' where an epigram need only be witty,⁴ fails to account for the individualism inherent to the posture of *all* aphoristic or epigrammatic speech, premised as it is on distinguishing itself from ordinary speech; a fact to which Auden's examples from *The Faber Book of Aphorisms* attest. For Oscar Wilde's 'Man is

¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.329.

² Ibid, p.329.

³ W.H. Auden, 'Foreword', *The Faber Book of Aphorisms: A Personal Selection*, eds. Louis Kronenberger and W.H. Auden, (London: Faber and Faber, 1964) p.vii.

⁴ R.J. Hollingdale, 'Introduction', in Georg Lichtenberg, *The Waste Books*, ed. R.J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: New York Review Books, 2000), p.vi.

least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell the truth',⁵ featured in the anthology's first section, both reverses a 'platitude' about self-disclosure, and advances a theory of selfhood which, in mimicking, by its style of paradox, a similar 'mask' (that of affected or artificial language) discloses that very self. It will be the basic contention of this thesis that the aphorism, in its Wildean handling, is always doing this, and that its very appeal to Wilde lay in its embedding, by formal sentential means, of his paradoxical persona, a bequest with which the subsequent authors in my study were to wrestle. My elision, finally, is also occasioned by more practical considerations: Wilde is this thesis's starting example of a 'conservative' aphorist, against whose use of the form all of my subsequent case studies respond; and he uses both terms interchangeably.

Because the form aims at Frye's assault on 'habitual response', it can be particularly useful to describe the mechanics of the aphorism by establishing what it is not. What then, is *not* an aphorism? We can be more specific, in our understanding of sentential opposites, than Frye's distinction between epigram and 'platitude' allows us, and say that where one group of sentence-vehicle aims to encapsulate common wisdom ('maxim' or 'proverb') are more precise ways of rendering Frye's 'platitude'), another (that of epigram or aphorism) seeks to counter it. The self that is asserted in distinction to the mass, moreover, is one achieved by style, or by stylised means: means that ensure, in Frye's words, the reader or auditor being 'pleased with the wit of its [epigram's] expression', and of being persuaded by its profundity as a result.⁶ The aphorism, as Frank Doggett writes, started life as a 'sentence of definition',⁷ and this is especially, and ironically, true in the case of Oscar Wilde, whose own aphorising began in the instruction manuals officially advised on the Oxford University Greats Course as essential tools for educative advancement.⁸ As I make plain at certain moments from within the thesis, the aphorism retains some of the grammatical markers of the proverb: excluding terms such as 'the last', 'the only', 'the most', 'the perfect', 'the supreme',⁹ and so on, keep the feeling of a sententious and authoritative voice which Renaissance instruction manuals had made their watchword. Yet an important aspect of its formal mechanics is that it retains this

⁵ Oscar Wilde, in *The Faber Book of Aphorisms*, p.5.

⁶ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p.329.

⁷ Frank Doggett, 'Stevens's Later Poetry', in Peter L. Macnamara ed. *Critics on Wallace Stevens* (Miami, FL: University of Miami Press, 1972), p.119.

⁸ Simon Reader, 'Social Notes: Oscar Wilde, Francis Bacon, and the Medium of Aphorism', in Kostas Boyiopoulos and Michael Shallcross eds. *Aphoristic Modernity: 1880 to the Present* (Boston: Brill, 2019), p.61.

⁹ See, for example, my discussion of Wallace Stevens's aphorism in this thesis, p.123.

straightforward, instructive sense whilst turning a commonplace definitional truth on its head. An aphorism like Wilde's 'punctuality is the thief of time' remembers Edward Young's sentential (and popular) 'procrastination is the thief of time' and exposes the earlier 'truth' against a wittier alternative that showcases the bravura flourish of its author.¹⁰ An aphorism like Wilde's 'Charity creates a multitude of sins' remembers – blasphemously – the Biblical assertion that 'Charity covers a multitude of sins' and exposes that, too, as an insufficient truth, a stylistically inept truism that fails to account for his own highly paradoxical case for individualism as a social good (as advanced throughout his 'Soul of Man');¹¹ an individualism always argued for by the self-asserting fact – self-centred, in the most descriptive sense – of Wilde's heavily artificial style. The aphorism depends, in Lawrence Danson's words, on 'keeping the old meaning in circulation':¹² a device upon which George Bernard Shaw, in *Man and Superman* (1903) – his most aphoristic play – often depends; most particularly in his reversal of familiar understandings of maturity: 'Every man over forty', as the afterword has it, 'is a scoundrel'.¹³ It is a finding more modern aphorists have also discovered: when, in 1938, in words later to be claimed by Groucho Marx, the American hotel-manager Frank Case opined that 'time wounds all heels',¹⁴ he was assuming – and depending on – a knowledge in the auditor on the anonymous maxim, 'time heals all wounds', so as to assert an individual riposte to an established convention, whilst arriving at a new and highly personal truth.

The distinction is only the more apparent when we consider the authority from which the aphorism – versus the proverb – is claiming to draw: for where the aphorism/epigram uses an individual style to assert selfhood, the maxim/proverb emphasises its comparable *lack* of authorship: the words the maxim contains give the sense, as the legal scholar Roscoe Pound once put it, of 'spr[inging] out of the soil of national character'.¹⁵ We can measure the astuteness of Pound's suggestion that the maxim might speak for communities as large as nations by noticing how much it undergirds Cardinal Newman's procedures, in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). For Newman's is a text in which the very multiplicity of available maxims asserts their truth-conferring

¹⁰ CWOW3, p.35. Edward Young, in *Night Thoughts*, ed. George Gilfillan (Edinburgh: James Nicol, 1853), p.17.

¹¹ CWOW4, p.231; Peter: 4, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, eds. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.288.

¹² Lawrence Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.3.

¹³ George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* (New York, NY: Brentano's, 1905), p.242.

¹⁴ Frank Case, *The Yale Book of Quotations*, ed Fred R. Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p.145.

¹⁵ Roscoe Pound, 'The Maxims of Equity', *Harvard Law Review* 34.8 (June 1921), pp.809-836, p.809.

value ('Various proverbs and maxims sanction me in so speaking')¹⁶, and where the form's invocation is enough to access a commonality of feeling ('We all feel the force of the maxim "Audi alteram partem"')¹⁷. The implicit appeal of the maxim, in Newman's use, lies in its ability to attest to an inherent structural and ordering unity to English grammar, a power similar to that Newman more famously bestows upon rhyme words: the maxim, like the rhyme, serves as an instrument for lexical discipline.

Frye's accurate distinction between paradoxical and non-paradoxical forms of sentence undermines the ecumenism of such recent studies as Ben Grant's *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms* (2016), and Andrew Hui's *A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter* (2019). Most inapposite, especially in Hui's study, is the implicit yoking of aphorism to another kind of short sentence, different to the maxim but equally opposed to aphorism's workings: that of the fragment. For where Hui talks of the aphorism's 'aesthetics of the unfinished', and describes, by this incompleteness, its violation of 'the reconstitution of the whole' which he perceives readers always to be engaged in when approaching a text (he calls such reconstitution '[t]extual criticism's greatest desire')¹⁸, this thesis will understand Hui's words to apply appositely to the fragment, and inappositely to the aphorism. For by this thesis's understanding, the two forms contain opposed attitudes to completion: the fragment being, as Glen W. Most puts it, 'an incomplete textual citation',¹⁹ and the aphorism being, in the words of Donald Davie, 'a sentence with a plot'.²⁰ Grant's thesis, which lucidly situates the difference between the two forms in the terrain of their completion as textual entities (the fragment, in Grant's study, which is 'by definition a broken-off piece [...] will always imply others, even if these are not actually present';²¹ at another, even stronger moment of opposition, Grant thus calls the fragment aphorism's 'antonym')²² belies such perspicacity by the capacious reach of its methodology, and undoes thereby the frontiers the aphorism erects about itself. Davie's words matter in contrasting with Most's on the question of the kinds of text – and not

¹⁶ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I.T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.205.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.359.

¹⁸ Andrew Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), p.20.

¹⁹ Glen W. Most, 'On Fragments', quoted in Rebecca Varley-Winter, *Reading Fragments and Fragmentation in Modernist Literature* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2018), pp.1-2.

²⁰ Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry Into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1971), p.52.

²¹ Ben Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.115.

²² Ibid, p.116.

just the kind of sentence – the reader is confronted with: the aphorism, rather than seeking a text that will complete it, *is* that text already.

The etymology of aphorism, as Grant informs us, asserts the idea of the boundary; of bounded speech. '[I]t comes', writes Grant, 'from the Greek *apo*, "off", *horizein*, "to set bounds" [...]' The aphorism then, defines itself as something which is bound off.²³ If the aphorism, by the anthologies in which, in classical times, it was collected, 'demarcates the boundaries of its subject matter' by its appearing under the rubric of separate entries,²⁴ this is because such anthologising mimics the collection, in books, of cut flowers, pressed and preserved and allocated space of a similar definiteness (hence the etymology of 'anthology' as a collection of flowers, an association enjoying an abiding resonance in such texts as *Other Men's Flowers* (1944)).²⁵ The etymological discovery licences a further folding of aphorism into epigram, since, as Denise Riley claims, in her study of 'the lapidary style', '[t]he link between "incision" and "concision" holds strong at the level of etymology', 'concision' being at one time 'synonymous with "cutting away"',²⁶ just as 'epigramma' implies a 'writing into', a setting of words in stone.²⁷ If aphorism and epigram are interchangeable, and if epigram is etymologically related to that other form of stony sentence, the 'epitaph',²⁸ it is only to further the sense of aphorism as having the last word.

A prehistory and context of the moment

The period immediately before that treated in this thesis saw, with the emergence of philology as a specialised area of study, a new crisis in the field of language-analysis, and a basic problem about the kinds of claims that could now reasonably be made on language's behalf. If the new Humboldtian principles that largely determined the reorganisation of the academy in Britain (and which were internalised most dramatically in the Oxford Greats course)²⁹ already provided, by their emphasis on disciplinary range, a levelling to what were previously more rigidly demarcated academic specialisms,

²³ Grant, *The Aphorism*, p.6.

²⁴ Ibid, p.6.

²⁵ Gideon Nisbet, *Greek Epigram in Reception: J.A. Symonds, Oscar Wilde, and the Invention of Desire, 1805-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.14.

²⁶ Denise Riley, 'On the Lapidary Style', *differences*, 1 May 2017; 28 (1): 17–36, p.33.

²⁷ Ibid, p.27.

²⁸ Ibid, p.27.

²⁹ See Linda Dowling's discussion of Humboldt's influence in *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.55.

they reflected a crossing of boundaries that was focused in the domain of philology. In that domain, as commentators such as Linda Dowling have shown, Charles Darwin's new insights in the field of evolutionary genetics threatened to disturb the basic tenet of romantic linguistics: that language was a system apart, its self-sustaining, self-referential materials proving, by extension, the separateness of humanity from – and thus, by implication, its supremacy over – other life-forms.³⁰ If these other life forms were not in fact separate but existed in the same environmental sphere as humans, then this would have consequences for language as a sustainable system: its premises would have to be considered every bit as contingent as the materials it had been helpful previously to regard as distinct.³¹ Dowling does a masterful job of anchoring *fin-de-siècle* literary innovation within these linguistic questions.³² Indeed, one of her principal case studies, M. Max Müller, claims that, in distinguishing man from animals, '[l]anguage is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it', and further, that 'no process of natural selection will ever distil significant words out of the notes of birds or the cries of beasts'.³³ This nervous special pleading on language's behalf would set the stage for the kinds of literary debates about the possibility of autonomy to be seen in the practitioners of the period. Ultimately, however, as this thesis will attempt to prove, Dowling chooses the wrong literary partisans for the views she correctly takes to be central to this dispute – and so goes some way to weakening the genuinely revelatory anchoring of the period of early modernism in questions of the study of language which is so boldly articulated throughout the course of her study.

The linguistic background I have sketched is essential to the claims made by this thesis because many of its themes – the autonomy of language-systems, and the possibility of man's separating from nature and existing outside of it – are made and rearticulated in the essays of Wilde, this thesis's first case study, and the author to whose example all my subsequent aphoristic case studies are in some sense responding. In Wilde's case, these linguistic concerns are concretised at the level of the sentence. This was not in itself a novel equivalence: Walter Pater, one of Wilde's undergraduate supervisors on the Greats curriculum, had made his multi-clausal sentences – with

³⁰ See *ibid*, pp.1-43.

³¹ See, for an overview of this discussion and how it affected Walter Pater's writing, Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.82.

³² See, in particular, Dowling's discussion of this debate's implication on writerly practice, *Language and Decadence*, pp.46-103.

³³ M. Max Müller, quoted in Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand 'Introduction', in Oscar Wilde, *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making*, eds. Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.9.

their meandering shifts and syntactic self-corrections – the instrument for his own embrace of Darwinian metaphysics. Since Darwin, according to Pater, had stressed the contingency of all things, so sentences would have to bear witness to this contingency, which, in their decided undecidability, they are always in some sense doing.³⁴ Wilde's innovation was to take Pater's equivalence and turn it on its head: by locating selfhood in the unit of the sentence, Wilde's style is able to prove, not language's incompetency as a vehicle of the self, but instead its obvious suitability for such a role. The first chapter of my thesis will demonstrate how Wilde's aphoristic practice, through the identifiability of his voice to this short, memorable, memorisable, and paradoxically witty form, effected a renunciation of the emerging assumptions of established philology by asserting an individualism of style that could withstand absorption by texts larger than it; and thus the integrity of an emboldened selfhood that could withstand similar claims from contemporary science.

The editors and contributors of a recent academic collection, *Aphoristic Modernity* (2019), have also sought to reckon with the legacy of aphorism in the period. Indeed, in their prefatory material, the editors consult some of the same literary case studies as treated in this thesis: Henry James, the subject of this thesis's second chapter, is thus seen, in his famous remarks about the 'baggy monsters' of the contemporary novel,³⁵ to be at one with Wilde in calling for the aphorism as a corrective to literature's perceived inability to represent society adequately. In the editors' words, James's description 'articulated a sense that new forms of art and rhetoric must emerge to encapsulate the sharpness, condensation, spontaneity, and fragmentation of the later-Victorian and modernist periods'.³⁶ I cannot agree with this judgement, for reasons which this exposition of James's words underlines. James, in the preface to *The Tragic Muse* (1890) from which these words emanate, was not asking that novels be shorter, or that they contain more moments of spontaneity and fragmentation, but rather that they be *less* spontaneous and fragmented: that they have, in his words, 'a deep-breathing economy and an organic form', that they rid themselves of the 'queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary' that conspired to make the very big no different from the very small.³⁷ The editors' mistake is useful in delineating the theoretical problems that undergird their assumptions – problems similar to those seen in Hui's more diachronic and theoretically-

³⁴ See, for her discussion of Darwin's implications for Pater's sentences particularly, Leighton, *On Form*, p.90.

³⁵ HJLC2, p.1107.

³⁶ Kostas Boyiopoulos and Michael Shallcross, 'Introduction', in Kostas Boyiopoulos and Michael Shallcross eds. *Aphoristic Modernity: 1880 to the Present* (Boston: Brill, 2019), p.4.

³⁷ HJLC2, p.1107.

minded study, which cannot help but borrow from the language of the fragment to which, as I have wanted to suggest, the aphorism is opposed.

In their efforts to explain the form's appeal to writers such as Wilde, the editors make a distinction between this historical moment – that of the 'late-Victorian and modernist periods' –³⁸ and that immediately preceding it. The earlier aphorism, as they understand it, exposes an 'observation or moral about the human condition' which is 'rendered revelatory by the distinct perspective and verbal ingenuity of the composer' –³⁹ a definition very similar to Frye's, and one from which I do not depart. Yet they then distinguish this kind of aphorism – whose 'age-old model was beginning to look a little shop-worn' – from the kind they intend to submit to scrutiny, one more representative of 'the rhythms of life and industry'.⁴⁰ Wanting to understand Wilde as a 'threshold aphorist[]', the editors present him at first as navigating the romantic and the modernist: wanting to be 'a kind of hyper-Keats' on the one hand (a role they define, perfectly correctly, as that of a 'passive idler and consumer of sensation')⁴¹ and 'proto-Warholian self-publicist, spooling out a prodigious, quasi-industrial proliferation of aphoristic texts' on the other.⁴² This thesis will argue, on the contrary, that this very real proliferation of aphoristic texts represented Wilde's ambition to encode those very qualities (such as Keatsian passivity) by such media as were notionally antithetical to it: that the particularity of Wilde's response to modernity lay in his manipulation of its resources to extend the feeling of a coterie-reach to never-before-contemplated numbers of readers. The formal paradox that thus sustains the aphorism – its requirement for the existence of a received wisdom against which it can distinguish itself – meets a social paradox in Wilde's time not open to earlier practitioners: of a lively print culture that magnifies the reach of Wilde's unique, putatively isolated voice; a culture that extends the scope of the author's voice even as it multiplies the number of cultural instances that might be found available for disagreement with it.

James gave lucid recognition to this paradox in Wilde's conditions of reception, in words which doubt the sincerity of these Keatsian refusals. Smarting from a performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (then, in 1892, newly-opened in the West End), James complained to Florence Bell

³⁸ Boyiopoulos and Shallcross, 'Introduction', p.4.

³⁹ Ibid, pp.3-4.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.4.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.7.

⁴² Ibid, p.7.

of Wilde's 'usual trick of saying the unusual'.⁴³ The play, thought James, contained 'too much drollery – that is, “cheeky” or paradoxical wit of dialogue, and the pit and gallery are so pleased at finding themselves clever enough to “catch on” to four or five of the ingenious – too ingenious – *mots* in the dozen, that it makes them feel quite “*decadent*” and *raffiné*?⁴⁴ It is perhaps from an understanding that such exclusions are really artful and ingenious ways of including (not to mention, of manipulating the literary marketplace) that epigrams and aphorisms enjoy the generally negative and only glancing treatment that they do in James's fiction: where they feature, they are quickly excused, as if serving as discordant moments registering communication's breakdown. ““She had a very good education when she was young [...] But she has learned nothing since””, says *The Aspern Papers*'s (1888) Miss Bordereau, of her niece; whose reply – ““I have always been with you”” – is put ‘very mildly, and evidently with no intention of making an epigram’.⁴⁵ ““[H]er delay makes me exceedingly unhappy””, says Nick Dormer to Mr. Carteret in *The Tragic Muse*, of Julia's extended engagement, whose own reply – ““Then what more does she want?”” – Nick laughs at, ‘though perceiving his host hadn't meant it as an epigram’.⁴⁶

In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), however, as my second chapter will argue, James entered the discussion about the importance of sentences in driving drama by participating in a circumstantial irony of his own. For in that novel, as I will show, the question of how sentences should be written is invested with such power as to distribute and disperse moral valency, just as it informs that novel's structure more broadly. It has been increasingly fashionable to compare James's project with Wilde's, and monographs such as Jonathan Freedman's *Professions of Taste* (1990) and Michèle Mendelssohn's *Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and Aesthetic Culture* (2014) have attempted in particular to stress the decadent affinities felt to exist between both writers. This chapter, however, will stress James's quite novel contribution to the English philological questions Wilde was responding to: a contribution taking shape, as I will argue, in the form of an American pragmatist understanding of the relationship of the self to language that departed in quite significant ways from Wilde's conviction that the aphoristic sentence could or should shepherd the personality of the author's voice. For it was Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his 1841 essay ‘Self-Reliance’, who wrote ‘[a]s soon as he

⁴³ Henry James, *Letters, Volume III: 1883-1895*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Macmillan, 1980), p.372.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.372.

⁴⁵ Henry James, *The Aspern Papers; The Spoils of Poynton*, ed. R.P. Blackmur (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1959), p.40.

⁴⁶ Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Penguin, 1978), p.207.

has once spoken or acted with *éclat* he is a committed person’;⁴⁷ words that return this rendering of the lapidary to its etymological negative (in splintering)⁴⁸; as if all declarative speaking were apt only to splinter the self in ever-narrowing traps. The much-noticed compositional and structural oddity of James’s late novel, whose narrative centres discretely contain the consciousnesses of several of its characters, was described by their author as the result of writing in ‘blocks’;⁴⁹ a fact recruited by Diana Leca to support her claim that the novel is structured aphoristically, in self-sustaining (and non-dialogic) components ‘constitutive of a generative hardness in late-Jamesian characterization’.⁵⁰ This chapter will share in Leca’s comparison but, rather than view it as the sanctioned will of an author whose effects are thereby reified, it will argue that the novel’s tethering of the aphoristic to forms of narrative method contrasts with an alternative (and opposed) narrative comparison: to that of the parenthesis. This vehicle it will understand as any attempt by a particle of speech to break from a sentence’s general drift: a thing of particular pertinence when the drift is set by Kate Croy, whose narrative plans, and whose lexical resources, are so firmly set in advance. The chapter will argue for the novel as presenting the thematization, and not the reification, of lapidary sentences as organisers of experience; and will suggest that it is in Milly Theale’s thwarting – in her becoming, that is, a person committed to another person’s *éclat* – that the novel stages the thwarting of James’s own professed aesthetics; and thus in its inability to house Milly’s fugitive moods and tones.

We have James’s word, in his criticism, for his standing against attempts (such as Kate’s) to separate experience into discrete units. We also know, as my second chapter will demonstrate, that James repeatedly sought to show the folly of this atomised model of experience via the disproving metaphor of the sentence. Considering each section of a novel to be constituted of ‘intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression’,⁵¹ ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1884) (in words rearticulated almost verbatim in 1902, the year of the novel’s publication)⁵² flags the aphoristic as an artificial means of pretending that this general effort, whose parts are to be found ‘melting into each other at every breath’,⁵³ can be made solid and individual. That chapter will seek to emphasise the

⁴⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), p.261.

⁴⁸ See for a discussion of this etymology Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp.154-5.

⁴⁹ HJLC2, p.1294.

⁵⁰ Diana Leca, ‘Failed to Feel It: Stoniness in Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove*’, *The Henry James Review*, 40.3 (Fall 2019), pp.234-243, p.238.

⁵¹ HJLC1, p.55.

⁵² HJLC2, p. 316.

⁵³ HJLC1 p.55.

implicit Emersonian pragmatism of these words (as indeed of James's narrative practice more widely), and how, in their resistance to containers, they declare a fealty to Emerson's injunction against indulging in 'repose'.⁵⁴ Evidence of similar convictions is manifest in the critical prose of Wallace Stevens, whose pragmatist affiliations (owing more to William James, who taught him at Harvard, than to James's godfather, Emerson) are expressed in his wish, in 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' (1941), to defer the business of naming. To name something, by Stevens's account, is to fix it, and '[t]o fix it is to put an end to it': as an alternative, offers Stevens, '[l]et me show it to you unfixed'.⁵⁵ These words are a lucid restatement of William James's argument, in *Pragmatism* (1907), that the substantive particles which are the material of traditional philosophy 'are so many solving names' allowing the inquirer to 'rest when you have them'; that pragmatism advises against 'look[ing] on such words as closing your quest' and instead encourages seeing them as 'a program for more work'.⁵⁶

These stated convictions have led Richard Poirier, pragmatist literature's most fluent expositor, to exclude the aphorism from Stevens's pragmatism; the form becoming, by Poirier's lights, a valve for aberrant energies that emerge in times of crisis or of loss of nerve:⁵⁷ times, in short, where Stevens forgets to be a pragmatist and declares a wish to fix things after all. The assumption, indeed, of aphorism as an aberrant vehicle for Stevens's procedures – either as a sincere marker of crisis, as in Poirier's account, or as a staged moment of weakness which Stevens's wider poetry transcends – is present even in that criticism which does not share in Poirier's ascription of pragmatism to Stevens's effects. Taking as its starting point another mistaken interpretation of the Stevensian aphorism – in Beverly Coyle's assertion that the appeal of aphorism for Stevens lay in its traditional function as a vehicle for truth –⁵⁸ my third chapter will argue that the aphorism appealed to Stevens as a vehicle that could generate interesting poetic possibilities. The chapter will reinscribe these interesting possibilities within the pragmatist bracket, by asserting the centrality of aphorism to what Poirier calls 'the performing self', which he defines using Walt Whitman's words in 'Song of Myself' (1855) as a state of being "both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at

⁵⁴ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.271.

⁵⁵ *CPP*, p.664.

⁵⁶ William James, *Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York, NY: Library of America, 1987), p.509.

⁵⁷ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.158.

⁵⁸ Beverly Coyle, *A Thought to be Rebearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry* (Epping: Bowker Publishing Company, 1983), pp.2-3.

it”’.⁵⁹ The aphorism, my chapter will show, affords just such possibilities, exactly in being, in its traditional usages, un-propitious for the kinds of fugitive flexibility we know Stevens to have valued. Affording the possibility of Poirier’s key pragmatist procedure of ‘troping’, which he defines as ‘turning or changing the apparently given’,⁶⁰ aphorism thus emerges as a central tool in Stevens’s pragmatist poetics.

Finding in Ronald Firbank’s novels ‘no relation’ to his own poetry, Stevens’s correspondence shows him having ‘long since sent the lot of them to the attic’;⁶¹ a faithful act of banishment, the attic serving as the site, in Firbank’s fiction, of just such categorical confusions and disappointments. ‘His Hellenism once captivated me’, says a character in *Vainglory*, ‘but the Attic to him means nothing now but servants’ bedrooms’.⁶² If this quip, in its deflation of grand analogues, is representative of Firbank’s procedures, my fourth chapter argues that the same effects are on display in Firbank’s frequently isolated and standalone sentences: sentences I label by the term ‘reverse aphorism’. The chapter finds a corresponding ascription of seriousness of purpose between commentators wanting Firbank to stand as, on the one hand, a late decadent, continuing Wilde’s aesthetics; and, on the other, as a modernist whose use of white spacing and ellipses suggests a tendency to fragmentation; a connection only furthered by the fact that the analogue Firbank seems most often to be fragmenting, by this argument, is Wilde. The chapter will focus on contemporary accounts of Firbank’s compositional methods to suggest that he invoked the resonances of the aphoristic – as a form of understanding trained on important material, and sloughing off the remainder – only to undo them, diverting his attention to materials which flaunted their *lack* of importance. It will further contend that if, in formal terms, we view Firbank’s sentences as ‘reverse aphorisms’ – not, as Frye has it, making the unfamiliar familiar, but making ordinary and commonplace locutions newly strange – we can better see their centrality to Firbank’s anarchically deflationary vision.

Aphoristic homosociality: the encoding of heredity

⁵⁹ Quoted in Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York, NY: Random House, 1987), p.75.

⁶⁰ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.39.

⁶¹ LWS, p.287.

⁶² Ronald Firbank, *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, ed. Anthony Powell (London: Duckworth, 1961), p.221.

Essential to my selection is the authors' relationship to sexuality; or, more exactly, to an aesthetic component that extrapolates from Darwin's findings a series of questions about literature's own possible relation to heredity. A part of this relates to form, and to the testamentary quality Riley locates in its etymology. Jacques Derrida, in a terminologically diffuse account, elaborates on this quality by viewing the aphorism as a hyper-literary form working explicitly against the contingencies of speech. In Derrida's essay, conceived as a programme note to a 1988 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's play is implicitly made to speak to the possibilities of paradox inherent to aphorism: the sheer sweep of what Derrida considers pertinent to the aphoristic emerges as equivalent to the sweeping territorial inclusiveness aphorism itself lays claim to. Derrida's essay, which associates the aphorism with what he calls 'contretemps', a state which thwarts order in the double sense of representing the collision of opposites and existing outside of time,⁶³ enlists *Romeo and Juliet*'s Friar as the apogee of this literary (and not spoken) device. Thus it is that the friar 'abandon[s] speech', and instead 'entrust[s] the secret' of the lovers' match 'to letters' – the function, as Derrida claims, of 'the third party, the mediator, the Friar, the matchmaker who [...] organizes the contretemps'.⁶⁴ So, like the device of paradox which aphorism shepherds, the Friar, in marrying Montague and Capulet, unites nominal opposites under a single banner. And like the epitaph-writer of Riley's account, he moves human relations to the realm of the scriptive, a domain that resists 'natural' ties of genealogy, in a posture appropriate to his own professionally-sanctioned refusal to procreate. That language – in its highly-literary, aphoristic iterations – might thus replace the natural order, is suggested by what Derrida notes elsewhere to be the play's (and aphorism's) repeatability, which denies, by its afterlife in subsequent performances (or in subsequent quotation) the possibility of decay or death.⁶⁵ Yet the sheer capaciousness of the friar's domain – which mediates opposites merely by his commanding utterance – adds to this immortal sense the impression that by his refusals a greater account of creativity may be open to him; as if only in turning away from life can he be invested with the power of shaping it. If the friar may will that 'holy church incorporate two in one',⁶⁶ it is his own speech that makes such fantasies a possibility.

⁶³ Derek Attridge, fn., in Derek Attridge ed, Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.418.

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, *ibid*, p.423.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.418

⁶⁵ See what Derrida elaborates about the aphorism's – and theatre's – 'innumerable repetitions', *ibid*, p.433.

⁶⁶ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.232.

The friar's status as a mediating influence connects him to a position of sexual ambiguity with a rich pedigree in the Western canon, most strikingly in evidence in the person of *Troilus and Criseyde's* (1385-6) Pandarus, whose ability to order the world by aphorism comes under strain when the forces that control that world prove too large for the form's tidy claims. Pandarus thus lives true to Leo Bersani's words, written about the Comte de Lautréamont's aphoristic turn, that the 'perfection' of the form he names a 'maxim' 'seems to be analogous to the perfection of being purified of the stain of existence':⁶⁷ in Pandarus's case, as in that of the Friar, the form depends upon a purely phrasal logic, untested and untried by the world's vicissitudes. All the writers I treat in the following thesis – with the instructive exception of Wallace Stevens – were gay men, whose sexuality was actualised with a varying degree of openness and practice; all of them, relatedly, wrestled with the question of how much the aphoristic form might address or resist the pressures exerted on it by the outside world, exactly inasmuch as it seemed to give the promise of replacing a natural order from which their sexuality excluded them.

The relationship between Wilde's biography and his critical writing sustains a paradox: that through an authoritative aesthetics embedding the autarky of literature a documented sexual subversiveness could be ensured. This is because the utopian system Wilde imagines seeks to transform literature into a domain that might compete with Darwinism on its own, developing a separate system of heredity, and thus answering that question at the centre of gay relations – how to compensate for the biological impossibility of reproduction – by literary means. As the Gilbert of 'The Critic as Artist' (1891) puts it, in a mischievous turn at rewriting Darwin's system: 'Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change'.⁶⁸ Much of what follows will assert the similarity to, and thus the centrality of, aphorism as a guarantor of this compromised 'variety' in Wilde's practice, one necessarily dependent on refusal (of the outside world and its conventional linguistic forms) and reduction (of sheer space) for its notionally enlarging effects. And if the aphorism functions, indeed, as a phrasal closed system, then Wilde's habit of polishing and reshaping these aphorisms becomes an essential means of effecting the reproductive mimicry such refusals are intended to ensure.

⁶⁷ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p.227.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.204.

In 1902, Henry James congratulated Gustave Flaubert for not being trapped by his well-wrought sentences. ‘It was truly a wonderful success to be so the devotee of the phrase and yet never its victim’,⁶⁹ wrote James, in words, as this thesis will make clear, inflected by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s injunction to literary ‘abandonment’,⁷⁰ not least because they echo a similar achievement James holds to have been Emerson’s own.⁷¹ James’s open hostility to the integrity of the aphorism, as of the seeming durability of all isolated expressions, stems from a sense that Wilde’s closed systems – and others like them – might themselves be traps, less an answer to the question of literary heredity than an evasion of its persistently thorny premises. That a work such as James’s *Spoils of Poynton* (1897), so obviously concerned with inheritance, contrasts with Wilde’s output along sexual lines might tempt a distinction like Jonathan Freedman’s between ‘the latent and the blatant’,⁷² did the difference lie not so much in the implied valences of James’s terms as that they lack the confidence of Wilde’s triumphant literary re-orderings. In James’s novella, a text in which Mrs. Gereth selects and nurtures a prospective daughter-in-law who might better fulfil the role of custodian of her fine objects than her son’s first choice, the narrative inscribes the contingency James felt to be more central to these ideas of heredity, ones never satisfied by the prescriptive programme or the general rule. That Mrs. Gereth proves unsuccessful in soldering a colour-sense on to the more generic designs of the novelistic marriage-plot only underlines such pessimism about continuity and transfer as James, speaking in his critical persona, is more open about asserting. The extraordinarily subtle tragedy of the novel thus resides in the perceived folly of its protagonists’ attempting to systematise ephemera: as with objects, as this thesis will argue, so with sentences.

In the case of Ronald Firbank, a writer this thesis wants to view as a ‘reverse aphorist’, his choice to write in a way that remembers the aphorism only to undo its claims to prestige amounts to the creation of works whose non-durability is flagrantly advertised. When, in his *Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), the Queen of Pisuerge expresses a desire to ‘form a party to excavate (for objects of art) among the ruins of Chedorlahomor, a *faubourg* of Sodom’,⁷³ she might, in this most self-reflexive of

⁶⁹ HJLC2, p.335.

⁷⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), p.408.

⁷¹ HJLC1, p.271.

⁷² Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.171.

⁷³ Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (London: Penguin, 1986), p.19.

novels, be speaking of the relationship between her author's sexuality and the attitudes towards heredity on display in his works. The Pisuerger Queen's wistfulness really exhibits its belatedness in a double way: by suggesting that the aestheticist valorisation of *objets d'art* has long since passed (enough for its remembered spoils to be comprised of ruins); and also that this appreciation is marginal to the main event: in the 'faubourgs' or suburbs of canonical examinations of sexuality, and not in their dynamic metropole. That Firbank felt able to name his corpus the stuff of mere 'thistledown' reflects a determined tendency to self-taxonomy at life's foothills and downy margins:⁷⁴ a necessarily non-procreative addition to some more generative activity occurring elsewhere. And just where Wilde saw in the aphorism an impermeable form that might protect the writer's voice as his sequestered closed systems protected the integrity of art more generally, so Firbank, as this thesis will argue, saw in his standalone sentences a vehicle that could not endure. Its purpose, in his handling of it, is to signal its own ephemeral feebleness: like a sexual negative of Wilde's conception of progress, Firbank's reverse aphorisms become a means of relating his creations instead to mere waste.

The results can thus be understood as cohering to a set of established conventions within queer theory: one concessive (as in Wilde's example); one mindful of the contingent negotiations queer sexuality is forced to make within heteronormative structures of permanence (as in James's); another, keen to stress the joyful possibilities inherent in gay non-productivity as it comes to terms with the inevitability of its recalcitrance (as in Firbank's). The latter two positions are, respectively, those advanced in such seminal treatments as Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) and Leo Bersani's *Homos* (1996): they are prescriptive responses, of course, to the flagrant failure of the first. It is, indeed, astonishing how far a novella like *Spoils* addresses itself to Edelman's injunction for literature to forget diminishing reproductive structures,⁷⁵ and how far Firbank's corpus, in relating its own creations to *jouissant* waste, coheres with a similar tendency Bersani admires in the fiction of Jean Genet.⁷⁶ Significant, also, is how far a writer like Wallace Stevens might be understood as responding to the question of creativity from a position noticeably free from the claims queer sexuality might make on it – a fact that might seem, at first, to bar him from inclusion in this 'moment', heavily

⁷⁴ Ronald Firbank, quoted in Brigid Brophy, *Prancing Novelist: A Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography in Praise of Ronald Firbank* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p.254.

⁷⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), pp.3-4.

⁷⁶ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.178.

freighted as it is with the cargo of philological as of sexual concern. But Stevens's example is, in fact, itself instructive – free from the immediate need to establish a position on the equivalence between his works and heredity, he is able to make ludic sport and play of his poetry's findings – to be 'kitsch', in Amia Srinivasan's term for him:⁷⁷ to find a throwaway value in these questions of self-expression through language, without tethering his own personhood ineluctably to its results. It is perhaps little wonder, then, that he, though sharing James's pragmatist assumptions, is capable of finding a synthesis for the aphorism whereby it proves incapable of binding him to positions he would rather not commit to.

Because the prehistory of the 'moment' under discussion starts with the philological questions being debated from within the Oxford Greats course, it is Wilde who is its starting point, and who sets its terms; even – and especially – if the subsequent writers grappling with those terms come to reject them. Shaw – certainly an aphorist, and spanning the period covered by this thesis almost exactly – is not included, because his aphorising was responsive to a different tradition (that of Friedrich Nietzsche most especially); one that does not touch upon the questions of longevity, heredity, and the possibility of preserving the self through language which had compelled Wilde to develop his theories of sentential preservation at such length. The homosociality of the question of heredity as it is expressed and rearticulated by my chosen practitioners accounts for the comparative paucity of women aphorists in the period; the urgency of the aphorism to gay men being what to do with literature that could not be done with the body. Yet even a gay writer like Auden – certainly, as some of the opening comments to this introduction suggest, an enthusiast of the form – reserved too marginal a place for the aphorism within his own thinking for him to be a part of this moment. For Auden, the aphorism is mostly a feature of his essays, where, owing to their commonplace structure and their refusal to discriminate between the voice of the author and the series of *bon mots* and quotations culled from the voices of others, the aphorism assumes the status of what Susan Sontag called 'note-book thinking':⁷⁸ a provisional form that registers the incompleteness of a thought. It is as if, rather than develop the form from its sentential humanist origins, he were attempting instead to revert it to them. For the authors under discussion, the aphorism assumed a central importance:

⁷⁷ Amia Srinivasan, 'The Imperfect is our Paradise: Wallace Stevens, Kitsch, Philosophy', *Schmilosophy Seminar*, 2013, pp.1-5, p.3.

⁷⁸ Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*, ed. David Rieff (London: Penguin, 2012), p.511.

its iterations were present and frequent in every form in which they practiced. This thesis traces the development of the Wildean aphorism as its implications are ingested and transformed by James, Stevens, and Firbank; and ends with a short account of that transformation's legacy in the British theatre.

Chapter One

Oscar Wilde's Conservative Aphorisms

This chapter aims to assert the centrality of the aphorism to Oscar Wilde's practice. It wants to argue that the aphorism encapsulates the imperatives of Wilde's critical writing (particularly of *Intentions* (1891))¹, and that it enforces these imperatives at the level of the sentence. To assert as much is to offer an interpretation in bad odour in mainstream Wildean studies, and it will be part of this chapter's business to explain why this is so; why that is, a vehicle with so conservative a prehistory should have been treated, in recent commentary, as a vehicle for radical subversion. The chapter will contend that in making an elision between Wilde's work and Walter Pater's, the dominant trend in commentary has been to find in Wilde a radical figure: doubting the aphorism's preserving capabilities just as Pater's multi-clausal and hedging sentences assuredly effect and mimic such a doubt. That Wilde's aphorisms instead assert the integrity of the phrase and the authorial voice it shepherds is a truth persistently obscured by a failure in commentary in connecting Wilde's critical writing with the changing shape of his aphorisms: in how the notational, inductive aspect of these sentences as they are reshaped across Wilde's career only confirms the ideal of perfectibility which that earlier critical document adumbrates extensively. It will argue that, once we realise how much the aphorism resembles the utopian cultures of Wilde's criticism – rigidly policed at their frontiers, in Wilde's scheme, only to allow for a wider variability guaranteeing perfection within – we can see how much it preserves the shape of selfhood in the author's voice across Wilde's career, in ways disruptive to our sense of a chronology about that career. And it will posit that, in enforcing a meaning so against the propositions that carry them, Wilde's aphorisms commit themselves, in ways only idealised by *Intentions*, to a renunciation of content that is the final assertion both of an autonomous aestheticism, and of the artist to whom such claims are tethered.

Maintaining the line: aphorism against hybridity

Wilde's aphorisms do not, at first, trouble stable categories. If we take Northrop Frye's words about the epigram as the definitive account, then we find in Wilde's epigrams, as in those of Frye's ideal, a 'dissociative rhetoric' wherein doxa is challenged by a reversal of its basic precepts, an effect

¹ For clarity's sake, I omit dates for the essays this collection contains.

communicating in stylistic terms as a shift in the fundamentals of its grammar.² The style of paradox which pervades Wilde's works of the 1890s finds condensed expression in those aphorisms for which Wilde is most famous – aphorisms like 'Charity creates a multitude of sins' or 'Punctuality is the thief of time' –³ which work either by reversing the terms of a proverbialism or by destabilising the sententiae of famous or revered sources (as, most extremely, that of the Bible: as in 'Charity creates a multitude of sins'). In these examples – as in all examples, I would argue, of the Wildean aphorism – it is an antinomian position that is arrived at, wherein both the doxa that is challenged and the paradox that does the challenging must be felt to hold true; an effect Lawrence Danson has elegantly and neatly summarised as that of achieving a 'new, oppositional meaning' by 'keeping the old meaning in circulation'.⁴

The formal conservatism of Wilde's aphorisms – their recognisable adherence, that is, to the established pattern the form sets for them – is heightened when such oppositions occur not just implicitly and *within* the aphorism (as do the examples above: 'Procrastination is the thief of time' being 'contained' by Wilde's opposing comments on punctuality) but outside it. Danson provides an excellent elucidation of the process when, in excerpting an exchange from Act 3 of *An Ideal Husband*, he talks of it as embodying an 'imperial relation of the Wildean self, personified in the dandiacal Lord Goring, to his world, reduced here to the compliant servant Phipps'.⁵ The text reads:

Lord Goring (taking out his buttonhole). You see, Phipps, Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.

Phipps. Yes, my lord.

Lord Goring (putting in new buttonhole). And falsehoods the truths of other people.

Phipps. Yes, my lord.

Lord Goring. Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself.

Phipps. Yes, my lord.

Lord Goring. To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance, Phipps.⁶

² Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.329.

³ CW4, p.231; *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. Connie Robertson (Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 1998), p.463.

⁴ Lawrence Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.3.

⁵ Ibid, p.3.

⁶ Ibid, p.3.

The exchange should be enough to query those readings which will detect in Wilde less gift for paradox than he truly has; and Robert Macfarlane's thundering pronouncement on Wilde's literary procedures, in which '[s]urface is preferred to depth, style to content, and effect to originality',⁷ would flag significantly at that central clause. For Wilde's style of paradox depends for its effects on the *thematization* of such preferences, a dramatization of 'style' as it accommodates its own preferring. It is as if one best becomes a Goring by one's *not* being a Phipps.

Where Danson is concerned, one can only complain that he has not gone far enough. For it is not just Phipps who proves the integrity of the Wildean voice and the discreteness that has sponsored it, but his name; or, rather, its inclusion at the final coil of Goring's utterances. We are, with the distance of over a century, in the privileged position of having a print culture to hand to enforce the point, for we 'know' now where the aphorism stops: anthologies of Wilde's sayings in which these lines are featured do not tend to include that final 'Phipps'.⁸ But it is there in the line itself, priming the reader or auditor via an abrupt shift in register to see in the transition from the end of the line to 'Phipps' a comic comment about tonal proportion, a sense that Goring is speaking aphoristically and then, quite as suddenly, that he is not. Wilde's Vivian, in 'The Decay of Lying', had talked of his wish to see 'a language different from that of actual use', one 'jewelled with wonderful words, and enriched with lofty diction',⁹ and Goring's 'Phipps' acts as the barrier that makes such diction possible. The effect is not only to tether this kind of language to the aphorism, and so to have its frontiers asserted in meeting a language that looks and sounds unlike it, but to assert, also – as this running in and out of voice suggests – a control of tone the more complete for its happening within the line and not outside it.

This tonal mastery undermines the progress of Danson's argument, anchored as that is in its claims to detect an 'instability' in Wilde's aphoristic and paradoxical procedures; as, specifically, when Danson claims that Wilde's terms in 'The Soul of Man' 'shimmer with the ingenious instability of paradox',¹⁰ or that the Phipps aphorisms, though 'shift[ing] from the measure of the many to the measure of the remarkable one', simultaneously 'call in question the stability and authority of that

⁷ Macfarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.172.

⁸ Wilde, *Wordsworth Dictionary of Quotations*, p.577.

⁹ CWOW4, p.84.

¹⁰ Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, p.151.

One'.¹¹ Danson is able to make these claims for Wilde as authoritative dispenser of knowledge – a role which, Danson having once assigned, he holds Wilde as soon to have ‘failed’ at playing –¹² because he takes Wilde’s style of paradox to ‘assert[] the primacy of the speaker over the word’.¹³ If Wilde fails by this count, and if ‘categories’ prove themselves to have got the better of him,¹⁴ it is because of his failure to provide a system of knowledge that evades ready assimilation: ‘Intensely himself, always unassimilable, this fat man floating free became to history a type, even a stereotype; not himself alone, unique, but the representative of a category, a name for a class’.¹⁵ But every evidence from what Danson has himself to say about the Phipps exchange shows that this is not so, for the feeling that Goring’s is Wilde’s authentic voice, and that we are being invited, in Goring’s excerpted personage, to ‘test’ that voice against the commonplace tone of an assumed outside, is instructive as to the very stability of Wilde’s authorial impress upon his materials. The unmistakable association of aphorism to the Wildean self works in a similar way, since it speaks of a writerly practice working *with* the word and not against it. If anything is felt to ‘float free’ it is Danson’s commentary upon the prompt.

Why, then, does this matter? Simply, because nothing less than mistaking the basic ethics of Wilde’s intentions is at stake, and the centrality of the aphorism in communicating those ethics. Nor is this problem helped by Danson’s claim that ‘[t]he paradoxes [of the Phipps aphorisms] do what the essays in *Intentions* try to do more expansively’;¹⁶ words unhelpful because they are right, and because what Danson has to say about the nature of this expansion is wrong. For Danson, Wilde’s use of aphorism points to an inconsistency by its accumulation, and one ultimately unsustainable: ‘[t]he final paradox in this sequence’, writes Danson, ‘draws upon all the instabilities previously generated’,¹⁷ which instabilities include Goring’s aphorism about falsehoods (‘the line reads both as an assertion of the dandy’s self-sufficiency and as a satire on the egotism that always assumes its own rightness in the face of overwhelmingly contrary evidence’)¹⁸ and about society (‘[t]his makes it less

¹¹ Ibid, p.4.

¹² Ibid, p.4.

¹³ Ibid, p.3.

¹⁴ Wilde became, according to Danson, ‘not himself alone, unique, but the representative of a category, a name for a class’, Ibid, p.4.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp.3-4.

likely that other people's falsehoods can also be truths, but it also makes one's own truth an isolated, incommunicable thing')¹⁹.

For Danson, not the least of these instabilities is that happening in the author himself, its being 'not clear', he writes, 'where the playwright stands in relation to Goring's relativistic principle'.²⁰ The pronouncement indicates his study's weakness; for in trying to guess at the consistency and merits of each of Wilde's truth-claims, and in treating Wilde's aphorisms as analytic propositions, Danson needlessly complicates the form's mechanics; since in Wilde's hands it is characterised by its dependency on *straightforward* procedures for its effects. If, as Empson tells us, every experience of tone is really the instantiation of some undergirding truth claim,²¹ then Wilde's are a rephrasing of the proposition that the artist must be isolated, and that what he says requires a language set apart from the speech of others in order to make itself heard; that the authority the artist asserts finds its ultimate verifier in a sequestered artifice of the author's unique shaping. That Danson might in some sense 'know' this whilst working in his criticism to advance arguments to the contrary is evidenced in the conditions that have enabled his readings: for all the time he has spent observing the inconsistencies in Goring's aphorisms, he has relied upon the consistency of tone that has united them as observable entities in the first place.

Danson's readings show him, in short, to licence assumptions about the consistency of Wilde's authorial selfhood that run counter to the narrative his study overtly sponsors; a consistency about what Wilde ought to sound like, and where sounding ought to start and end, that corresponds with remarkable frequency to the shape of his words in aphorisms. His misidentifications matter because they display a tension in what it is possible to say about Wilde that exposes how far the impression of him as 'unstable' has assumed the status of critical orthodoxy – to the point of working, at times, against the commentator's better instincts. Other interventions have proved less abashed, and Terry Eagleton's theatrical exposition of Wilde's life and thought – 1990's *Saint Oscar* – presents perhaps the most comprehensive case for a Wilde whose fluidity of feeling matches that of

¹⁹ Ibid, p.4.

²⁰ Ibid, p.3.

²¹ William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), pp.58-59. Sos Eltis claims [i]t was entirely characteristic of Wilde to express his serious political convictions in such a deceptively frivolous and witty form as he did in "The Soul of Man", *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.25. But form and content are one in Wilde's use, the exclusionary wittiness of the paradox encapsulating, and not hiding, what he means by socialism and individualism in that essay.

his expression; or, as he puts it in a preface which shares in none of the fraught advocacy of Danson's study, one in whom 'everything [...] is precarious, unstable, double-edged'.²²

That Eagleton's 'everything' is formed of a triumvirate of 'sexual identity, social status, politics' accounts for the kind of fiction he holds Wilde to endorse.²³ 'If, like Wilde', Eagleton confidently claims, 'your history has been one of colonial oppression, you are less likely to be enamoured of stable representational forms, which are usually, so to speak, on the side of Caesar';²⁴ later: '[t]he colonial subject, pitched into a permanent crisis of identity, will not be overimpressed by the solid, well-rounded characters of classical literary realism, but will feel itself fluid, diffuse, provisional'.²⁵ If the author that emerges from Eagleton's preface seems more representative of the critical developments of the last forty years than of those of the 1890s – seems, in fact, particularly friendly to Eagleton's 'radical cultural theory',²⁶ with its syncretistic marriage of poststructuralism, post-colonialism, and Marx – this only confirms a connection Eagleton himself asserts. Wilde, in Eagleton's characterisation of him, manifests a 'remarkable anticipation of some present-day theory',²⁷ appearing to us now as 'a proto-deconstructionist',²⁸ or else, shifting theorists, 'loom[ing] up for us more and more as the Irish Roland Barthes'.²⁹ That Eagleton professes to identify with his subject is a point enforced even at the vocal level, as self-exposing moments revealed by Eagleton-the-radical-scholar become self-actualising experiences enjoyed by Wilde-the-wayward-author:³⁰ the effect is to confer upon the title's 'saintliness' the appropriate air of a felt prophecy.

Yet it is on the question of voice, and how it ought to sound, that Eagleton's claims become unstuck. For the simple fact that his Wilde sounds nothing like his putative subject exposes the problem of his play's critical assumptions, founded as they are on the 'provisional' and the 'fluid'. If

²² Terry Eagleton, *Saint Oscar* (St. Ives: Clays Ltd, 1990), p.x.

²³ Ibid, p.x.

²⁴ Ibid, p.viii.

²⁵ Ibid, viii-ix.

²⁶ Ibid, p.vii.

²⁷ Ibid, p.viii.

²⁸ Ibid, p.viii.

²⁹ Ibid, p.vii.

³⁰ Compare, from within the play itself, 'Wilde's' 'Who sent me to that odious little prep school and threw a banquet for her friends when I won a place at Oxford? [...] I did what you urged, entered the belly of the beast and made my name there' to Eagleton's prefatory remarks: 'I have been professionally engaged with radical cultural theory for some years; but during part of that time I have also been struggling to make sense of my own ambiguous, contradictory identity, as one of Irish working-class provenance now teaching in the very belly of the beast at Oxford', Ibid, p.13; pp.vii-viii.

the bluff immediacy of lines like ‘I’m a racial hybrid; I might as well be a sexual one too’ –³¹ in their inconsequence so unimaginable in Wilde – underlines the remoteness of these words from their source, it is to say that the discovery Eagleton chances on is that of imagining a Wilde without the paradox which one associates with his voice. Indeed, if ‘aphorism’ is a curious omission from Eagleton’s text – an effect carrying over to both play and preface – his ‘Wilde’s’ words help to make sense of the absence. ‘All the great artists have had one foot in and one foot out’, he intones; and to ‘Lady Wilde’s’ question, ‘Of what?’, he replies: ‘I don’t know; of something or other. I have a number of feet in and out’.³² These words have occasioned ‘Wilde’s’ subsequent comment about hybridity, which must stand as gloss; and hybridity, as it will later be adduced by Homi Bhabha, is appropriate to the vaunted imprecision of the sentiment that will be as uncertain about where to put one’s feet as about how many feet one has at the time of so putting. The implicit anti-Hegelianism of Bhabha’s explication, refusing to allow for the very possibility of polarities because ‘*there is no given community or body of the people whose inherent, radical historicity emits the right signs*’ (essentially, that no one thing will be allowed entirely to name itself as not the other; italics Bhabha’s)³³, as well as living up to the radicality of Eagleton’s reading by refusing the tenet that had grounded the idea of opposites in the physical realm (as in The Symposium’s observation that the existence of ‘pairs’ of hands proved the relevance of opposites), refuses thereby the possibility of paradox, and the aphoristic form that is its vehicle. That one is obliged, in the above instance, to look across the line for the *aperçu*’s proper shape – and that the second ‘part’ of that *aperçu* only complicates such sense of shape as has been hinted at – is itself expressive of that wider function, as Eagleton’s phrasal leakage mirrors that experienced across those notionally separable and upright categories of Bhabha’s determining.

I have so far wanted to suggest that a critical ideology seeking to eliminate the idea of opposites on political grounds will thereby eliminate the possibility of paradox, a system that depends on ‘keeping in circulation’ the meaning it would outdo. I have wanted to say that ‘hybridity’ is a particularly inapposite lens through which to appreciate Wilde, and that an emphasis on hybridity will have to obscure Wilde’s voice and the vehicle through which it is most reliably articulated and observed. But I also linger on Eagleton’s play because it is representative of a feeling across recent commentary on Wilde, whose findings snag similarly on the questions of voice. These

³¹ Ibid, p.12.

³² Ibid, p.12.

³³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), p.39.

readings, however, display none of Eagleton's caginess about the aphorism, a vehicle which assumes in them pride of place as the very instrument of Wilde's subversiveness. For Sandra Siegal, Wilde's is a revolution from within, his turns of phrase undermining the central tenets of the form they constitute – one 'always confirmatory, determinate, or compatible with the prevailing current of opinion' –³⁴ because they 'deny the possibility of arriving at any truth at all, including the truth of the Wildean aphorism'.³⁵ Hope, even despite Siegal's deconstructionist bent, is given to the aphorism after all in Deirdre Toomey's account of Wilde's relationship to oral culture, where the kinds of self-cancellation which Siegal outlines assume a redistributive valency anchored in Wilde's Irish pedigree. In Toomey's account, the aphorism participates in an 'oral culture' that disperses ownership and collectivises speech, organising the fruits of linguistic production according to a principle of authorless common ownership.³⁶ And for Macfarlane, Wilde's subversiveness achieves formal proportions, ones by which the generic shibboleths of nineteenth-century literature could be undermined. 'Writers', he argues, 'who were concerned with representing singular "pulsations" of experience found that their interests were not best served by the long haul of a novel, but could instead best be represented formally in fits and starts. For this reason the aphorism, the paradox, the renovated cliché, the short lyric, and the rare word all became characteristic of much *fin-de-siècle* prose, poetry, and even drama'.³⁷

Macfarlane's judgement proceeds from words that make their paradigmatic designation clear: Paul Bourget's diagnosis of decadent writing as one in which 'the page breaks down to make place for the independence of the sentence, and in which the sentence breaks down to make place for the independence of the word'.³⁸ Grouping small units or 'pulsations' within a decadent rubric thus makes sense both if one remembers that descriptor's frequent articulation in Walter Pater's *Renaissance* (1873),³⁹ and if one attends to the pun on 'composition' which a more faithful translation of Bourget's words yields: instead of 'break down', Bourget's diagnostic verb is 'se décomposer',

³⁴ Sandra Siegal, 'Wilde's use and abuse of aphorism', *Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada Newsletter*, 12 (1986), pp.16-26, p.17.

³⁵ Ibid, p.22.

³⁶ See Deirdre Toomey on 'oral culture'; and the aphorism's role within that culture, 'The Story-Teller at Fault' in C. George Sandilescu ed. *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994), p.407; pp. 410-11. Macfarlane characterises Toomey's account of Wilde's plagiarisms as 'Irish socialism waged against the possessive individualism of English literary property', Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.192.

³⁷ Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.167.

³⁸ Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Lemettré, 1883), p.24, quoted in Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.167.

³⁹ First published as *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. For various 'pulses' and 'pulsations' see WPR p.152; p.153; p.44; p.56.

which makes this ‘un-writing’ inherent with decay.⁴⁰ Pater, as Christopher Ricks pejoratively notices,⁴¹ can serve as the prototypical figure of contemporary critical theory which Eagleton would have Wilde be, his subversion of large and totalising structures (what he called ‘facile orthodoxy’)⁴² an attempt to reflect in writing the world as it is experienced in these ‘pulsations’, from one moment to the next. That Wilde’s use of aphorism belongs in the same bracket, seeks to dissolve authorial primacy; or that it owes anything to an ideology of ‘fits and starts’, the remainder of this chapter will disprove.

Containing Pater: Clause and effect.

Pater’s *Renaissance*, Wilde told W.B. Yeats, was ‘the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written’.⁴³ Wilde’s words put some distance between himself and Pater, craftily associating deathliness with a study notionally about rebirth; the ‘moment it was written’ becomes, in Wilde’s equivalence, also the moment of its immediate entombment. If there is a relationship being proposed between Pater’s ‘flower’ and decadence, it is to smother the latter by association with the former. Yet Wilde’s words also, quite faithfully, equate the Paterian ‘moment’ – as in, ‘art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake’ –⁴⁴ with atrophy: thus silencing Pater by his own decadent logic. In this caustic parenthesis, Wilde manages to expedite, in ways for which Pater could not have planned, the sense that a writer’s language might be gone just as he sought to apprehend it.

Yet the specific valency to the invoked ‘flower’ rises beyond these immediate burials; a valency suggested by Wilde’s words of ‘a few nights later’: ‘Give me *The Winter’s Tale*, “Daffodils that come before the swallow dares”, but not *King Lear*. What is *King Lear* but poor life staggering in the fog?’⁴⁵ Wilde’s comparison imagines in ‘life’ a paradoxical opposite to ‘liveliness’: for to select *The Winter’s Tale* is to side with a play that features a statue, the work of a named and real artist, come to life; and to do so in a moment of typical late-Shakespearean dramatic clarity which knows nothing of

⁴⁰ John R. Reed, in translating the verb as ‘decompose’, catches part of this sense, *Decadent Style* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985), pp.10-11.

⁴¹ Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.415.

⁴² WPR, p.152.

⁴³ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p.130.

⁴⁴ WPR, p.153.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.130.

perceptual fog. Wilde's judgement endorses the perverse logic that has enabled such a metaphysics: excerpting Perdita's words about 'daffodils', Wilde sides with things out of season, and thus magnifies the merit in Hermione's later petrification (to select in this way means to anneal the very distinct genre conventions of tragedy in the first three acts, and of the sharp turn to comedy with the commencement of the fourth; Act V's work of synthesis dissolves into a nothing of the kind). But Wilde has also thematised 'choice', because his excerpt works beyond the expectations of citation. Perdita's words about daffodils and their attendant qualities are, in their original context, only one of the many options available to Act IV.iv's floral *enumeratio*: she has wanted to make Camillo garlands that are so full of life as to include flowers representative of all seasons, a comprehensiveness of spirit borrowing from the conventions of euphuistic love poetry (even as this baroque play deflates those terms: these are words given to a man to whom Perdita does not stand in romantic relation).⁴⁶ To exclude the primrose, oxlips and lilies of her account is to retrograde the very plenitude of which she boasts: to extract from Shakespeare's plays one theme only as its dominant tone, and that of artificiality.

It is worth pausing here to establish a definition, since questions of artifice are central to an understanding of Wilde and of those writers with whom he is commonly associated; and because I intend to assert a difference, within artificiality, between an ideology of decadence and of art-for-art's sake aestheticism. I do so, not seeking to depart from Linda Dowling's understanding of decadence as arising out of a concern for new developments in philology,⁴⁷ yet seeking to recoil from Dowling's specific findings. By 'decadence', I mean to argue both for the etymological sense of 'decay', the commonplace term for behaviours and attitudes associated with such a sense of belatedness, and the usually majuscule term 'Decadent', which denotes writers who have responded in their writing to a like understanding of the world.⁴⁸ Unlike, say, Romanticism, where what it means to style oneself a romantic poet is different from what it means to be classified as a Romantic one,⁴⁹ 'decadence', even as a term denoting a movement, borrows so much from both my first two definitions as to make distinctions of taxonomy impossible and unhelpful; in important ways, as

⁴⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.1119.

⁴⁷ See Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp.3-45.

⁴⁸ I do not follow Alex Murray's or John R. Reed's distinctions between the colloquial term and that designating the movement, because I think both iterations are mutually informing, *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.5; Reed, *Decadent Style*, p.xiii.

⁴⁹ See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p.30.

Angela Leighton has described, decay and its associated designations are inscribed upon decadent writing itself, particularly in the case of Pater.

Pater, as Leighton argues, ‘relishes’ the effects of atrophy that environmental pressures put on sentences as on natural processes alike.⁵⁰ Not seeing a design in elemental conditions – and holding that the same process in nature ‘rusts iron and ripens corn’ –⁵¹ he is able in his sentences to synthesise essentially Darwinian findings into a mimicry of the wave-like motion he has learnt from Tyndall to find inherent in processes in nature;⁵² and in Heraclitus at those stages of the self’s making and unmasking.⁵³ To conceive the world in streams of experience, and to refuse all systems that might separate the subjective human from applicability within this scheme, is to stress at the self’s ready subjection to such oscillations; at the possibility of its being caught up in them only temporarily, and being left behind. That tendency that Ricks disparages – that ‘ubiquitous feature of Pater’s style’ that sees it use the word ‘almost’ ‘in conjunction with strong, extreme, or absolute terms in order to create an emotional tremor, a simulation of a forthcoming delicate discrimination which proves not to come forth’’,⁵⁴ can, next to Leighton’s study, be understood as a positive function of Pater’s style of non-arrival. The self’s ‘grammatical erosion’ to its ‘all too permeable borders’,⁵⁵ holds true, by Leighton’s lights, to a conviction in the assured sense of living life by flux which Heraclitus, Darwin, Tyndall and Lucretius all sponsor in her study.⁵⁶ The result is ‘[l]ong, passenger-like sentences’ that ‘carry their meaning, moment by moment, turn by turn, in an elaborate formal reproduction of the matter they disclose’.⁵⁷

What Pater urges, then, is an attitude to the world that will make use of the relish that Leighton casts as his. Yet for all the perishing away that sentences effect in Pater’s scheme, it does not make sense to figure this, as Dowling does, as language’s death.⁵⁸ Pater is in a sense too pessimistic about the act of writing for such theorising, too burdened with a late Romantic attitude

⁵⁰ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.89.

⁵¹ WPR, p.150.

⁵² Leighton, *On Form*, p.82.

⁵³ Leighton ably relates Heraclitean thinking to Pater’s flux in selfhood, *ibid*, pp.88-89.

⁵⁴ Ricks, *The Force of Poetry*, p.397.

⁵⁵ Leighton, *On Form*, p.89.

⁵⁶ ‘The physics of form, in both Darwin and Tyndall, may have encouraged that materialist perspective in Pater which already found congenial matter in Lucretius’, *ibid*, p.82.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.90.

⁵⁸ Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p.137; p.181.

that sees words as imperfect registers of the experiences they would seek to capture. Pater's theory of words as tokens of their own failure – as units whose lateness to the event might even be a lateness of an earlier attempt at alike latenesses (Leighton observes that not just what the relic captures but the relic itself is 'more or less fleeting')⁵⁹ – shares nothing with the more mainstream attempts at studying the particularities of language of R.C. Trench's comments on the subject, comments that express faith in language's power both to capture the experiences of humans, and to prove like humans themselves.

Robert Douglas Fairhurst summarises Trench's argument, in *English Past and Present*, as holding that '[t]o understand what words mean, we must first know where they have been', and excerpts his assertion that, to honour this imperative, the language-student ought to avail themselves of 'the date and place of their [words'] birth, the successive stages of their subsequent history, the company which they have kept, all the road which they have travelled, and what has brought them to the point at which now we find them'.⁶⁰ Douglas-Fairhurst glosses a passage in the same text as 'Heraclitean',⁶¹ but there Trench's use of the terminology of 'flux and flow', and his temporary happiness in reducing words to their atomic value,⁶² is undone by this casting of lexical items as picaresque heroes. To conceive of words as having both an origin story and a 'birth' which is central to it, and to commit words not just to vivid personhood but to the conventions of a bawdy bildungsroman out of Fielding, is to lend a narrative investment to words which outpaces those about 'gaining and losing', or about words as sharing in 'the atoms which at any one moment make up our bodies',⁶³ judgements which had seemed to tether words to the senseless world of processes whose slippery transience eludes observability altogether.

The transformation of tone – from a Heraclitean dispassion to a remarkable late Augustan narratology that, in voice as in plot-coordinates, evokes the schemata of a travellers' tale like *Joseph Andrews* (1742) ('in the same relations to one another' *becomes* 'the company which they have kept'; 'flux and flow [...] gaining and losing' *becomes* 'all the road which they have travelled'; and the

⁵⁹ Leighton, *On Form*, p.92.

⁶⁰ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.89.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.89.

⁶² *Ibid*, p.89.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.89.

ephemeral – and Paterian – ‘atoms which at any one moment make up our bodies’ *becomes* the expository scene-setting of ‘what has brought them to the point at which we now find them’;⁶⁴ Fielding’s fiction is full of such confidential sallies) bespeaks a dispersal of commitments: away from randomness and towards the shaping system narrative confers. Such commitments have been present all along – ‘it is the essential character of a *living language* to be in flux and flow’ [italics mine];⁶⁵ the deviation from Heracliteanism even at its most strenuous assertion should be enough to temper Douglas-Fairhurst’s too-ready descriptive categories – but the effect of including the one system only to make way for the other expresses a preference that is also a rebuff, even a containment. In animating the one set of terms at the expense of the other, Trench finds on the side of them, and so animates the tracing and tracking of words which it was his professional business to promote and modernise.

But if Trench sees in language-use a vividness equal to life, and which in some measure creates its own version of it, it is worth noting that Wilde’s methodology, which also values the practice of tracing and observation, subscribes to an idea of language as living entity no more than Pater’s does. Danson, in anchoring his study in 1891, justifies this choice by seeing in that ‘climactic year’ the best expression of Wilde’s critical thought, rid of the excessive demands of ‘historical consequen[ce]’ which 1895 makes on commentary.⁶⁶ Wilde’s words to Yeats are dated to 1887; yet the writer who published his 1881 poetry collection had less of the later anecdotist’s confidence about literature’s powers to resist subservience to the seasonal. In fact, Wilde’s ‘Poem 74’ presents a poetic voice hinting at an attitude to literary deathliness at once an advance on decadent themes – some version of immortality is clearly possible in this depiction of literary writing – yet still beholden to its dominant conceits, such immortality’s being presented as the preserve of those who have abnegated what it means to be really living.

Anticipating, in this respect, the schematic argument familiar from Yeats’s ‘Choice’ (1932), Wilde’s poem articulates the hazardous consequences for a *roué* who has chosen that ‘perfection of the life’ which is the implicit enemy of the conditions that have enabled Yeats’s later poem to exist. At Wilde’s poem’s centre is a gnomic lament for the passage of time that connects such non-

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.89.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.89.

⁶⁶ Danson, *Wilde’s Intentions*, p.2.

recoverability to the inevitable march of time and seasons, in particular as they impinge on organic matter, mimetically encapsulated, for the purposes of the poem's extended metaphorical machinery, in the withering of flowers (or rather, as human life is conceived as itself a flower): 'For the crimson flower of our life is eaten by the canker-worm of truth, | And no hand can gather up the fallen withered petals of the rose of youth'.⁶⁷ The poem's irregular stress, helped along by its unconventional nineteen-syllable lines, focuses a predisposed fatality about these flowers' (and youth's) durability that is inherent to the line itself: the trochees at 'eaten' as at 'fallen', for instance, stress a symmetry of decay only strengthened by the second line's subsequent deviation in stress. 'Eaten' anticipates 'fallen' as a participle but then locates the action as the work of an active agent ('eaten by the'); 'fallen' meets 'withered' as if to deter an opposite in the proposition the line has advocated (both stresses perform a 'falling' and suggest in the 'withering' a second stage of dispersal): no hand can gather these flowers, as they are not just dispersed but ruined. And so on. Sponsoring fullness of experience over the compromises necessary to a poetics of immortality, the speaker has, in the words of the closing couplet, 'made my choice', has 'lived my poems', and has 'found the lover's crown of myrtle better than the poet's crown of bays'.⁶⁸ He has found, that is, a laurel that flowers seasonally preferable, because vivid and vital ('lived my poems') to one that lasts the season. Firmly on the side of style over knowledge, the poem is honest about this posture's double bind: 'youth' (the passion of 'wasted days') is 'better' than 'truth', but lasts less long.

And still: a function of the energies that the poem expends on putting the 'myrtle' in hazard is to suggest how difficult has been the tension in resolving for transience over immortality. The 'House of Fame' of the speaker's representation –⁶⁹ a house the speaker cannot enter – both does away with the distinctions of age ('the oldest bard is as the young')⁷⁰ and manages to mimic the processes of nature so vividly ('the pipe is ever dripping honey, and the lyre's string is ever strung')⁷¹ that it comes to seem as if it may after all be an open question whether there is any tension between life and literature. The next couplet integrates Keats in an image that, in its languid stupor, is positively Dionysean ('Keats had lifted up his hymenæal curls from out the poppy-seeded wine, |

⁶⁷ CWOW1, p.127.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.127.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.126.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.126.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.126.

With ambrosial mouth had kissed my forehead, clasped the hand of noble love in mine')⁷², an image which affords poetry demiurgic powers, ones emanating from a god who values pleasure as much as high-minded art. That the image is 'lifted' itself from Keats ("Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; | Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep, | Drows'd with the fume of poppies")⁷³ vindicates the lastingness of Keats's creative powers, the intact conjuring of his authorial self in words over sixty years after the publication of "To Autumn" (1820), undoing the temporally-bound afternoon transience Keats's poem depicts.

I have sought to give an outline of a poetics replete with contradictions, whose tensions are not resolved in the poem's course; and I want to argue that the development in Wilde's position from the aesthetics that had fostered this poem to that giving rise to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), to *Intentions*, or to the bulk of Wilde's plays, is to oppositions synthesised into paradox. To return to that gnomic comparison of life to flowers is to see how an unresolved problem about mortality is already present at the heart of Wilde's poem; for otherwise what imagined counterfactual does the enclosing stress on 'withering' licence? Why is it not enough that these crimson flowers should fall, petal by petal, and so dissipate their original energies, and what alternative might be left them if such an outcome is not automatically imagined? Wilde's poem, still attached to the romantic/Paterian *topos* of the essential belatedness inherent to the process of transcription, sees immortality slip through its grasp, and atemporality of seasons slip along with it; yet there remains the inclusion of the flower as a subject to be lingered over, like an unresolved puzzle; and there remains, with it, the anti-truth valency of the gnomic vehicle that has shepherded it, even as the sentence the vehicle carries has intended to communicate axiomatic truthfulness.

The contradiction is not incidental to Wilde's developing procedures, for as gnomic utterance yields to aphoristic paradox as predominant instrument, so a shift in Wilde's attitude towards flowers registers this transformation; appropriately, since as Gideon Nesbit shows, the language of flowers is one of two classically prevalent discursive fields for talking about the aphorism (the other is that of gems),⁷⁴ associations re-issued by *fin-de-siecle* practitioners.⁷⁵ In

⁷² Ibid, p.126.

⁷³ John Keats, *The Poems*, ed. Gerald Bullett (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), p.213.

⁷⁴ Gideon Nisbet, *Greek Epigram in Reception: J.A. Symonds, Oscar Wilde, and the Invention of Desire, 1805-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.14.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.15.

measuring the full force of the abiding resonance of these ‘figurative languages’ on writers of the 1890s, Nesbit draws our attention to the popularity of the idea of the ‘anthology’ in this period (by which Nesbit draws on the etymological root, adjacent to the Latin ‘*florilegium*’, that sees excerpation as a harvesting, as AP Wavell would later have it, of *Other Men’s Flowers* (1944)).⁷⁶ Nesbit thus observes the levelling possibilities intrinsic to processes of collecting, sifting, and compilation, particularly when anthologising takes in classical sources and aestheticist ones alike. These ‘flowers of meta-poetic flourish’,⁷⁷ as Nesbit calls them, are thus situated in a floral landscape whose refined distinctions become difficult to stabilise; for, as Nesbit terms it, ‘the roses and lilies of purity and health could be hard to tell apart from Decadent *fleurs du mal*’.⁷⁸

This is, of course, exactly how Wilde stages the business of anthologising in *Intentions*, and by the same example; Gilbert, in ‘The Critic as Artist’, telling Ernest to partake of this equivalence, such that ‘when you are tired of these flowers of evil, turn to the flowers that grow in the garden of Perdita [...] or wake from his forgotten tomb the sweet Syrian, Meleager, and bid the lover of Heliodore make you music, for he too has flowers in his song’.⁷⁹ The invocation of Meleager reanimates a figural commonplace about flowers and anthologies, unpacking from their hackneyed wrapping those metaphorical distinctions that have undergirded his practice by a like plenitude. In listing Meleager’s ‘flowers’ – ‘red pomegranate blossoms, and irises that smell of myrrh, ringed daffodils and dark blue hyacinths, and marjoram and crinkled ox-eyes’ as well as thyme, spikenard, and bean –⁸⁰ Wilde not only returns the aphorisms collected in Meleager’s anthology to their etymological root in excised flowers, but imagines the writer as lordly gardener, with freedom and leisure to sift through such influences as it occurs to him to consult. For Gilbert’s plenitude depends on compression; the ease with which his addressee can be expected to ‘turn’ to sources different and even opposed suggesting a similarly rangy freedom in the anthologist to move from one text to another, and not to have their authority disturbed. ‘Wilde’, claims Macfarlane, like Pater before him, was of the ‘conviction that literature at its best would find profit in the circumstance [...] that the words we receive from our linguistic community are “filled” or “inhabited” by the voices of

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.14.

⁷⁷ Ibid, pp.14-15.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.15.

⁷⁹ CWOW4, p.172.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.172.

others’;⁸¹ but if the elision is misplaced in the designation of Pater to Wilde, the use of the word ‘voices’ is even more so: for Wilde’s criticism depends, in important ways, on containing, and not accommodating, the influences of which he makes extended use.

If established accounts of power record the ways in which anthologising asserts a difference between observing subject and thing observed,⁸² Wilde’s impress is of a different stamp. This is a selective history whose scope refuses to let tone of voice be disturbed by the inclusion: just as Gilbert is able to quote an aphorism of Walter Savage Landor’s and make that tone, as if unruffled, consistent with its own,⁸³ so Gilbert’s aphoristic practice as theorised suggests a static monotony despite the inclusiveness, a plenitude of reference which never threatens to disturb the smallness of the garden in which the selection has taken place. Macfarlane’s study, which features an apt excerpt from Josephine Guy’s study arguing for the relative lack of importance of artistic materials next to ‘the artist’s unique handling of them’,⁸⁴ buckles in sustaining the difference between this account and its attempts elsewhere to suggest Wilde to be dissipating authorial primacy by the inclusiveness.⁸⁵ Where Wilde includes other texts, as I have been suggesting, the inclusion betokens a stifling of their authors’ voices: a stifling made possible by exploiting an established discourse for talking about the aphorism.

Far from willing that collecting bespeak a like belatedness,⁸⁶ Wilde’s criticism presents, in this phrasal curatorialism, a resistance to decadent precepts. Indeed, if Wilde’s aphoristic florilegium works by a perverse delight in inciting a multivocality that never arrives – that is in fact thwarted exactly in the vast pretences of its inclusiveness – then such supremacy is only strengthened by that other lapidary tenet that flowers sponsor. For the metaphorical figuration of the aphoristic flower – in its being pressed, according to the precepts of the classical anthology, at the moment of its fullest bloom – is by its nature nature’s thwarting; it is a freezing of time that courts a consonant rebuff to

⁸¹ Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.209.

⁸² Edward Said talks of Ernest Renan’s Semitic citations in the *Histoire Générale* (1855) as ‘surrounded by a suave European prose that points out defects’, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), p.142.

⁸³ ‘Like the Persephone of whom Landor tells us, the sweet pensive Persephone around whose white feet the asphodel and amaranth are blooming, he will sit contented “in that deep, motionless quiet which mortals pity, and which the gods enjoy”’. He will look out upon the world and know its secret’, CWOW4, p.205.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.191.

⁸⁵ Macfarlane speculates that Wilde’s thefts are ‘deliberate repudiations of the conventions of literary property’, *ibid*, p.192.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p.70.

nature, in a manner similar to that indicated by Amy M. King's observation of the narrator's description of Dorian through the course of *Dorian Gray* as 'a flower ever blooming', so becoming itself 'unnatural', and thus 'closer in its decadence to death than budding life'.⁸⁷ That is, it intervenes to stop the processes of decay that Pater's thesis had wanted to make inevitable, the only response to which, by his sanction, was that decay's embrace, and that then only for the precarious dependency of moments.

Wilde's criticism, in other words, closely resembles his earlier comments to Yeats; by connecting flowers, in a way glancingly done in those judgements on Shakespeare's play, with a petrification that is the guarantor for a corresponding vividness. In Gilbert's eyes, a proliferative itemisation of flowers shades into an implicit argument for the anthology's capacity, by its stewardship of the right materials, to conjure life. By such means is Meleager's connoisseurship returned into a scene of such remarkable vitality that the very habit of collecting becomes validated by implication. In conjuring Heliodore, Gilbert trades in an exalted vision in which flowers warm and grow at the sight of the human presence that pretends, in Meleager's subsequent practice, to shape them. And this portrait displays with remarkable felicity the capacity to prove by argument, as well as practical application, a synthesis of all the elements implied. For Heliodore moves, in Gilbert's exalted representation of her, from being remembered *by* flowers ('softer than sleep-laden poppy petals were her lips, softer than violets and as scented')⁸⁸ to conducting these observed flowers by her merest being ('The flame-like crocus sprang from the grass to look at her. For her the slim narcissus stored the cool rain; and for her the anemones forgot the Sicilian winds that wooed them').⁸⁹

This description of floral plenitude becomes, in turn, the occasion for thoughts about the kinds of paradoxical deathliness that have guaranteed it, and of the petrification of which it has been the vehicle. 'It is a strange thing', opines Gilbert,

this transference of emotion. We sicken with the same maladies as the poets, and the singer lends us his pain. Dead lips have their message for us, and hearts that have

⁸⁷ Amy M. King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.216.

⁸⁸ CWOW4, p.172.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.172.

fallen to dust can communicate their joy. We run to kiss the bleeding mouth of Fantine, and we follow Manon Lescaut over the whole world. Ours is the love-madness of the Tyrian, and the terror of Orestes is ours also. There is no passion that we cannot feel, no pleasure that we may not gratify, and we can choose the time of our initiation and the time of our freedom also. Life! Life! Don't let us go to life for our fulfilment or our experience. It is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament. It makes us pay too high a price for its wares, and we purchase the meanest of its secrets at a cost that is monstrous and infinite.⁹⁰

This is Hermione on repeat, and it is every season stopped; for to find in dead lips a message that can be distilled and learnt is to find for the paradox that had sponsored those words to Yeats: to suggest that immortality's greatest guarantee is the fact of proving unlikelike.

In suggesting, in its exaltation of a petrified literature, a guarantee and not an impediment to vital energies, Gilbert's equivalence confers such properties upon the practice of collecting; for the ease with which Gilbert's imagined anthologist can consult these various sources and live by the strength of their experiences is a function of the limited space the anthology will permit. The delineated and rigidly demarcated sense of constriction which the length of a single anthologist's volume doubly imposes – by means of the ordinary restrictions set by the page, and by the feeling of truncation that will need, whatever paraphernalia of commentary assembled to justify it, to govern a citation wrenched from its source – are here transformed and radiated back into the metaphorical scheme that depicts Heliodore's serene adventures. The result is that such materially-circumscribed events end up as arguments in the excerpter's favour. That this is so even as Gilbert's seems at times almost limitless ('we follow Manon Lescaut over the whole world') is exactly to the point, for the final dramatic irony is one had by the anthologist against the literature by whose passions he has willed himself to be led. The delighted voice that speaks of a boundless range accommodates, within this appreciation, the irony that is that range's function; not just of geography, that is, but of time and leisure. Set against these 'passions', 'pleasures' and 'terrors', and serving perhaps as the ultimate

⁹⁰ CWOW4, p. 173.

measure of them, is the consolation that, unlike, say, Manon Lescaut's heroes, or Fantine or Orestes, 'we' are able to 'choose the time of our initiation and the time of our freedom also'. Seeming to depart from an argument strictly for petrification, the anthologist really extends its basic premises. Rather than working to encourage a 'conflation of voices', as Patricia Clements designates the 'anthological' practice in Wilde's handling of it,⁹¹ Gilbert's exposition makes clear that such a scheme contains the influence of the authors it would accommodate.

I have chosen to excerpt in this large manner to give a sense of how inseparable this feeling about petrification is from Wilde's more general one about the choices available to the artist: to make the case, in other words, that petrification forms part of a wider aesthetics of exception, selection, excerption, and separation. Gilbert's words are quite clear in this equivalence; for in addition to enlisting the language of paradox as their dominant mode (that life might be 'narrowed by circumstance' playfully reverses the limits felt about art) these words represent a considerable re-treading of critical ground. They are, that is, a restatement of Vivian's pronouncement in 'The Decay of Lying', that 'What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition'.⁹² By the logic of Gilbert's compressive paradox, which takes the anthologist's correspondence of smallness to wholeness as assured, it is the job of the artist to select and so to finish it.

But Gilbert's words are an advance on Vivian's in holding to a special meaning for what such finishing might entail: for in 'The Critic as Artist' the role of art is constituted not just in its 'design', in its 'finished condition', and so on, but in its being actually 'perfect'. And with this perfection, as Gilbert is quite clear about stressing in his aesthetic synthesis, comes a necessary injunction about separation; in Gilbert's words: 'It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realise our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence'.⁹³ Even without properly elucidating what Gilbert means by the term, it is obvious that some understanding of 'perfection' is important to Wilde's imagined scheme for the production of valuable literature, and that this perfection is a function of the 'shielding' that has made it possible. This is the compact Macfarlane's reading will not allow, seemingly because it cannot scan

⁹¹ Patricia Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.145.

⁹² CWOW, p.73.

⁹³ Ibid, p.173.

with the artist who seeks joint enterprise with Pater. When Macfarlane quotes Wilde, in a review of 1885, as contending that '[i]t is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything', Macfarlane immediately attempts to put Wilde's naked case for individualism in warmer clothes. 'The OED', informs Macfarlane, 'records that the principal meaning of the verb to 'annex' is to 'join', rather than to tear away from or stake out, and this understanding of art as juncture or connection is crucial to Wilde's aesthetics — and antithetical to those notions of literary creation which regard the true work of literature as unique and isolated'.⁹⁴ Words to the opposite effect are so many in Wilde's criticism as to derail any project that would seek to take proper account of them. We have seen some of them, by the by, as other arguments have been made; to these we might add his valorisation of Meredith's linguistic autarky and self-resourcefulness (by 'his style' he manages 'to keep life at a respectful distance')⁹⁵ or his open veneration of individualism (plainly: 'What is needed is individualism';⁹⁶ more paradoxically: 'the recognition of private property has really harmed Individualism',⁹⁷ etc.). What matters is why Macfarlane feels able to make the case he does, and so to read against contexts aggregate and immediate. And the reason is the obscuring association with Pater.

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The elisions Wilde is keen to make in his own criticism are clear as to the wrongheadedness of the Paterian one, common though it is as a feature in scholarly commentary. Let us consider the example of Keats, and this example's role in Wilde's putting distance between his own aesthetics and Pater's. An instructive instance of this effect occurs in 'The Critic as Artist'; that in which Gilbert, evoking the anthologist's rite, bids his addressee 'wake from his forgotten tomb the sweet Syrian, Meleager, and bid the lover of Heliodore make you music, for he too has flowers in his song'. The echo, as in Wilde's poem of earlier, is to Keats's 'To Autumn' — 'Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they? | Think not of them, thou hast thy music too' —⁹⁸ and its inclusion here furthers the connection latent in the practice of anthologising to that of plenitude. Keats's memorialising of underrepresented human experience becomes converted, in the emphasis, to a valorisation of the anthologist's compendiousness, one practiced in the careful movements of Gilbert's tone, trained as

⁹⁴ Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.190.

⁹⁵ CWOW4, p.81.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.233.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p.237.

⁹⁸ Keats, *The Poems*, p.213.

it is both on housing other voices and of containing them. But the allusion also embraces that other aspect of the anthologist/aphorist's training, and that is a separation of his materials from the ordinary motion of time: in this way Keats's poem becomes re-emphasised – perhaps even 'collected' – so as to transform into a statement which, in arguing for things out of season, is really arguing against the pressure which the seasons exert. To put such intent alongside the description of Meleager's 'tomb', as Gilbert does, is to enlist Keats in Wilde's paradox of vivid deathliness: just as Meleager, by his death and by that of his materials, can achieve a liveliness in the consultation of him, so can Keats's ephemeral moments be granted a death of their own, and so be chanced to live.

The effect of this allusive ripple is finally most elucidating in what it says about separability *tout court*: for to consider the aphorist as abiding in a 'forgotten tomb', and to confer a like deathliness upon his collected materials, is to consider the conditions supporting Keats's authorship as sacred, inviolable, cut off from the main. Entombment, then, becomes another way of asserting a difference from 'life' in that sense of the term which Wilde uses to celebrate Meredith's distance from it, and the effect is very nearly that which Meredith achieves from his separations. That these are Wilde's feelings, and not the happenstantial fruits of felicitous adjacency, Wilde makes clear in 'The Soul of Man'; and this, exactly by the provocative sweep of its inclusiveness. 'Now and then, in the course of the century', writes Wilde, speaking now in his own critical person,

a great man of science, like Darwin; a great poet, like Keats; a fine critical spirit, like M. Renan; a supreme artist, like Flaubert, has been able to isolate himself, to keep himself out of reach of the clamorous claims of others, to stand 'under the shelter of the wall,' as Plato puts it, and so to realise the perfection of what was in him, to his own incomparable gain, and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world.⁹⁹

The allusion makes clearer than that earlier will allow with what force Keats's example has come to serve as shorthand for the autarkic artist, reclusive in his recalcitrance, and unbidden, ultimately, to 'the clamorous claims of others' – a restatement of Wilde's critical caution against 'concessions made to the public' of which Wilde had warned in 'The Truth of Masks'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ CWOW4, p.243.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 223.

Much in the comparison evades obvious controversy: that Gustave Flaubert should, by his ‘supreme’ artistry, achieve the isolation of which Wilde talks makes sense of a writer whose theorisation of style is inseparable from his uncompromising attitude towards *idées reçues*; that Ernest Renan should be the facilitator for ‘the perfection of what was in him’ figures with a philologist who, by the racist extrapolations wrought from dubious study in the laboratory, argued for the contrastive superiority of Indo-European over Semitic languages using remarkably similar terms as Wilde himself (such languages, submitted to his system of philological tracing, have, in Edward Said’s translation, ‘that variety, that amplitude, that abundance of life which is the condition of perfectibility’)¹⁰¹. Yet that Darwin should vie for kinship amongst Wilde’s coterie of isolates introduces a note of such disjuncture as to have led David Clifford to assume there to be something at fault in Wilde’s basic comprehension of Darwin’s theory. Such incomprehension is to be expected, claims Clifford, because ‘[f]or Wilde, like many Victorians, ideas about evolution slipped seamlessly into ideas of progress, individualism and *telos* – contrary to Darwin’s [...] conception of evolution by natural selection, where progress was an anthropocentric illusion, an individual was less important than its species, and the only *telos* was to survive, reproduce, and die’.¹⁰² In Clifford’s thesis, Wilde’s understanding of Darwin, the stuff nonetheless of ‘unreserved admiration’, is an appreciation experienced on unequal terms: ‘never grasp[ing] the more fatalistic implications of Darwinian evolution’, Wilde’s notion of what Darwin was propounding ‘enabled him to refine critical possibilities in ways he might not have done, had he understood the science better’.¹⁰³

The unsustainability of Clifford’s thesis manifests in the fact that the randomness he associates with Darwin’s theory – of a model without an obvious *telos* – was an opinion of Darwin with a wide audience in the Victorian reading public, of which position perhaps the most fluent advocate was Pater himself. Indeed, the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, which used an epigraph of Heraclitus to support the proposition that the same phenomena ‘rust iron’ as ‘ripen corn’ (a thesis, thus, refusing *telos*), cedes the way, as Pater’s career progresses, to a model that roots these same processes explicitly in contemporary science; the result is a direct designation of Darwin as the new Heraclitus. The important moment is from *Plato and Platonism* (1893), where Darwin’s theory is itself answerable to a Heraclitean understanding of experience, one that is also a restatement of the

¹⁰¹ Said, *Orientalism*, p.149.

¹⁰² David Clifford, ‘Wilde and Evolution’, in Kerry Powell and Peter Raby eds. *Oscar Wilde in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.213.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.213.

conclusion's precepts. Darwin, by Pater's lights, advocates a view in which a category of type 'is not but is only always *becoming*' [italics his] –¹⁰⁴ a nineteenth-century iteration of Heraclitus's words – 'Panta chorei' – which christen the paragraph in which Darwin is housed.¹⁰⁵ 'Darwinian theory', by Pater's understanding, licences a view of matter as merely the 'tremulous wisp' of his earlier thesis: one which, restated here, holds categories of 'races', 'laws', and 'arts' to constitute 'ripples only on the great river of organic life' in which 'language is changing on our very lips'.¹⁰⁶

The obvious caveat to insist upon here is that Pater's words come in 1893: that is, two years after Wilde's *Intentions*, and five after 'The Critic as Artist' appeared in its first iteration. But that fact is of little consequence next to the use Wilde makes of Darwin; that is, as a containing force on Pater's effects. For in talking of Darwin as being successful in separating himself from the wider public, Wilde, far from communicating a *naïf's* vision of contemporary science, intervenes instead to assert Darwinism's central paradox: that a thesis holding for the 'survival of the fittest' under expansive phenomena will have to choose its proof from such environments in which the opposite obtains: those, such as the observable island cultures of Darwin's voyages, which have preserved weaker species under protected conditions; and with them, preserved the rarer species too.¹⁰⁷ Far from suggesting a muddle about Darwin's real meaning, Wilde's criticism is densely alive with the cadences of the scientist, disposed mischievously to be turned against his intentions.

Consider what Wilde does to Darwin's concept of heredity, which in Danson's eyes sponsors his view of an author tangled in a warp of looping postmodern objectives, none of them exactly resolved. For Danson, the problem facing Wilde is exactly that 'dilemma' facing Dorian: 'the aspiration freely to create one's personality or personalities or masks, versus the fear of fatality' – which find expression in explicitly Paterian terms as a 'contest between the personality that weaves and unweaves itself and the personality woven already into the net of its own doom'.¹⁰⁸ This vision of Wilde, in whose writing Pater's influence squares off against Darwin's, is one necessarily of 'contradictions'; and these, 'between a self-making and an always made self, a creative and a created

¹⁰⁴ Walter Pater, *The Works of Walter Pater, Volume 6: Plato and Platonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.19

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.19.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.21.

¹⁰⁷ See Gillian Beer, 'Writing Darwin's Islands: England and the Insular Condition', in Timothy Lenoir ed. *Inscribing Science: Scientific Texts and the Materiality of Communication* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.119.

¹⁰⁸ Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, p.19.

personality’,¹⁰⁹ finding its particular nodal expression in a moment in ‘The Critic as Artist’, where Wilde deals with the notion of heredity.

Heredity is, Wilde claims, “the warrant for the contemplative life”, since it shows “that we are never less free than when we try to act”. So far so good, for the critic-artist who valorizes thinking above doing. But in the very next sentence heredity starts sounding uncondusive to the free play of personality: “It has hemmed us round with nets of the hunter, and written upon the wall the prophecy of our doom...It is Nemesis without her mask”. It has made us what we will be from before we ever were.¹¹⁰

But in Wilde’s treatment this is not a dilemma, still less a contradiction; it is a paradox, a division of alternatives with its inconsistencies cleaned up and made to look like causal follow-ons; it is thus less likely to induce paroxysms than to swell the reader to the triumphant correctness of his case. Those words, ‘hemmed us round’, should have been the first indication that this was so, for in appealing to the shapes of a like frontier Gilbert is merely restating what imagined utopias have come to look like throughout Wilde’s criticism, keen always to stress a border from which others might not submit their clamorous claims.

So it is here, and only more so; for ‘heredity’ assumes a remarkable descriptive convergence, in Wilde’s eccentric stewardship of the term, with the claims made for the anthology in the same essay. That is, from having seemed to offer restriction – ‘in the sphere of practical and external life it has robbed energy of its freedom and activity of its choice’ –¹¹¹ it reveals itself as offering the greater expanse that is restriction’s other portion. ‘In the subjective sphere’, as Gilbert intones, ‘where the soul is at work, it comes to us, this terrible shadow, with many gifts in its hands’; gifts of vicariousness, such as ‘the pain of Leopardi’, ‘the cowl of Abelard’, ‘the stained raiment of Villon’ and the ‘eyes’ of Shelley;¹¹² gifts amounting in their aggregate to an access to all of literary history. By this emphasis on plenitude heredity makes of its limitations its most unanswerable case – ‘dignifying’, in Nesbit’s formula for the aphorism, ‘what might be taken as a shortcoming’ –¹¹³ for it

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.18.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p.18.

¹¹¹ CWOW4, p.177.

¹¹² Ibid, p.177-8.

¹¹³ Nesbit, *Greek Epigram*, p.14.

works, by an anthologist's excerpting prerogative, in taking the best from human experience and omitting the slough. Heredity moves in this way from 'hemming us round' to being able to 'teach us how to escape from our experience'; and this, because it distils the best of history for its essence. Our 'surroundings', argues Gilbert, are, by their 'ignoble ugliness' and 'sordid claims', 'marring the perfection of our development';¹¹⁴ heredity, by contrast, 'is the imagination', which amounts, by a run of pleonasm, to 'concentrated race-experience'.¹¹⁵ In emphasising a heredity of accumulated essences, Wilde sketches a vision of history that prides itself on its status as a hero's narrative. It has to, since its premise – that heredity learns the best from history by leaving off the worst – has been the survival of the fittest in all but name.

Far from crippling Wilde's claims to the free play of personality, as Danson would have it, 'heredity' emerges as the canny instantiation of a rhetorical ploy, suggesting no alternative to its basic claims: that genetics is on *Intentions*'s side. This would be an outrageous gambit even had, as Clifford thinks it, Wilde's thesis been premised on an accidental misreading; but that Wilde was so saturated in Darwin's writing as to point up its inherent tensions is, I think, proof of the mischievous ends to which the scientist is being consciously placed in Wilde's scheme. Gilbert, for instance, in elucidating the idea of heredity, speaks of its plenitude as being that which offers 'complex multiform gifts of thoughts that are at variance with each other',¹¹⁶ an echo of that moment that opens Darwin's fifth chapter to his *On the Origin of Species* (1859), in which he talks of 'variations – so common and multiform in organic beings under domestication'. A fuller excerpt suggests the fascinating ends to which such an echo is being put in Wilde's rippling inclusion of it. Darwin:

I have hitherto sometimes spoken as if the variations – so common and multiform in organic beings under domestication, and in a lesser degree in those in a state of nature – had been due to chance. This, of course, is a wholly incorrect expression, but it serves to acknowledge plainly our ignorance of the cause of each particular variation. [...] [T]he much greater variability, as well as the greater frequency of monstrosities, under domestication or cultivation, than under nature, leads me to believe that deviations of structure are in some way due to the nature of the

¹¹⁴ CWOW4, p.177.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.178.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.177.

conditions of life, to which the parents and their more remote ancestors have been exposed during several generations.¹¹⁷

Darwin acknowledges the problem inherent to his speculative theory: that the methodology that permits observation of this greater variety is both impossible to replicate in nature, and is so removed from it as to risk distorting its own results. That Wilde should use these words to exalt a 'hemming round', just as that, earlier, he should choose to stress that very feature of Darwin's theory that had most disposed its methodologies against its theoretical findings, suggests a consciously crafty refocusing of Darwin's science against itself: against the survival of the fittest by competitive means, and in favour of the observational conditions that had always threatened to undermine it.

The very paragraph that houses Wilde's words expresses the direct manner in which they are used against Pater's example, so binding him by an ethical system against which he had explicitly argued. Consider Wilde's words on heredity, and the services to which they are put. For by its means, the artist-critic can see that

it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service, and entering into us for our joy. It is something that has dwelt in fearful places, and in ancient sepulchres has made its abode. It is sick with many maladies, and has memories of curious sins. It is wiser than we are, and its wisdom is bitter. It fills us with impossible desires, and makes us follow what we know we cannot gain.¹¹⁸

The echo is to Pater, and his description of the Mona Lisa:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas,

¹¹⁷ Charles Darwin, *On The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.101.

¹¹⁸ CWOW, p.1777.

and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants [... etc]¹¹⁹

The effect of turning Pater's cadences to use in Wilde's 'hemmed-round' view of heredity is to suggest that only by these constrictive means – means opposed to those of Pater's stated aesthetics – can a writer like Pater have a chance to emerge or thrive: a suggestion made more explicit in *Dorian Gray*'s opening paragraph, in the narrator's description of Lord Henry and his rooms:

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flamelike as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid, jade-faced painters of Tokyo who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion.¹²⁰

In keeping with the orientalist capture of his 'Persian saddle-bags', Lord Henry has conveyed the essence of a Paterian writing by the distillation of its perceived essences, achieved in this case by some evocative keywords. For if the 'tremulous branches' of Lord Henry's observation motion towards the 'tremulous wisp' of the conclusion to Pater's *Renaissance*, so the 'beauty so flamelike' allows the longer effect of Pater's 'hard, gemlike flame' to flicker into a compressed compound, as if this latter word's appearing so soon after the former had sanctioned its reissuing as a shorthand. Pater's aesthetics are thus made to support a thesis to which they are expressly opposed: an advocacy of impermanence has transformed into one arguing for 'an art that is necessarily immobile', one which by those means alone conveys its 'swiftness and motion' – in that paradox of a stasis granting motility which this chapter has wanted to render familiar from Wilde's criticism.

¹¹⁹ WPR, p.76.

¹²⁰ CWOW3, p.3.

Wilde's words, then, 'contain' Pater's thesis just as they have contained Darwin's; as if, in observing a feeling against *telos* in both writers, Wilde intended to fix the effects of such a lack; enlisting the force of two potentially hostile writers as buttress to his own theories. Indeed, if Pater's effects are only seen to work when they look most like Wilde's, the corollary to this manoeuvre – that in deviating from an adherence to Wilde's closed systems Pater's effects are set up to fail in Wilde's treatment – holds just as true. 'Even the work of Mr. Pater', writes Wilde in 'The Decay of Lying', 'who is, on the whole, the most perfect master of English prose now creating amongst us, is often far more like a piece of mosaic than a passage in music, and seems, here and there, to lack the true rhythmical life of words and the fine freedom and richness of effect that such rhythmical life produces'.¹²¹ Danson makes the claim that, in Wilde's writing, 'existence is measured in Paterian units',¹²² but to observe Wilde at work here is to see him measuring existence by no such means; to see him, instead, turning Paterian instrument against Paterian intention. For it had been Pater's insistence that '[a]ll art constantly aspires towards the condition of music' [italics his],¹²³ an argument for process that aspired itself to exactly those larger remits that 'a passage in music' entails. That Pater is ultimately held to fail by those means that are meant to guarantee an argument for process – for the essential ephemerality of materials when set against the wider, wave-like processes that work their way through them, and which render them only partial and temporary registers – is a point focused by Pater's encrustation in the rubble of the 'mosaic'. By its means, Pater has moved from positing the argument that art-appreciation might resist the materials with which it must collaborate, to one holding that argument's author as being defined by them: from refusing the lastingness of his 'relic more or less fleeting' to having such relics serve as metonymic symbol for his writing. From being what the artist can be sure to leave behind, to being the only thing that is left.

Or there is the moment in Wilde's preface to *Dorian Gray*, in which Wilde permits, via that extended *parabasis*, a double-aphorism on artistic categories. Commonly seen as a straightforward allusion to Pater (this is the gloss the Oxford edition gives),¹²⁴ Wilde's claim – that 'From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type' –¹²⁵ is a betrayal of Pater's original. Pater's words, which held that 'All

¹²¹ CWOW4, p.137.

¹²² Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, p.95.

¹²³ WPR, p.86.

¹²⁴ CWOW3, p.428.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.167.

art constantly aspires towards the condition of music', speak of a tussle or motion inherent to this process: exemplified in the adverb 'constantly', the verb 'aspires', the preposition 'towards'. These are words of motion that are as interested in those other forms whose pinnacle is not guaranteed as they are in music's which is: and they mimic, in their multi-clausal undulations, the sway of how, in Pater's model for them, all other art-conditions are felt to behave. That Pater proceeds to talk not about music but about painting suggests, indeed, that it is the profitability of the struggle that is where his real interest lies: to shape this into an aphorism reasserts a tendency to categorise appropriate to the 'achieved' neatness of Wilde's form.¹²⁶

The rhythmical and the mnemonic: aphoristic antiphrasis

I have wanted to say that Wilde, in reading Pater aphoristically, so uses him against his intended effects. I have thereby wanted to re-emphasise the difference between both writers, and to set as the point of dispute the question of how a sentence should be written. That such a division involves restoring Wilde to his rightful place as conservative phrase-maker and Pater as a writer minded to dissolve the categories of the sentence (as of all matter and categories) I have wanted to make the substance of my argument. It is outside the scope of this thesis to outline where I think commentary on Pater has gone wrong in finding in his later career a renunciation of his earlier radicalism.¹²⁷ For my purposes, it is important merely to stress how much I agree with Donoghue's elegant summa that Pater's writing evidences an endlessly suggestible compositional process, one in which '[t]here is no subordination of phrase to phrase, or any producible reason why the sequence ends where it does'.¹²⁸ Calling 'mental movement' thus the 'real content of the passage',¹²⁹ Donoghue makes the comprehensive case for Pater's sentences as the opposite of aphoristic: availing himself of a distinctly non-lapidary emphasis, his, as Donoghue argues, is a language that 'keeps correcting itself, as if the mere words were at best approximate to the feelings they are called upon to serve'.

¹²⁶ The adjective is from Leighton, *On Form*, p.83.

¹²⁷ I disagree with Ramsey McGlazer's detection of such a conservative turn partly due to the persuasiveness of Stefano Evangelista's assessment that Pater chose increasingly conservative subjects so that his subversiveness might 'fully shar[e]' in such texts' 'high-cultural status', *Old Schools: Modernism, Education, and the Critique of Progress* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020), p.35; 'Walter Pater's Teaching in Oxford: Classics and Aestheticism' in Christopher Stray ed. *Oxford Classics: Teaching and Learning, 1800-2000* (London: Duckworth, 2007), p.70.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p.295.

¹²⁹ Ibid, p.298.

This is what Wilde means in talking of Pater in the terms he does in 'The Critic as Artist', when Gilbert seems to compare Pater's lacking, 'here and there', 'the true rhythmical life of words and the fine freedom and richness of effect that such rhythmical life produces' with writing that is 'a definite mode of composition', a 'form of elaborate design'; for Pater's endless sentences work against Wilde's protected atmospheres, where boundaries of syntax as of influence are paramount. For Dowling, the passage endorses her view of the difference between Pater and Wilde, at least as she holds it to stand according to Wilde's account: there, so she has it, the difference is one wherein 'Wilde set Pater's individual stylistic fall against the background of a larger decadence: the petrification of the speaking voice by print'.¹³⁰ 'In Pater's later work', continues Dowling,

devoted as it was to rarified [sic] etymologizing and elaborate excursions from a central theme, Wilde detected a disposition to compose for the printed page, the only medium through which such complex effects could be comprehended or made visible. Yet though such prose satisfied the desire for variation and "visual" arabesque, it alienated the ear. Wilde's answer to the problem posed by Pater's later style was simple: "We must return to the voice. That must be our test..." [...] At the same time, Wilde was unwilling to resign the richness of Pater's Euphuistic ideal for the sake of mere colloquial ease. Instead, the ideal Wilde sought – "a language different from that of actual use, a language full of resonant music and sweet rhythm, made stately by solemn cadence, or made delicate by fanciful rhyme, jewelled with wonderful words, and enriched with lofty diction" – was to be scaled to the capacities of the speaking voice. Whatever the speaking voice could accommodate, literary style might also attempt.¹³¹

The increasingly hedging version of Wilde that emerges from Dowling's summary illustrates a wider tendency in Wilde scholarship to be uneasy about its prompts. For if this rather practical and dutiful lesson ('Whatever the speaking voice could accommodate, literary style might also attempt') fits improbably with what we know of Wilde, the faulty ventriloquism makes a useful formal argument against itself: in favour of a paradox missing as much from Dowling's style as from the substance of her exegesis. Instead of stable theories, Dowling, like Danson after her, offers contradictions to be

¹³⁰ Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p.184.

¹³¹ Ibid, pp.184-185.

accommodated; and if it seems at times as if Wilde is rather more the full-throated aestheticist than she will really allow – if, that is, he turns up at another critical moment to stress ‘a language different from that of actual use’ – the disturbance is not long allowed to ruffle her thesis’s pages. For if Dowling’s treatment is a nervous one, this itself becomes pertinent to Wilde’s literary procedures, concerned as they are with the management of difficult opposites. As she notes at the close of her treatment, the ‘authority’ of Wilde’s “beautiful style” ‘must be repeatedly enacted or enunciated through speech, for as we have seen, it cannot according to Wilde be secured or made permanent through the petrifications of a written language’.¹³²

Dowling has not given us the exact text from which she makes her judgments, but she is right that it exists: and that, moreover, in adjacent spaces obscured by her excerpting. Yet to return to those original moments is to see a predictable turn of paradox made out of the difficulty posed by variety on the one hand and restrictiveness on the other. Dowling is the first commentator to have observed in Wilde a preference for orality, and it is a quality taken up by Toomey to assert Wilde’s radical phraseological collectivism, his perceived tendency to undermine the supremacy of the authorial position. But in Gilbert’s words, the exalted author is to be found making use of orality exactly that it might *guarantee* his primacy, enhancing the very petrification to which Dowling contends he is opposed. For having introduced the idea of ‘a passage in music’ as the antidote to Pater’s method of composition, the same treatment sees Gilbert proceed to make of this musical sense an instrument against the aspect of it that is most displeasing: its tendency to logorrhea. Wanting language to be unlike Pater’s – wanting it, that is, not to be the fruit of an ‘elaborate design’; or, as he put it in ‘Mr. Pater’s Last Volume’, to have as organising compositional unit ‘a sentence which is somewhat long, and possibly, if one may venture to say so, a little heavy and cumbersome in movement’ – Wilde wants a language ‘checked by the ear’, where such checking –¹³³ the paradox is by now familiar – will result in the ‘fine freedom and richness of effect’ that was the privilege of the Greeks.¹³⁴

And how to ensure that language, shortening itself to manageable units, is to be kept to such petrifying boundedness? By the method of rehearsal that is the necessary corollary of setting such

¹³² Ibid, p.188.

¹³³ Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Random House, 1968), pp.183-184.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.184.

store by musicality. For, speculating that the story of Homer's blindness may only have been a Greek myth – the best of many – having as its aim to reify and exalt Homer's example in the classical canon, Gilbert is able to reissue the good sense the example incarnates: if Homer allows Gilbert to fashion a paradox of clarity of vision out of the poet's blindness, he also allows him to eulogise upon the role of the poet as 'singer' as well as 'seer', to be seen 'building his song out of music, repeating each line over and over again to himself till he has caught the secret of its melody, chaunting in darkness the words that are winged with light'.¹³⁵ The effect of Gilbert's exaltation has been to repudiate Pater's aesthetics along with the renunciation that had served as its narrative vehicle. For where the Flavian of Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) had resolved upon forgetting Homer and the ossifying model that poet provided (ossifying, that is, because suggesting that Homer's time was anything other than 'trite and commonplace enough')¹³⁶ – it does so by espousing an aesthetics that are themselves classically mandated. If an oral sense literally 'checks' speech by organising it into manageable, memorable, and repeatable doses – by suggesting, for its boundaries, the limits of manageability, of memorability, and of repetition – this has been by means of that favoured Homeric form – those 'winged phrases' –¹³⁷ that, antecedent to the aphorism and like it as to many essential characteristics, has privileged the sentence's essential unity.

If to emphasise the full efficacy of repetition undermines the possibility of Pater as an influential forebear, it is 'petrification' – the view that sentences are not 'tremulous wisps' evading capture but instead units graspable and repeatable, with qualities of durability akin to stone – that most clearly instantiates this turn. Said misses this careful soldering of orality on to the qualities of print in Wilde's writing when he drily notes that Wilde's texts, in their passage 'from speech to print', 'show how [...] he had been ruined' – the context is an incriminating letter written to Lord Alfred Douglas that was subsequently used against him in his trial – a fate 'which in a sense all of his other more fortunate texts had managed somehow to avoid by virtue of their epigrammatic individuality'.¹³⁸ Wanting to foreground the 'circumstantial reality' of his texts,¹³⁹ Said's Wilde is his own circumstantial naïf, mugged by a reality for which he has made no suitable provision.

¹³⁵ CWOW4, p.138.

¹³⁶ Walter Pater, *The Works of Walter Pater, Volume 2: Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.104.

¹³⁷ Paolo Vivante, 'On Homer's Winged Words', *The Classical Quarterly* 25.1 (May 1975), pp.1-12.

¹³⁸ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1991), p.43.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.43.

It is a vision that scarcely tallies with what we know of Wilde's Homeric assurances, nor of Wilde's sure knowledge of how even aphorisms, if not sufficiently protected, can be made to support positions opposite to those intended for them. The magisterial avatar of Vivian in 'The Decay of Lying', for instance, dismisses Hamlet's advice to the players – that the 'purpose of playing' had been 'to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature' –¹⁴⁰ and this aphorism's recruitment by contemporary realists as support for their movement's representational standard. 'They will call upon Shakespeare', says Vivian, 'they always do – and will quote that hackneyed passage forgetting that this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters'.¹⁴¹ To choose *Hamlet* as a descriptive example of the phenomenon of which he speaks places Vivian in the mainstream of that criticism of the play that would excerpt the sayings of Polonius against the bumbling context in which they really appear; that it is Hamlet who is quoted, and this, in a moment not generally associated as proof of his feigned madness, indicates Vivian's willingness to partake of the very process he describes, and so add a descriptive efficacy to the provocation. These are strategies – willed, felt, elucidated – that plunge Said's 'somehow' into doubt, and they hint at procedures that would refuse for Wilde's own aphorisms a similar sense of multivalent opening.

Wilde effects such phrasal closure by tethering the aphoristic form to a sense of voice that can be recovered merely in quoting it. It is indeed instructive as to why Said gives Wilde less agency on this tethering than we might expect that he should summarise Frye's definition of the epigram only to leave the question of voice – or of style – to one side. Said: 'This epigram, in Northrop Frye's terminology, is Wilde's radical of presentation: a compact utterance capable of the utmost range of subject matter, the greatest authority, and the least equivocation as to its author'.¹⁴² Of course, Said is right to emphasise the aphorism's leaving 'the least equivocation as to its author' (he also notes, correctly, that '[w]hat he wrote was intended [...] for tracing back to him')¹⁴³; but in stressing the point he risks begging the question, since it is exactly the *how* that trails his 'somehow' that is at issue. Frye's terminology is in fact quite keen to stress that the epigram might be working exactly *against*, and not with, its chosen subject matter – that the limitless bounds of subject through

¹⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (London: Random House, 2008), p.81.

¹⁴¹ CWOW4, p.89.

¹⁴² Ibid, p.42.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.42.

which Wilde's aphorisms range matters much less than the voice, surviving intact upon each moment of its own proposition-making, that does the ranging. 'What distinguishes, not simply the epigram, but profundity itself from platitude', notes Frye, 'is very frequently rhetorical wit. In fact it may be doubted whether we ever really call an idea profound unless we are pleased with the wit of its expression'.¹⁴⁴ It is out of a realisation of a similar kind that Wilde comes by some of the most startling discoveries of his late career.

The idea of perfectibility, and the developmental telos that leads to it, have emerged, throughout this chapter, as abiding keywords in Wilde's vocabulary. Heredity 'can lead us away from surroundings whose beauty is dimmed to us by the mist of familiarity, or whose ignoble ugliness and sordid claims are marring the perfection of our development';¹⁴⁵ 'The mere existence of conscience [...] is a sign of our imperfect development';¹⁴⁶ 'it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world [...] through which common natures seek to realise their perfection'.¹⁴⁷ And so on. Danson, whose commentary, as we have seen, finds in Wilde's writing contradictions that do not exist, is minded similarly when it comes to the question of what Wilde means by 'perfect'. 'Wilde's personality [...] is often torn by contradiction',¹⁴⁸ writes Danson; and yet, he continues, in many of his essays Wilde is found using 'personality' 'in counterpoint to the word "perfection" in a way that makes personality a virtually quantifiable quality, simply half of the equation which equals art'.¹⁴⁹ We can ignore, for the moment, Danson's surprise at art's responsiveness to a dilemma, exactly because the examples Danson gives elucidate that responsiveness well: Henry Irving 'brings to the interpretation of a work of art the two qualities which we in this century so much desire, the qualities of personality and perfection'; 'in Mr. Pater, as in Cardinal Newman, we find the union of personality and perfection'; 'we can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection...[T]he very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist'.¹⁵⁰ These, then, are examples that would justify Danson's designation of counterpoint, and suggest for the two terms an equivalence so strong that it might figure more to compare them to a thread of music occupying only one melodic line.

¹⁴⁴ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p.329.

¹⁴⁵ CWOW4, p. 177.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p.148.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.152.

¹⁴⁸ Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, p.98.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.98.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p.98.

But then the original problem resurfaces: for in ‘Pen, Pencil, and Poison’, or so Danson tells us, ‘*it is not* the union of personality with perfection that interests Wilde; *rather*, ‘His crimes...gave a strong personality to his style’; *and again*, “One can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin”.¹⁵¹ The judgement only proves Danson’s lack of sympathy with Wilde’s notion of perfection; for in equating the latter grouping’s connection of crime to personality with an abandonment of perfection, he ignores Wilde’s stated views on morality and its relationship to the artistry that is what he surely means in talking of ‘perfection’ in the first place.¹⁵² Danson has also failed to see how exactly the examples from his first grouping practice the sly renunciation of the moral as equivalent to the perfect that Danson views with bafflement as the exclusive domain of those of the second. ‘Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art’,¹⁵³ Wilde wrote, in his preface to *Dorian Gray*, and it is the exploitation of the assumption that this view is outrageous that undergirds what he has said about Pater and Newman, the artist and Christ: both comparisons of such a violent yoking of the sacred and the profane as to suggest for religion no greater verifier than an achieved sense of taste and artistry.

The elision is recognisable from the account of Frye, who has taught us to view the aphorism as a vehicle for just such renunciations of ethics by style. Yet it may be that, in its particular stress on a mnemonic sense (that repeatability that Wilde had felt to be so absent in Pater’s sprawling phrasal reliquary), Wilde’s aphorism goes one step further. Wanting to draw a distinction between Pater and Wilde, Leighton claims that Wilde’s epigrams ‘flagwave a proposition achieved’,¹⁵⁴ and while this is true as to the spirit of Wilde’s aphorisms, it is manifestly untrue as to their shape. For where we are encouraged, both by the form’s cultural legacy and by its understanding in etymology, to think of the lapidary as bearing a testamentary or final quality – the connection of the lapidary to a writing ‘set in stone’ is one thing; that which links the ‘epigram’ to the ‘epitaph’, as Denise Riley tells us, is not another –¹⁵⁵ Wilde’s frequent changes to the phrasing of his aphorisms seem to belie such petrified stabilities. In line with his figuring of the aphorism as a

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p.98.

¹⁵² ‘Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change. And when we reach the true culture that is our aim, we attain to that perfection of which the saints have dreamed’, CWOW4, p.204.

¹⁵³ CWOW3, p.167.

¹⁵⁴ Leighton, p.83.

¹⁵⁵ Denise Riley, ‘On the Lapidary Style’, *differences*, 1 May 2017; 28 (1): 17–36, p.33.

vehicle right for ‘fits and starts’, or momentary ‘pulsations of experience’, Macfarlane accounts for its variability, in Wilde’s hands, by foregrounding a Bakhtinian dialogism supposedly inherent to the form itself, one which effects a similar transience in the ‘spontaneously creative stylising variants’ it is seen to render possible by the lights of his study.¹⁵⁶ Macfarlane comes by this reading via Toomey’s study, emphasising, as that study does, Wilde’s putative grounding in oral culture. And if I have already shown Wilde to have been ill-disposed to the kinds of spontaneity Macfarlane proposes, and no less to what Toomey means by ‘oral culture’,¹⁵⁷ I can no more deny a real change to the shape of Wilde’s aphorisms, across the arc of his career, than I can deny the pertinence to them, as a descriptor, of what Simon Reader has called the aphorism’s ‘notational style’ –¹⁵⁸ which in Reader’s (incorrect) understanding, finds on the side of an ‘inductive’ attitude to knowledge in Wilde’s use of it, a tendency stretching back to Bacon;¹⁵⁹ one which ‘combats the fantasy of total representation and systematic closure’.¹⁶⁰ How then to make sense of such a style of correction and reshaping if, as I have been saying, that style is not to be held as token for inductive dispositions at all?

The answer we have so far is an unhappy mix of right and wrong: right as to method but wrong as to theory, or wrong as to method and right as to same. Guy, who does not share Reader’s view of the notational as provisional, nevertheless understands Wilde’s self-repetitions and reshapings as a procedure ‘whereby Wilde sets up his own work – his own, self-made tradition, as it were – as the only arbiter of taste’,¹⁶¹ a view which does not specify why it should be aphorisms that are serving as vehicles for such authorial bolsterings, and not, for instance (as Stanley Fish had contended about Ben Jonson’s strategies of authorial short-circuiting),¹⁶² those paratextual materials, in whatever form, that could as easily constitute the sum of Wilde’s critical writing. We are faced, therefore, with one tradition of scholarship that views the aphorism’s rootedness in notetaking as evidence of its provisionality – Wilde’s aphoristic inductiveness, in Reader’s terms, encourages

¹⁵⁶ Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.192.

¹⁵⁷ ‘In oral cultures,’ writes Toomey, ‘words are not things, dead, “out there” on a flat surface, as they are to literates living in a chirographic-typographic culture’ – yet they are, as I have argued, since Wilde uses orality to *enhance* the effects of this flattening out-thereness, ‘The Story-Teller at Fault’, p.409.

¹⁵⁸ Simon Reader, ‘Social Notes: Oscar Wilde, Francis Bacon, and the Medium of Aphorism’, in Kostas Boyiopoulos and Michael Shallcross eds. *Aphoristic Modernity: 1880 to the Present* (Boston: Brill, 2019), p.69.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.70.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.70.

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.169.

¹⁶² Stanley Fish, ‘Authors-Readers: Jonson’s Community of the Same’, *Representations*, 7 (Summer 1984), pp.26-58.

author and reader ‘to take notes together’;¹⁶³ words especially alien to the exclusionary precepts contained in *Intentions* – and another that sees it as enforcing such authority simply by referring to itself via dense textual means, aphorism or not. Yet it may be that the ‘notational’ is participative in authorial primacy, since it anchors all claims of truth in the perfectibility of the author’s style: as Leo Bersani puts it, of the style that comes with the choice of form of Lautréamont’s maxims, ‘The perfection of the maxim [...] seems to be analogous to the perfection of being purified of the stain of existence’.¹⁶⁴ The self that emerges from the style of the maxim, continues Bersani, ‘manages to leap out of its own history into a verbal ordering of its history [...] In the maxim, opposition and negation no longer destroy; they have been reduced, or rather raised, to the status of aspects of composition’.¹⁶⁵ Wilde’s claims to authority come not, if we follow Bersani’s logic, from his unique ability to dispense wisdom, but from the fact that he has pushed the domain of arbitration for such authority elsewhere, to the very question of how he sounds. Returning to those notebooks, as Reader will have us do, allows us to make sense of a ‘notational style’ that is authoritative exactly because it seeks not only its origin in note-taking, but its end there too.

And once we have conceded both the authoritative aspect to these shifting aphorisms and the nature of the authority that is had by them, we can begin to understand also how far Wilde’s exalted mnemonic sense has sought to recreate the condition of the notational space, and how much this space has in common with the idealised utopias that are depicted in *Intentions*. For the slight changes to the phrasing of Wilde’s aphorisms as they are reproduced across novel, play, and pamphlet are made possible by the memorability of the original phrase – that is, by the ‘boundedness’ created by the sense of shape inherent to these sentences: short enough to be repeated, and with enough of a sense of internal and stable rhythm to their original incarnations (the speaker might thereby ‘catch the secret of its melody’) as to provide the contours of a space in which development can happen internally. This, in other words, is exactly how development is held to happen in *Intentions*’s utopian systems, which demarcate a space for themselves as separate from the outside world so that perfection might subsequently be achieved – slowly – within.

¹⁶³ Reader, ‘Social Notes’, p.70.

¹⁶⁴ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p.227.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p.277.

'De Profundis records the destruction of the utopia whose individualism and unselfish selfishness Wilde had adumbrated in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*', writes Said. 'From a free world to a prison and a circle of suffering: how is the change accomplished?'¹⁶⁶ Not, I think, as Said would have it: that is, by Wilde's realisation that he inhabits a textual society, the 'embroiled medium'¹⁶⁷ that Said elegantly terms it elsewhere. No: Wilde already is in such a medium, knowing fully that his texts are 'in the world',¹⁶⁸ and it is the very knowledge of such circumstantiality that instigates his protective awareness that only isolation – isolation, at least, as theorised – could guarantee him the aesthetic returns he so repeatedly claimed to want. Said is right to foreground the passage from Wilde's previous life to 'a circle of suffering', for he chances thereby upon what is perhaps the most fascinating discovery Wilde comes by: that it is in the nature of such a 'circle' to look rather like those utopian schemes of his earlier imagining, and that in prison he may have discovered a more efficient means of securing the gains that are to be made from isolation. For as *De Profundis* (1905) would have it, prison becomes perhaps the most efficient enforcer of memory's helpful limitations, serving, more even than those fenced systems adumbrated in *Intentions*, to point up the overthrow of ethics by aesthetics.

Danson, in his study, excerpts a moment which he considers proof of prison's ultimate capacity for humiliation, its breaking of Wilde's provisionalising aesthetics by the literal reminder of its boundedness in time and space.

But we who live in prison, and in whose lives there is no event but sorrow, have to measure time by throbs of pain, and the record of bitter moments. Suffering – curious as it may sound to you – is the means by which we exist, because it is the only means by which we can become conscious of existing; and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence, of our continued identity.¹⁶⁹

For Danson, what has been broken is a reluctantly cast-off fealty to Pater, where 'existence', though still 'measured in Paterian units', becomes, rather than 'variegated', instead articulated in 'throbs of

¹⁶⁶ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p.42.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p.43.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p.40.

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, p.95.

pain’ – units which now register ‘the unvariegated, undramatic life of sorrow’.¹⁷⁰ [N]ow’, continues Danson, ‘rather than the fleetingness of impression leading to a need for constant renewal in fresh sensation, there is the “remembrance of suffering” which, like English law, asserts “the permanence of personality”’.¹⁷¹ Yet only if one assumes that a continued identity really is what Wilde is disparaging can the text be read as Danson wills himself to read it. If we do not assume this to be Wilde’s intention, we can start to assume something like its opposite: that Wilde is talking – in remarkable, dispassionate terms that attest to a discovery in spite of the materials as they present themselves – about a means of organising experience that is a direct repudiation of Pater’s schemes. For where Pater talks of the conscious mind breaking out of the prison it sets itself as a necessary precondition for the kinds of impressionistic searching his conclusion urges,¹⁷² Wilde’s letter suggests an active re-imprisonment of these vital energies, the ‘throbs of pain’ being organised back into a stable system of ‘continued identity’ that can make sense of them. ‘Suffering’ – ‘the means by which we exist’ – in being the prerogative of the experience of prison, is thus the way in which prison enforces the mnemonic, since by it Wilde, denied the experience of living (‘there is no event but sorrow’), is guaranteed only such existence as memory allows. The mnemonic, even if it be as facilitator of the bad, has become ‘the only means by which we can become conscious of existing’, and Danson’s argument is only possible if one considers Wilde to be more the nihilist than even his argument has so far allowed. The extreme and surprising conclusion Wilde draws, instead, is that suffering, by the memory that prolongs it, is the only means by which his identity can be guaranteed.

This is clear even from the section of text that Danson quotes: a larger excerpt suggests a still greater synthesis of earlier effects, and a return, in fact, to the exact language Wilde had used for theorising the benefits of isolated and repeatable sentences, and for noticing their lack in Pater’s phrasal handling. Pater had been unlike ‘a passage in music’, a judgement by which means Wilde had set such ‘passages’ as the standard of prose achievement as against the only partial ‘mosaic’; Wilde now talks of not being able to ‘recall a single passage’ of his joy. Pater’s words, in being unlike music, so ‘lack[ed] the true rhythmical life of words and the fine freedom and richness of effect that such rhythmical life produces’; Wilde’s life, now, attains to that standard for the same reason, being ‘a Symphony of Sorrow, passing through its rhythmically-linked movements’.¹⁷³ Repetition of feeling

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p.95.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p.95.

¹⁷² See Leighton’s discussion of the ‘solitary prisoner’ in Pater’s ‘Conclusion’, *On Form*, pp.17-19.

¹⁷³ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (London: Random House, 2010), p.19.

exists even where such repetition does not apply to explicit word-choice: Homeric Greek had emphasised an orality that ensured the integrity of the individual phrase – one that enabled ‘repeating each line over and over’ – a preference for discrete integrity that extends, in Wilde’s later letter, to all experience: ‘I can see or hear each separate incident in its detail, can indeed see or hear little else’.¹⁷⁴ And that repetition of feeling is, in turn, only secondary to the more general repetition of attitude that all these repetitions suggest: the broad sponsoring of gain by limitation that sorrow has newly focused.

Wilde, I want to say, is loyal to the idea of the closed system even to the end – so loyal, in fact, as to render impossible the tragic character-arc that informs both Danson’s and Said’s readings. Or at least, if Wilde’s genre *is* tragedy, it is a tragedy permitting of no dramatic irony, since it finds itself recollected, in this later treatment, with none of those registers of surprise at his own downfall that are those studies’ claims for him. In his being imprisoned, both Said and Danson want to say, something essential has been compromised in Wilde’s aesthetic system that makes its recollection itself painful. In fact, however, Wilde’s ‘Symphony of Sorrow’, as it passes, in his memory of it, ‘to its certain resolution, with that inevitableness that in Art characterises the treatment of every great theme’,¹⁷⁵ will have none of that surprise in its transitions; suggests, instead, a proper extension of the same; one perhaps especially coextensive with those earlier precepts, in that it is able to achieve that state of contemplation otherwise denied by life’s vicissitudes. Wilde’s conclusions, as his commitments to seeing out a genre, are of a piece, then, with his earlier aphoristic injunctions; except that instead now of seeing vice and virtue as materials opportunistically available for art’s manipulation, Wilde has opted for the earlier as the best means of achieving a renunciation of the latter. In this, to be sure a development of a kind, Wilde has only managed to arrive at a more extreme statement still of art’s supremacy over the life that claims us.

Wilde may indeed have been speaking in genre terms when he said ‘To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance’, and I would charge in any case that where Said sees ‘obvious social reasons’ for this aphorism’s ‘egoism’, its implications may in fact be far from obvious. The genre of the romance, a system that deals flagrantly in those kinds of revelation which have only the data at the play’s beginning to show for them – the generic system, that is, governing *The Comedy of*

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p.19.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.19.

Errors, *Twelfth Night*, and, of course, *The Winter's Tale* – is a particularly extravagant means of arguing for the self-sustenance that Wilde is keen to associate with his isolated and observable cultures as with his aphorisms. And when Said argues that ‘When he invaded other forms of art, Wilde converted them into longer epigrams’,¹⁷⁶ he might have been talking of *The Importance of Being Earnest* which, in having just such a structure, speaks as an extended version of that aphorism another play gives space to, and which Said has equated, with revealing insouciance, with the ego of the author charged with writing it.

That prison, then, might be like those imagined utopias – might indeed be a better guarantor of their impenetrability than the most rigorous frontiers a Meredith might muster – is the substance of my argument, Said’s finding for the opposite suggesting only the powerful temptation, even in so sensitive a reader, in finding Wilde more the *avant-gardiste* than he really is. There is a powerful paradox of reduction inherent in that position, for in wishing to see in Wilde a figure of subversive transgression humiliated by a bourgeois society which, in its bluff mediocrity, has had no time for his radical resistances, the Wilde of this account emerges empty of the perversities that really are in his gift to offer. These perversities have direct implications for the aphorism because of its role as the conceptual form, in phrasing, for those isolated cultures given extended outline in Wilde’s critical prose. More than that: it is their instrument, as the aphorism sets and determines the contours for the domain of observation that has been everywhere made paramount in Wilde’s synthesis of Darwin, Keats and Renan, his lucid containment of Pater, and his general rejection of those ethical concerns that had sought to make the closed systems for which he has been arguing essentially unviable.

De Profundis, far from the register of this system’s breakdown, continues in its valorisation of the perfectibility of the phrase, even – and especially – in those moments of its obvious renunciation. ‘I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram’,¹⁷⁷ writes Wilde, seeming to put some distance between the persona this sentence embodies and the self now writing; or, as Richard Ellmann puts it – passing judgement over the entire passage from which the expression comes – Wilde ‘heightens the pinnacle from which he has fallen’.¹⁷⁸ Yet a phraseological

¹⁷⁶ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p.42.

¹⁷⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis*, p.58.

¹⁷⁸ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1988), p. 514.

tracing of Wilde's words brings up results contrary to the enforced renunciation they have seemed to disclose; suggests, instead, an extension of the pinnacle from which Wilde has never really fallen in the first place. For this aphorism has itself appeared in previous form: in *Dorian Gray*, where, by force of the narrative voice's free indirect discourse, Lord Henry is seen to have 'struck a light on a dainty silver case, and began to smoke a cigarette with a self-conscious and self-satisfied air, as if he had summed up life in a phrase'.¹⁷⁹ Our knowledge of this earlier version not only casts immediate doubt on the 'sincerity' of Wilde's reversals (though it does do that): more largely, it indicates a phrasal logic working against whatever propositional one the sentence notionally posits; that in so doing, a renunciation of the 'clamour' of the reading public is being continued – from critical text, across play, and now in these late letters from prison – a renunciation whose expression of such resistances is formalised at the level of the sentence itself.

The result may look like an antiphrasis whose prioritisation of a sonic sense works against its putatively-made argument, but the observable culture this recollected phrase enables goes further than even these effects: rather than truncated (and thus, plausibly, stifled), that earlier tendency to beautiful summary has been extended and thus intensified, changed only to the extent that it might better play host to more perfect versions of itself. Not only this: it has become *more* self-sustaining, shorn of the pressure of a contextualising narratology that figures these words within the questionable guise of Lord Henry's character, and the dissipated transmission of third-person description that is the novel's rite. Entrusted to bear out its own existence as a discrete sentence, Wilde's clause has only been made more perfect, its two polarities assuming such algebraical symmetry at the heart of their procedures as to argue for the resolution of the world by means of the author's voice, and for the aphorism to be the staging-post for this perfecting. For the repeated short 'i' and 'e' sounds in 'systems' and 'existence' establish a parity and mutual exchangeability between epistemology and life that dissolves their typographical partition (even as that partition, in its enforcing of a parallelism, makes the connection still deeper); as if, in a final irony Said does not notice, the aphorism has argued the case for those very summarising tendencies it has not finished achieving through the benefits of style. If nowhere is such symmetry obvious in its original, it is as much as to say that it has been inductive only in the sense that gestures to a future which may make it perfect.

¹⁷⁹ CWOW3, p.15.

This ‘notational style’, so different from that which emerges from Reader’s account, is perhaps the ultimate challenge to any reception of the aphorism in Wilde’s stewardship of it, as well as his most lasting bequest: for in accommodating us to a paradoxical style in which the sound of selfhood tethers to the parameters of the phrase, Wilde’s rephrasing stages the dynamics of a system whose hour has not fully come: not, that is, until all Wilde’s semi-aphorisms have been reshaped so as to become fuller ones. This has been the aphorism’s real legacy in dictionaries of quotation and epigraphic matter – an aphorism like ‘Punctuality is the thief of time’,¹⁸⁰ for instance, being the result of much the same treatment after Wilde’s life as Wilde’s ‘systems in a phrase’ aphorism had been during it.¹⁸¹ Indeed, the fact that Wilde’s incomplete aphorisms are to be dealt with in this way – taken from their original contexts, and reshaped to stand on their own, with all the symmetry of that later epigram – speaks to the difficulty that faces these phrases as they are incorporated into narrative or dramatic fiction, and the softening or else drastically inhibiting effects that can dispose them to valences accidentally outside their immediate purpose to argue for. For the dynamic anxiety about misquotation that Vivian assumes to be Shakespeare’s – assumes to be his, that is, by his writing such an aphoristically quotable play as *Hamlet* – is borne out in Pater’s own surprise that Wilde should have written a novel so removed from his stated convictions,¹⁸² a novel moralising against a weddedness to beautiful objects that is feebly mobilised away from such conclusions – as a nervous afterthought – by the prefatory aphorisms that argue to its contrary. Richard Canning has nicely said that Wilde’s text shows how ‘easy’ it can be ‘for a novel to become trapped in a set of ethics that may not have been intended by its author’,¹⁸³ but no similar fate is left the aphorism, which accommodates the world to its pithy symmetries, all the while holding out for a future in which such symmetries can be rendered as more perfect still.

¹⁸⁰ See Oscar Wilde, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. Connie Robertson (Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 1998), p.463, in which the repurposed quotation is attributed to *Dorian Gray*.

¹⁸¹ The original had been ‘Lord Henry had not yet come in. He was always late on principle, his principle being that punctuality is the thief of time’, CWOW3, p.35.

¹⁸² Pater, finding Wilde ‘not infallibly’ true to the principle from *Intentions* that ‘art [...] influential and effective art, has never taken its cue from actual life’, notes ‘a certain amount of intrusion of real life and its sordid aspects’, ‘A Novel by Oscar Wilde’, in Richard Ellmann ed. *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969), p.35.

¹⁸³ Richard Canning, ‘Introduction’, *Vainglory, with Inclinations and Caprice*, ed. Richard Canning (London: Penguin, 2012), p.xxv.

Writing in 1979, Jan B. Gordon defined decadence in a way suggestive of self-designation: pointing up the parallels, as Gordon's judgement did, between his own time and that his study treated. 'A world composed of mirrors, epigrams, and gossip', wrote Gordon, relating decadence to orality whilst suggesting the pertinence of the vocabulary of Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes – 'is a world that is decadent in the more traditional sense in which we use that word: it exists under conditions of flagging energy and failed connections where there is no longer any hope of a Unity of Being'.¹⁸⁴ This would have surprised Wilde, in whose criticism such Hegelian unities predominate¹⁸⁵ but it is Gordon's phrasing that reveals the force of his misreading. For the idea of the epigram's being 'under conditions' hints at an elision with Pater's language as with his sensibility: 'under conditions' being a formula invoking the submission of materials to pressurising environmental phenomena, 'hint[ing]', in Leighton's elegant summary, 'at external forces: weather, dates, places, on which intrinsic "beauty" itself might be dependent'¹⁸⁶ I have argued in this chapter that Wilde's aphorism, instead of participating in these 'flagging energies', is an intervention against them: that far from embodying that decadent tradition which Gordon rightly conceives as sharing in many characteristics with the commonplace modifier that licences it – to figure atrophy, decay, impermanence – the aphorism, in Wilde's handling, asserts style by tethering it to a phrasal form. In so doing, it capitalises on those structures Wilde had asserted as the only means the artist had to protect the force of their favoured artistry. If Wilde's gestures of control have been mistaken for provisionalising ones, this chapter has intended to correct the irony. The chapter that follows introduces, in Henry James, a writer for whom these earlier non-contingent valences hold true for the aphorism; and how these 'achieved' associations combine, in *The Wings of the Dove*, with correspondingly fixed forms of narratology.

¹⁸⁴ Jan B. Gordon, "'Decadent Spaces': Notes for a Phenomenology of the Fin de Siècle", in Ian Fletcher ed. *Decadence and the 1890s* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), p.52.

¹⁸⁵ See Gilbert's *Geist*-inflected words about 'The Critical Spirit and the World-Spirit', CWOW4, p.205.

¹⁸⁶ Leighton, *On Form*, p.86.

Chapter Two

Aphorism as Narrative Method: Henry James's Pragmatist Parentheses

At the close of his preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James describes his failure at offering a full explication of his intentions. '[C]onscious', as he notes himself to be, 'of overstepping my space without having brought the whole quantity to light', James is aware thus of 'a burden of residuary comment' of which he hopes 'elsewhere to discharge myself'.¹ The concession, speaking against James's abilities at compressive finality, in fact finds against such lapidary values by asserting an inherent insufficiency in the materials available to him; by gesturing to an elsewhere unspecified in form as in location. In a way disruptive to the monumentality of the New York Edition (1907-9) – yet in reality faithful to its revisionist spirit, its refusal to let James's earlier fiction have the last word – James's closing judgements promise the spirit, if not the observable fact, of continuity. It will be the contention of this chapter that James's words, far from the practical plea of failure which at first they seem, are an essential key to the novel they elucidate; that novel in fact constituting a major intervention in the contemporary discussion about how much of selfhood could or should be contained in the boundaries set by the aphoristic sentence. Making use of a recent scholarly tendency to relate Wilde's aestheticism to James's own critical thinking, this chapter will show that, in so heavily relating aphoristic sentences to narrative devices of arrival and closure – and, conversely, in relating parenthetical sentences to openness and deferral – James's novel shows what is meaningfully *not* salient in the comparison. Wanting to reinscribe James's sentences within an ethos of American pragmatism which *The Wings of the Dove* shows, through the moral dispersal of its characterisations, an apophatic feeling for, this chapter will introduce and maintain the irony of sentence-vehicles used as much to encapsulate James's preferred aesthetics as Wilde's did in his own works; yet working, as this chapter will show, to opposed ends.

'Really, universally': James's hedging circles

Violet Hunt, complaining of James's epistolary admonishment of her affair with Ford Madox Hueffer, designated the reaction an 'inburst' – an epithet, as Adrian Poole seems to suggest, which manages to turn the question of self-betrayal back on to James himself. For '[w]hen the characters in James's fiction start to feel the pressure of the forms they inhabit', writes Poole, 'they burst inwards

¹ HJLC2, p.1303.

rather than outwards'.² Poole's summary, in implying that the faithfully consistent Jamesian ethical position is a movement outwards rather than inwards, is also a summary of an aesthetics opposed to those of Wilde, whose critical writing favoured an idealist self-betterment proceeding by just such movements in. When Vivian had claimed that 'Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself',³ he had proposed a model for living as well as for art; or rather, a model that figured the development of art as a flight from the ordinary business of life ('poor, probable, uninteresting human life')⁴, whose claim to liveliness he held paradoxically to be a shadow of art's. James had also wished to suggest that art and life might be comparable subjects for the question of composition, but there again the similarity points up the difference. James's claim, from the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*,⁵ that art ought to exhibit vivid qualities – to show a 'felt life' –⁶ invites life back into art's domain as ultimate verifier, in a way that undergirds the basic formulaic difference – the one centrifugal, the other centripetal – of the two writers' models.

These differences, in turn, undo Michèle Mendelssohn's agonistic account of the relationship between both writers, which reads into Wilde's documented critical hostility a fear of James's aesthetics being too similar to his own. When Vivian claims that James 'writes fiction as if it were a painful duty, and wastes upon mean motives and imperceptible "points of view" his neat literary style, his felicitous phrases, his swift and caustic satire';⁷ Mendelssohn notices repressed affinities. 'Wilde's accusation', she notes, 'suggests that he regards James as someone with a creative mode similar to his own. It also instances his uneasiness at the growing proximity between their approaches'.⁸ In fact, an outrageous skewing of evaluative measurement is at work, as Wilde holds James to have failed by values all Wilde's and none of James's: aphoristic values favouring 'neat literary styles' and 'felicitous phrases'. The skewing has depended on pretending that the two writers' positions are *more* similar than in fact they are, and this helps to explain Wilde's deft burlesquing of James's terms. Mendelssohn notes that when Wilde mentions James's 'points of view' he takes the phrase from 'The Art of Fiction' (1884),⁹ but she does not notice that 'imperceptible' burlesques the

² Adrian Poole, *Henry James* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.90.

³ CWOW4, p.89.

⁴ Ibid, p.88.

⁵ In the interests of clarity I have not given publication dates for the novels the prefaces accompany.

⁶ HJLC2, p.1074.

⁷ CW4, p.97.

⁸ Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p.140.

⁹ Ibid, p.140.

‘innumerable’ of James’s original, and that the change significantly opposes both writers’ ethics.¹⁰ The term had originally emerged, in James’s essay, as a way of recoiling against Walter Besant’s injunction that a novel should be ‘clear in outline’, and of James’s finding ‘dramas within dramas’ in a novelistic premise Besant dismisses as fanciful, ‘and innumerable points of view’.¹¹ In equating the ‘innumerable’ with the ‘imperceptible’, Wilde states a commitment to the aesthetics I have outlined in the previous chapter, which advocate an observable development achieved by singular precision.

In James’s essay, the fact that a novel is a part of life makes observing the parts of it most difficult. ‘A novel is a living thing’, he contends, ‘all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts’.¹² Implying the basic impossibility of taxonomizing or even excerpting, James’s words anticipate the concerns of the prefaces of twenty-three years later, particularly that accompanying *Roderick Hudson*, which imagines a boundlessness tempered by momentary artistic interventions:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it.¹³

For Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, these words answer ‘that central Victorian worry over the unchecked sprawl of relations by confining it to the more controlled relations of his prose; like all good writers, he provides a literary shape which attends simultaneously to the forms we impose upon experience and its resistance to these forms’.¹⁴ But Victorianising James in this way arrogates to him an

¹⁰ Mendelssohn similarly holds James’s prefaces to be returning to Wilde’s terms in *Intentions*: specifically, in Wilde’s distinction between ‘romanticism’ and ‘realism’. But the preface to *The American* (which is Mendelssohn’s example) instead opposes ‘romance’ to ‘reality’, a term wholly without reference to the organised literary movement of Wilde’s complaint. Ibid, p.151.

¹¹ HJLC1, p.61.

¹² Ibid, p.55.

¹³ HJLC2, p.1041.

¹⁴ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.94.

authority he does not claim. ‘James’, according to Douglas-Fairhurst, ‘describes the “continuity of things” as one might describe a circle’,¹⁵ but it is just how to describe a circle that is the most bewildering aspect to James’s words, and the least open to this appeal to common-sense wisdom (‘as one might describe’). The real phrasal ‘confinement’ comes at the hands of Douglas-Fairhurst’s manoeuvres, which ignore those adverbial and adjectival modifiers (‘eternally’ and ‘perpetual’) which resist absorption into insinuating rubrics like ‘all good writers’. ‘[T]he cautious advance of his syntax studiously consults and steadfastly ignores’, claims Douglas-Fairhurst, ‘the possibility of his line of thought breaking down, by negotiating its passage across the moments of pausing and checking, the “stopping”, which are provided by his punctuation: “this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken”’.¹⁶ But James is instead saying that matter is one and continuous; terms like ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’ mere appearances of artifice; and the business of the work of art – its ‘exquisite problem’ – to shape and to go on shaping the domain in which such work will convince.

If ‘The Art of Fiction’ disputed Besant’s terms, the remarkable continuity of terminology and address from essay to preface suggests these to have value beyond their local circumscriptions. Against Besant’s confidence about ‘the English novel’, James finds the phrase ‘a label which begs the question’;¹⁷ against Besant’s injunction to ‘write from experience’, James wants to know ‘[w]hat kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end?’.¹⁸ If both assertions foreshadow the later preface’s querying of textual stability, the point is focused by what James there calls the ‘exquisite process’ of ‘produc[ing] the illusion of life’,¹⁹ a telegraph to the ‘exquisite problem’ in *Roderick Hudson*’s preface. But what has emerged in the later as opposed to the middle James is a shaping metaphor for grouping this experience, and this he has taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson’s essay ‘Circles’ had suggested a spatial model unlike that proverbial container which Douglas-Fairhurst views as mimicking the controlling operations of James’s notionally studious syntax.

There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us. The man finishes his story – how good! how final! how it puts a new face on all things! He fills the sky!

¹⁵ Ibid, p.94.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.94.

¹⁷ HJLC1, p.56.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.52.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.53.

Lo! on the other side rises also a man, and draws a circle around the circle we had just pronounced the outline of the sphere. Then already is our first speaker not man, but only a first speaker. His only redress is forthwith to draw a circle outside of his antagonist.²⁰

That this incremental dispersal of available materials relates to the writing of sentences Emerson has suggested by the verb ‘pronounce’, which plays on the etymological duality inherent to the language of ‘describing’ circles. He suggests a further sentential connection later in the same essay, in claiming that Greek letters are ‘passing under the same sentence’ of loss and atrophy as the fragmentary remains of formerly robust Greek sculpture;²¹ thus tethering substantial things to the dying fall of their representation in language, and hinting at a pun on such pronouncements as death sentences of their own. Yet it is in ‘Self-Reliance’ that form properly embodies function, and where rhythmic drift most closely echoes the sentence-vehicle’s propositional import. ‘[P]ower ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim’;²² Emerson’s sentence performs its own darting, resting at the semi-colon before ‘shooting the gulf’ in a stretched clause that survives the impasse, accommodating a set of values over which it legibly triumphs.

Such effects are what James seemed to have in mind in claiming that Emerson’s later essays read like ‘a renunciation of success’, or that he achieved the remarkable feat of a writerly legacy despite ‘fail[ing] to achieve a style’;²³ for in Emerson’s writing, the renunciation registered in these ‘junctural’ moments operates as a point of principle.²⁴ James writes, of Emerson’s escape from it, that style is generally the ‘bribe or toll-money on the journey to posterity’, and Emerson, in ‘Self-Reliance’, had himself cautioned against the kind of writing which required its author to pay their

²⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York, NY: Library of America, 1983), p.405.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.405.

²² *Ibid.*, p.271.

²³ HJLC1, p.68.

²⁴ The term adapts David Crystal’s ‘junctural features’, quoted in Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.16. James’s judicious reading makes it hard to credit Richard Poirier’s assertion that he ‘patronisingly admired’ Emerson, especially since Poirier himself eloquently articulates the same terms. Emerson, writes Poirier, ‘is forced to claim a place and function for himself almost wholly through his style’;²⁴ yet Emerson’s style ‘seldom manages to be more than compliantly evocative of the social forms it wants us to disown’, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), p.56; p.64. James says what Poirier elsewhere quotes Harold Bloom as saying: that ‘the Emersonian self is voice and not text’, Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (London: Random House, 1987), p.75.

lexical dues. ‘As soon as he has once spoken or acted with *éclat*’, wrote Emerson in this vein, ‘he is a committed person’;²⁵ so Emerson’s exposition of the lapidary undoes, in anticipation, Wilde’s declarative boast; as if, instead of preserving the self, such statement-making served only as a trap to it (etymology informs us that, in associating the lapidary with ‘*éclat*’, or splintering, Emerson suggests that we are *less* ourselves upon making declarative statements)²⁶. If ‘Circles’ depicts Emerson’s triumphalism about the materials one need not be wedded to – the implicit glee in monumental classical structures being like ‘scraps of snow left in cold dells and mountain clefts’ thus paves the way for the open delight in the essay’s peroration: ‘The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment’ –²⁷ Emerson’s essay ‘Compensation’ (1841) returns to the same imagery to outline the shape of such commitments:

Commit a crime, and the earth is made of glass. Commit a crime, and it seems as if a coat of snow fell on the ground, such as reveals in the woods the track of every partridge and fox and squirrel and mole. You cannot recall the spoken word, you cannot wipe out the foot-track, you cannot draw up the ladder, so as to leave no inlet or clew. Some damning circumstance always transpires. The laws and substances of nature—water, snow, wind, gravitation—become penalties to the thief.²⁸

The volume-spanning repetition of the word ‘commit’, appearing in the same essay-series as ‘Self-Reliance’, gives ‘commitment’ more urgency than the ‘crime’ that has been the occasion for it, an effect enforced by repetition at the internal level, as the anaphora literalises commitment to those lexical materials burdening the imagined thief. Not being able to ‘recall’ our words becomes equivalent, in this system, to being trapped by them, and those ‘laws and substances’ which had, in ‘Circles’, easily undone human effort become instead weird magnifiers to it. The pun on ‘recall’, indeed, suggests the further perceptual entrapment of faulty or imprecise memory, as if a commitment to one’s words involved an inability to see how one had become so committed to them, or to locate an exit from them once one had been.

²⁵ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.261.

²⁶ Poirier makes the point, and expands: ‘By speaking emphatically you shatter and scatter, you lose rather than express your identity’, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp.154-5.

²⁷ Ibid, p.408.

²⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), p.297.

Emerson's example, then, prefigures and sponsors the inward and outward bursting found in James's fiction, in which the drift of sentences carries similar associations of entrapment or liberation. When the governess, in Chapter XIII of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), remembers 'times when it might have struck us that almost every branch of study or subject of conversation skirted forbidden ground. Forbidden ground was the question of the return of the dead',²⁹ the inward movement of her syntax, with its Emersonian repetitions, acts as index to her increasing unreliability as narrative steer, the lexical closed system mirroring her obsessive conviction of Peter Quint's and Mrs. Jessel's ghostly pertinence to all events.³⁰ 'The Art of Fiction' responds to similar marches into ever-smaller systems of comprehension – this time, in the proliferative generic categories favoured by literary critics – by finding in the attempted limits only a responsively dense network of association pointing ever outwards: 'People often talk of these things as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, instead of melting into each other at every breath and being intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression'.³¹ This massive sentence of which fiction (and still less its taxonomic subdivisions) forms only a part gives the lie to the Germanic recursiveness of control of Douglas-Fairhurst's understanding; more importantly, it connects sentence-writing to the construction of plots only to assert the maddening difficulty of setting rules for either. For if the self-sustaining grammatical features of the aphorism make it, in Donald Davie's phrase, 'a sentence with a plot',³² then James's essay undermines any confidence in naming plots exactly by the standard of the sentences that are larger than them.

The preface to *Roderick Hudson*, as I have shown, suggests a partial correction to this totalising statement, by imagining a containing shape to these artistic energies, albeit one existing in appearances, and in constant rotation. But it is perhaps most significant that the words which articulate the disjunctive moment in the progress of James's theorised 'continuity' should be, as well as represent, a parenthesis. This is not, as Douglas-Fairhurst has it, so as to manage 'the possibility of [James's] line of thought breaking down'; the subject, for one, has been 'human relations', and not

²⁹ Henry James, *Complete Stories: 1892-1898*, eds. David Bromwich and John Hollander (New York, NY: Library of America, 1995), p.695.

³⁰ The governess's surprising flying of the Emersonian standard even on English shores registers densely at the allusive level, where Nathaniel Hawthorne's attack on Emerson in 'The Celestial Railroad' (1843) as 'Mr. Smooth-it-away' gets integrated into what she later regrets as her early optimism about her employer's terms: 'I was under a charm, apparently, that could smooth away the extent and the far and difficult connections of such an effort'. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Tales and Sketches*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York, NY: Library of America, 1982), p.808; James, *Complete Stories*, p.651.

³¹ HJLC1, p.55.

³² Davie, *Articulate Energy*, p.52.

James's 'line of thought'. Instead, it is just in the moment of breakage that creation *exists*, in James's model, by setting a boundary, however temporary, in the vast phrase that ultimately refuses attempts to categorise. It is not only in *Roderick Hudson*, and 'by the space of an instant or an inch', that the parenthetic moment is tethered to artistic self-actualisations, but also in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where one critical judgement's extreme deferral of the closing noun mimics the 'bursting' against generic confines of which it propositionally speaks: thus, 'the high price of the novel as a literary form' is that it tends 'positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould'.³³ Having established the significance of broadly two types of sentence as they figure in Emersonian pragmatism – the one aphoristic and closed, the other parenthetic and open – I want to suggest that this opposition obtains, in *The Wings of the Dove*, in a way that transfers the critical sympathies they register to the realm of characterisation, as questions of how to operate within the narrative the novel unfolds relate to questions of how to write sentences a certain way.

Agency and ambition: Two kinds of sentence in *The Wings of the Dove*

That the characters who people nineteenth-century novels might also be those novels' motors is a view proposed by Peter Brooks, who comes by circular expansionism without recourse to Emerson, yet whose judgment shares remarkably in the associations of that pragmatist model. Nineteenth-century characters are thus 'desiring machines', by Brooks's reading, moving the circle of the narrative forward just as the etymology of 'ambition' – from 'ambitus', designating an ever-expanding aureole in which desire might be registered as much as incrementally transcended – suggested they might.³⁴ James's fiction suggests that his characters are not only ambitious in the way Brooks describes, but that they can name the shape in which their desires should be put. For if the 'exquisite problem of the artist' was 'eternally to draw [...] the circle', it is the problem for John Marcher too, who in James's late novella, 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903), understands the fate he expects to befall him as a vibrating ambitus he literally visualises: 'He circled about it', notes James's narrator, 'at a distance that alternately narrowed and widened'.³⁵ Yet if Brooks's reading does not detect a latent pragmatism to these manoeuvres, David Bromwich's does. In his understanding,

³³ Ibid, p.1075.

³⁴ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.39-40.

³⁵ Henry James, *Complete Stories, 1898-1910*, ed. Denis Donoghue (New York, NY: Library of America, 1996), p.518.

James's tendency to make his characters his own interpretative exegetes – a judgement of longstanding in commentary on James –³⁶ becomes a part of spreading out the drama of interpreting experience: so that 'the novelist's novelist [...] becomes, by virtue of that fact, the experiencer's experiencer'.³⁷ The choice to write – and to have such characters speak – in a difficult style, then, becomes in turn not a 'retreat from life into the palace of art', as John Carlos Rowe had put it, but, as Ross Posnock has argued, a more direct engagement with it exactly in its registering its difficulties.³⁸ The parenthesis, by which I mean any break in a sentence's 'line of thought',³⁹ becomes the most focused unit for articulating and representing such difficulty, exactly because it mimics the deferred arrival inherent to Emerson's system. James's are 'expressions', in R.W. Short's compelling formula, which 'are truly connectives rather than summaries', and in which 'what has been achieved is merely referred to, not epitomized'.⁴⁰ In being exactly that, such expressions tether the formation of sentences to an ethos accounted for in Emerson's suggestive model.

The Wings of the Dove, however, complicates Short's notion that James 'tune[s] the speech of all his characters to the speech of the ones entrusted with the achievement of his artistic purposes' by suggesting some temptation by the lapidary (and thus un-Jamesian) utterance.⁴¹ For it is via the parenthetical expression that Kate, in the opening section, negatively views her present circumstance, and via the aphoristic that she detects a plausible redemption of it: 'the whole history of their house', as the narrator relates it, 'had the effect of some fine florid voluminous phrase, say even a musical, that dropped first into words and notes without sense and then, hanging unfinished, into no words nor any notes at all'.⁴² If the paratactic expanse of the sentence mimics the lack of conclusive finality which is its propositional complaint (so that it itself ends up 'hanging unfinished') a typographic emphasis is introduced to the other kind of sentence Kate imagines, so that the opposite effect is rendered: '[s]he hadn't given up yet, and the broken sentence, if she was the last word, *would* end

³⁶ See Peter Brooks, 'Introduction', Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* ed Peter Brooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Susanne Kappeler, *Writing and Reading in Henry James* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

³⁷ David Bromwich, 'The Novelist of Everyday Life', in Morris Dickstein ed. *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), p.372.

³⁸ Ross Posnock uses Carlos Rowe's argument to stress this difference in *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.vii.

³⁹ I do not depart from John Lennard's useful methodology, which employs the crisp definition of the 'parenthetical' as 'independent of the main syntax'; and thus comprises parentheses in 'round brackets' as well as 'dash'd or comma'd off'. John Lennard, *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.7; p.1.

⁴⁰ R.W. Short, 'The Sentence Structure of Henry James', *American Literature*, 18.2 (May 1946) pp.71-88, p.80.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.84.

⁴² WoD, p.4.

with a sort of meaning'.⁴³ The effect of the opposition is to equate the construction of narrative to the composition of sentences: the one directionless and opaque, the other motivated and final. The equivalence has caused Diana Leca, seemingly internalising Short's much-earlier assumptions, to consider Kate's ultimate preference (she chooses the lapidary) a reification of James's own changing working methods: the fruit in their turn of his increasingly burgeoning modernist convictions. Kate thus becomes 'constitutive of a generative hardness in late-Jamesian characterization – one that both beckons and blocks the reader's curiosity for contact', claims Leca;⁴⁴ Kate being, in fact, only a function of the 'states of unfeeling and associated lapidary elements like imperviousness and fixity' that are 'built into' the novel 'at various levels of its compositional process'.⁴⁵

It is appropriate that James's notebooks, from which Leca's study draws much of its argument for an increasingly aphoristic author, reveal instead a dynamic of motion entirely in keeping with that outlined in the *Roderick Hudson* preface;⁴⁶ for James's novel presents the *thematization*, and not the reification, of the kinds of sentence Kate encounters and contemplates in the novel's first section. If it makes sense to think of her, as Leca does, as James's author-designate, then this first section sees her propose to her father a view of life siding with the fumblingly parenthetical, and not with the lapidary and final. Promising her father that they will 'stand together', Kate continues: "We won't worry in advance about how or where; we'll have faith and find a way"⁴⁷ – a hardness all the more admirable when we remember the kind of sentence the narrator has just revealed as terrifying her. The assurance is also suggestively similar to a demand Milly makes of Susan Stringham, at the close of Book Fourth; that, having recently been introduced to the *beau-monde* at Lancaster Gate, these two American travellers continue their European tour according to

⁴³ Ibid, p.5.

⁴⁴ Diana Leca, 'Failed to Feel It: Stoniness in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*', *The Henry James Review*, 40.3 (Fall 2019), pp.234-243, p.238.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.235.

⁴⁶ Leca claims that '[e]ntries he made in his notebooks show him [James] fully alive to writing as a process that is at once lapidary, rigorous, and recursive'. But the entry she cites as proof, in which James describes 'the "very essence" of his "job"' as being 'to ensure that his stories "consist each, substantially, of a single incident definite, limited, sharp"' comes of a circumstantial desire to save something for his process from 'this remnant of a beguiled morning'. The intention for these plot-summaries being mnemonic – aides he called, in the same entry, 'jot[tings]', not 'writings' – they are better explained by F.O. Matthiessen's phlegmatic judgement: that James 'used his notebooks as a means of catching his thoughts as they rose'. They thus do not herald a shift away from an earlier non-lapidary process but confirm that process, Ibid, p.241; Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.146; F.O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.53.

⁴⁷ WoD, p.17.

itineraries as yet undetermined: “‘I mean by your staying ‘here’ for me”, Milly pursued, “your staying with me wherever I may be, even though we may neither of us know at the time where that is””.⁴⁸ The parity matters because it lends significance to what has often been considered a structural mistake in the composition of James’s novel: that, in Short’s terms, ‘the opening of this novel secedes from the bulk of it’.⁴⁹ In presenting us with a Kate whose preferences differ from those she indicates in the novel’s remainder, *The Wings of the Dove* instigates an abiding theme, willing us to read into the novel’s structure other, thwarted narrative possibilities, and presenting characters who play by Jamesian rules for which the novel ultimately finds no place.

It makes sense then to assume, as Leca does, that an equivalence is being made between sentence-structure and the more general structure of novelistic narrative. It even makes sense to find, with Leca also, that Kate’s form of sentence-writing and narrativizing prove predominant in the structure of the novel as a whole. But the aphoristic transposition Leca detects in the easy passage from preface to novel – the lapidary evidence of which, for her, lies in James’s claim to have composed the novel in ‘blocks’ –⁵⁰ in fact reveals why such aphoristic composition represents a departure from James’s stated values. For if James had made his own equivalence, in ‘The Art of Fiction’, between composing in blocks and composing sentences, it was to state a radical irreducibility of types of narrative into separable entities that mimicked the irreducibility of sentences, as if atomically, to their constituent parts: “I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks”, writes James, immediately after his words asserting ‘one general effort of expression’, ‘nor [...] a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive’.⁵¹ The choice to compose in blocks, then – far from the stuff of authorial sanction which it is in Leca’s understanding – is significant in registering the subtle thwarting of James’s terms, and in highlighting the novel’s presentation of situations which depart in crucial ways from James’s critical values exactly by their invocation.

We can trace this departure, that is, by observing how Kate’s use of James’s terms subverts the significance they hold in James’s criticism. One instance of this subversion occurs in the preface itself, in which what James had earlier taken to be the real sentence governing experience – one

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.140.

⁴⁹ Short, ‘The Sentence Structure of Henry James’, p.82.

⁵⁰ Leca, ‘Failed to Feel It’, p.236.

⁵¹ HJLC1, p.55.

which sees categories ‘melting into each other at every breath and being intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression’ – has its key terms redispersed to fall under a very specific (and not ‘general’) effort of expression: Kate’s. Thus, though Densher’s conference with Aunt Lowder is ‘the one patch not strictly seen over Kate Croy’s shoulder’, as James puts it five years after the novel’s publication, we immediately afterwards ‘surrender again’ to ‘drawing breath through the young woman’s lungs’, so that Densher’s ‘experience [...] melts back into that accumulation, which we have been, as it were, saving up’.⁵² James’s image, that is, invokes the collocation of ‘breath’ and ‘melting’ to argue at a sense of narrative fixity and control which depends on finite subdivisions: for since Kate is the sole dispenser of this breath, it follows that Densher’s allowance of it will be a reduced iteration of these already reduced resources.⁵³ If the effect of the contraction is only magnified by our prior knowledge of these words’ use in James’s criticism – earlier such ‘melting’ had been about eliminating causality; here, it works to assert it – the same applies to the progress of events as related in the central text. In the first chapter’s second section, that is, in which Kate rides a coach to meet Maud Lowder at Lancaster Gate immediately following the tense paternal conference of the novel’s opening, Kate’s resolved mental change – to ‘accept with smothered irony other people’s interpretation of her conduct’ –⁵⁴ is registered by an inward contraction of Emerson’s shaping metaphor, and thus of that powering the *Roderick Hudson* preface: Aunt Maud’s house being ‘reached through long, straight, discouraging vistas, perfect telescopes of streets [...] which kept lengthening and straightening’.⁵⁵ If the coach-ride allows her ‘to reflect on the long way she had travelled’ since her mother’s death, its progress literalises a further perceptual passage: away from the ‘circle in which she revolved’ and the area ‘roundabout Cromwell Road’,⁵⁶ towards an increasingly linear shaping system with no sanction in James’s criticism.

James, as we have seen, argued in the prefaces that moments of narrative resistance were paradoxical confirmations of such narratives’ capacity for staying true to themselves (indeed, in mimicking this ‘bursting’, James’s statement tethered such resistances to the resistances of the

⁵² HJCL2, p.1301.

⁵³ Leca correctly relates Densher’s ghastly vatic judgement to Kate in Book Sixth – ‘when we’re married, you’ll dole me out my sugar by lumps’ – to Kate’s ‘control of the plot’s shape’; Kate, who ‘runs a tight ship’, is thus ‘contrasted explicitly with Merton Densher’s more elastic “line of muddle”’. Yet despite the salience in this distribution of attributes, I maintain that she is wrong about how we as readers are meant to interpret such qualities. WoD, p.219; Leca, “Failed to Feel It”, p.240.

⁵⁴ WoD, p.19.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.19.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.19.

sentence's parts). That such forms of narrative require a container against which to effect such resistance is implied by the 'latency' or 'mould' against which the extravagance can be measured. In his preface to *The Aspern Papers*, James writes of 'delighting [...] in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries' of experience, and compares such proximate discoveries with 'the charm of looking over a garden-wall'; a charm which draws its power from making 'the place we have wondered at *other*' [italics James's].⁵⁷ If the vocabulary of wonder has been implicitly Emerson's,⁵⁸ then so has the model: for Emerson had talked, in 'Circles', of similarly incremental increases, and thus of '[t]he continual effort to raise himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height' which "betrays itself in a man's relations".⁵⁹ *The Wings of the Dove*'s Book Second, which focuses on the origins of the romance between Kate and Merton Densher, seems at first to keep to this Emersonian compact not just by introducing the metaphor of the garden-wall, but by socialising it: sharing it out so that it really is as 'in relations' as Emerson (and later, James) valued their guiding terms as being.⁶⁰ When Kate first meets Densher – at a party in London thrown by a society hostess – it is with a sense of wonder for which speech is only partially adequate ('other conscious organs, faculties, feelers' had been involved than a simple meeting of the eyes)⁶¹, a deferral of articulation whose discovery resembles that of the James of the prefaces. Kate, having 'observed a ladder against a garden-wall', had also 'trusted herself so to climb it as to be able to see over into the probable garden on the other side'.⁶² Densher makes this probability other, for '[o]n reaching the top she had found herself face to face with a gentleman engaged in a like calculation':⁶³ in other words, the non-discovery of what she meant to find is registered and confirmed by the establishment of a valve of sympathy with someone who can share in her curiosity.

Yet, again, the invocation asserts a difference, and Kate mistakes the nature of James's terms in using them. Instead, that is, of widening the circle, of allowing that this impression be the first in a series, leading to others similarly and subtly unlike it, Kate and Densher stay 'perched – they had not

⁵⁷ HJLC2, p.1177.

⁵⁸ Tony Tanner associates Emerson's efforts with a development of Thomas Carlyle's attribute of 'wonder' in *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p.9.

⁵⁹ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.406.

⁶⁰ The language describing Kate's discovery, which specifies a 'ladder' as access to this garden-wall, is, resultantly, *more* Emersonian than that of James's prefaces, since the same prop outlines Emerson's system: 'Step by step we scale this mysterious ladder: the steps are actions; the new prospect is power', Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.404.

⁶¹ WoD, p.38

⁶² Ibid, p.38.

⁶³ Ibid, p.38.

climbed down; and indeed during the time that followed Kate at least had the perched feeling – it was as if she were there aloft without a retreat’.⁶⁴ The glide of exclusion that the sentence, all without typographic interruption, subtly effects (‘Kate at least’) registers and instigates an asymmetry in this perching, a disparity which only grows as the novel progresses. Yet the novel’s later sense that Kate has possession of the central narrative thread is foreshadowed by – and thus inherent to – Book Second’s innocent-seeming unfolding of her burgeoning romance to Densher, by which she determines ‘his long looks [...] the thing in the world she could never have enough of’ and expresses the wish that ‘whatever might happen, she must keep them, must make them completely her possession’.⁶⁵ Indeed, if the garden-wall metaphor has been used to register not a ‘nearer mystery’ at all but a confirming anagnorisis, this is because its mechanics have transformed to emphasise not an unfolding sense of discovery, but the selecting principle that height invites. For the metaphor itself transforms, as Book Second progresses, from the ambling discoveries of an obliquely navigable wall to a kind of lighthouse or lookout which selects only what is most observable from the ground below, and thus what it deems most pertinent. Reflecting on Mrs. Lowder’s society in Book First, Kate finds against discovery by realising how different life is ‘from her rudimentary readings’, which give her ‘a feeling of a wasted past. If she had only known sooner she might have arranged herself more to meet it’.⁶⁶ By Book Second, she has found a determining metaphor suitable to these pre-emptions against waste: that is, the ‘young woman’s high retreat’ or ‘lookout’, whose silences register the fact of ‘hearing irrelevant sounds’, and whose relevant ones see to her having ‘caught the truth’ of Aunt Maud’s dealings.⁶⁷ It is from this vantage that Kate formalises her selecting possessiveness over Densher – the facts of whose childhood, suddenly revealed to her, ‘perched him there with her for half an hour, like a cicerone and his victim on a tower-top, before as much of the bird’s-eye view of his early years abroad [...] as she had easy attention for’.⁶⁸ If the bird’s-eye view steers the realm of observation to selecting the kind of information of most use to Kate, it also registers an increasing and engulfing disparity between the two lovers which their first perch had only hinted at. More than an expression that Kate and Densher operate at different altitudes, Book Second suggests what the novel will come to confirm: that Kate’s aphoristic treatment of Densher’s story will be his undoing.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.39.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.44.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.21.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.41.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.66.

But if Kate determines, through this aphoristic narrativizing, to exclude chance, evade discovery, and undo mutuality, it is a model itself decided for her in advance. For if, as the narrator notes in Book Second, '[i]t was impossible to keep Mrs. Lowder out of their [the lovers'] scheme',⁶⁹ it is an intrusiveness of imagery as much as of information; an affiliation which in turn registers Kate's implicit conclusion that the only way to keep Mrs. Lowder out of their scheme is by making schemes that resemble hers. At stake, again, is a thwarting of James's terms, and Kate's comparison of her aunt to 'a great seamed silk balloon', alongside its explanatory assertion, 'I never myself got into her car. I was her choice',⁷⁰ foreshadow the balloon metaphor of the preface to *The American*, which works as a critical tool for cautioning against the high-flown fantasy of writers of romance. If 'the balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth', as James puts it there, then 'the rope of remarkable length' which guarantees the tie guarantees also the 'commodious car of the imagination'; cut the rope, however, and we are 'at large and unrelated'.⁷¹ Invoking this imagery (and conjoining it with the fatal associations of the executioner: "'She has been giving us rope'",⁷² says Kate of Aunt Maud) asserts Aunt Maud as the most potent of those authors whose version of events she must accept with 'smothered irony': it also establishes her (and thus Kate's) loftiness as a separation from relations, a state of being running counter to the injunction to constant change on which James's 'perpetual predicament' had insisted. Aunt Maud's terms for things, finding an overlap, increasingly, in Kate's usage, confirm a like indistinguishability in their conceptual models. Kate's 'high retreat' from which she removes 'irrelevant sounds' is not just literally Aunt Maud's (being instigated, in their metaphorical chain of association, by 'the high south window' in her Bayswater lodgings)⁷³ but conceptually hers too, as the same collocation of relevance and height insists: talking as if Densher's 'contribution to the subject' of Kate's future 'were barely relevant', Maud expresses a similar wish to see Kate "'high, high up – high up and in the light'".⁷⁴ Such continuities, more than just a question of aligning critical sympathies, provide a measure for how not to approach experience that also works as grim portent for the blandness of tone that interposes itself between the lovers at the novel's end:⁷⁵ for Maud's terms have made her less sociable too. 'It

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.45.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.53.

⁷¹ HJLC2, p.1064.

⁷² WoD, p.44.

⁷³ Ibid, p.20.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p.59.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.479.

was an oddity of Mrs. Lowder's', notes the narrator, of Densher's conference with her in Book Second, 'that her face in speech was like a lighted window at night, but that silence immediately drew the curtain'.⁷⁶ If Maud's sociability works thus in a series of aphorisms, blocking entry by 'the great glaze of her surface',⁷⁷ it is only a more literal instantiation of an otherwise insistent image: that the type of narrative she encourages is necessarily remote.

Implicit to the thread of my argument has been an acceptance of Leca's proposition that Kate is an author, even if I have wanted to say that the kind of authorship she embodies is one the novel thematises. It is, in fact, exactly by observing the model of authorship Milly embodies that we can see the full alternative to Kate's ethics, and so fully take the measure, as Kate's narrative predominates, of these ethics' crushing. This interpretation runs against the critical grain: not just against Leca's argument, but also against that of Sheila Teahan, for whom James's novel stages the drama of non-representability; or, in her words, the 'radical fissure or disjunction between knowledge and act, means and ends, cause and effect';⁷⁸ disjunctions she elsewhere likens to the image of the 'broken sentence' that Kate introduces – and reveals a terror over – at the novel's beginning.⁷⁹ Suggesting that, in voicing a fear of broken sentences, the novel 'names the trope of anacoluthon' and thus names also 'a failure of narrative continuity or causal sequence', Teahan proceeds to claim that 'anacoluthon is the chief (dis)organizing trope of *The Wings of the Dove*, whose prominent anacoluthon is Densher's turn to Milly, the anacoluthic event for which there is no causal or thematic preparation, and which cannot be located at any one point in the text'.⁸⁰ Teahan's study, itself an argument for James's novel as a commentary on composition for which sentences are the guiding metaphor, proceeds from the assumption that perfect capture is what James wants from his fictive efforts. Pointing to James's claim, in the novel's preface, that 'the bridge [that] spans the stream' is the only lasting reality any artwork can bestow,⁸¹ Teahan summarises James's intent in a way that undoes the force of this valorisation of a work's transitional elements: '[t]he artist appears to enjoy a mastery of his finished work', says Teahan, 'but that work is itself only a substitute, copy,

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.59.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.59.

⁷⁸ Sheila Teahan, 'The Abyss of Language in *The Wings of the Dove*', *Henry James Review*, 14.2 (Spring 1993), pp.204-214, p.205.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.210.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.210.

⁸¹ HJLC2, p.1295.

or tropological displacement of its original conception'.⁸² We know, from James's preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, with what serio-comic force James outlines the folly of sticking to original conceptions for unfolding fictional projects ('the depths of [the] delusion' in being rigid about that novella's length against which it 'accordingly began to struggle')⁸³, and how much authorial sanction we already have in finding against Teahan's summary. Even if we did not, James's words themselves would speak for the radically adventurous project engaged in by his writing, and particularly in the New York Edition which has been the occasion for the prefaces in the first place. For if James's constant revisions imply a preference against the preserved conservation of finished works in favour of the process that has brought them into being (and will survive them in turn), favouring 'the bridge [that] spans the stream' aligns James's fiction not with finished mastery, but with provisional adventitiousness: his sentences not with summaries but with connectives.

Teahan, in quoting James's description of the novel as beginning at 'the outer ring' and then 'approaching the centre thus by narrowing circumvallations',⁸⁴ summarises the designation as 'describ[ing] an asymptotic curve of successively smaller increments that can approach, but never coincide with, its end'; and that by these means Milly 'appears by nature to resist representation'.⁸⁵ Yet the novel makes clear that it is by just such resistances that Milly reveals her own bid for authorship; by giving a sense, that is, in which her disturbing entry into the London of prearranged formulas qualifies her to bear the standard of an ethics closest, amongst the characters in the novel, to James's stated own. For the cadences and vocabulary of James's comments in the *Roderick Hudson* preface find themselves dispersed and rearranged, as the novel progresses, in association with Milly's character; in suggestive ways that mark and register her own preference, with James's prefaces, against set formulas and straitening plans set in advance. Regretting, at the close of Book Fifth, that Densher should adopt a view of her that accorded with the standard one now set and ossifying in London (the private tone they had established between them in Boston has since given way to Densher's 'particular desire [...] to be like every one else, simplifyingly "kind" to her'),⁸⁶ Milly observes that 'by its sweet universality, it made relations rather prosaically a matter of course'.⁸⁷ By

⁸² Teahan, 'The Abyss of Language', p.212.

⁸³ HJLC2, p.1142.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.1293.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.204.

⁸⁶ WoD, p.208.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.209.

these means, the narrator intra-diegetically reformulates James's 'really, universally, relations stop nowhere' so as to argue similarly against begged questions: 'It anticipated and superseded the – likewise sweet – operations of real affinities'.⁸⁸ The corollary of the equivalence, of course, has been to associate questions of authorship with the navigation of Milly's own social experience; and to suggest that Milly's preferred model of sociability, siding as it does with perspectival breaks and ruptures, is a model as suited to authorship as to social affairs.

The novel returns to the same phrase later, only to enhance a fidelity to its disjunctive mechanics. The cadence, and some of the terms, recur, that is, in Book Eighth, on the occasion of Milly's throwing a party in Venice in her hired palazzo for the assembled holidaymakers out from London, and as the narrative centre's inhabitation of Densher's consciousness registers his conflicting romantic attachments, which seem to be reorientating towards Milly against his stated will. 'He was at least sure about his feelings', ventriloquises the narrator, 'it being so established that he had none at all. They were all for Kate, without a feather's weight to spare. He was acting for Kate – not, by the deviation of an inch, for her friend'.⁸⁹ The anticipation of James's 'this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken', reminds us to attend to a fraught dramatic irony in Densher's calculations; for if Milly incarnates the rupture of thought he means here to deny, then the break, far from suppressed or controlled by the sentence's own deviation, represents instead a significant discovery about ordering experience. Densher's irony of self-fooling works at the sentential level to register a confusion about his own conduct up to this point: one which undoes his propositional conviction of its being 'marked by straightness' by its own deviations of course as of subject. The knots of self-denial that hint at a love lost for Kate even at Densher's seeming to declare for her wholly (as to 'feelings' he has 'none at all' – the subsequent run-on, unchecked and undisturbed, then finds these dubious nothings to be 'all for Kate') are a fraught prelude to the rupture that would seem to cast Kate and Milly alike as opposites; a rupture the em-dash, at the typographical level, strives ironically to enforce. The resonance with that other question about a novel's shape which occurs in *The Spoils of Poynton*'s preface – 'how do we know when and where to intervene, where do we place the beginnings of the wrong or the right deviation?'⁹⁰ – generalises the nature of the disturbance, to make Densher's increasing attachment to Milly over Kate a question of

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.209.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.350.

⁹⁰ HJLC2, p.1139.

choosing one model of experience over another. It is as if, in seeking to close the question, Densher's pre-emptive anticipations instead only invite larger ones.

These moments of allusion suggest that the 'radical fissure' Teahan describes should be understood as proposing, in Milly's example, an alternative to Kate's compositional aesthetics, one marked by the very transitional elements Teahan takes to be the novel's 'chief (dis)organizing trope'. The remarkable transition the novel takes from Book Second (which, like the first book, never strays from representing the closed lower-aristocratic world of central and west London) to Book Third (high up on the Swiss Alps, and with characters entirely new) mimics the preferences of the character whose movements the narrative centre now describes. The tendency for such thematic narrative leaps is first declared for her in her absence, at the alpine cliff edge, by her friend Susan Stringham's 'stifl[ing] a cry on taking in what she believed to be the danger of such a perch for a mere maiden: her liability to slip, to slide, to leap, to be precipitated by a single false movement, by a turn of the head—how could one tell? into whatever was beneath'.⁹¹ Locating her, giddy and happy, at the section's close, Stringham's encounter with Milly registers the aftershocks of a fate whose literal rebuff sits and talks before her. 'Milly', we are told, 'had designed to "lie down"'; only to get up, 'three minutes later', and 'with a transition that was like a jump of four thousand miles'.⁹² Indeed, if the pointed substitution Susan Stringham makes of Milly, in her absence, to the Tauchnitz edition she has left at the cliff's edge, relates her to a work of literature, the trope of the vertiginous chasm so outlasts the change in scenery as to suggest its being central to this alternative literature's effects. 'Don't tell me', Milly implores Susan, in Book Fourth, in responding to her friend's exasperated confusion about the motivations for the behaviour of those in London, 'there are not abysses. I want abysses'.⁹³ It is the increasing lack of abysses that is Milly's tragedy, as that of the novel in general.

The desired abysses appeal to Milly exactly in that they present a challenge: exactly, that is, in that they attest to some underlying mystery to be solved and accounted for. For by such desires, Milly asserts the possibility of erecting 'the bridge [that] spans the stream' of the novel's preface, and which Teahan finds to be the crisis the novel stages. These abysses are, in other words, invitations to

⁹¹ WoD, p.88.

⁹² Ibid, pp.901-91.

⁹³ WoD, p.130.

fill in the gaps in the text, to work out, in this instance, what she is and is not being told about ‘their relations’ (those of Densher and Kate): to see something more in ‘the circumstances of his [Densher’s] own silence’,⁹⁴ and thus to go some way to undoing it. If Milly here perceives relations in terms of a tangible bulk, wondering, as she does, whether the ‘quantity’ of those relations of which Kate has informed her ‘might have figured as small, as smallest, beside the quantity she hadn’t’,⁹⁵ the perception works to point up her more general tendency to bring distinct entities into a connective chain of association. Book Fourth shows Susan Stringham moved by the effects of such relationality, as Milly’s promise that the two Americans continue travelling ‘dispel[s]’ the feeling that ‘their relation might have been afloat, like some island in the south, in a great warm sea that represented [...] a margin, an outer sphere, of general emotion; and the effect of the occurrence of anything in particular was to make the sea submerge the island, the margin flood the text’.⁹⁶ These words, which yoke connective grammar to a commitment to chance, contrast with Densher’s and Kate’s recourse to their own private language, their own separated and distinct relations: their willingness, in Book Second, to make themselves into a kind of conjoined aphorism: ‘what they said when not together had no taste for them at all, and nothing could have served more to launch them, at special hours, on their small floating island than such an assumption that they were only making believe everywhere else’.⁹⁷ Milly’s textual dealings instead express an appetite for such make believe, and in figuring her own burgeoning relationship with Densher as a question of her ‘bec[oming] as spontaneous as possible and as American as it might appeal to Mr. Densher, after his travels, to find her’ she makes it clear that such role-playing involves an active break from the predictive and predictable grammar by which London threatens otherwise to arrange her: ‘conscious’, as she has been, ‘of her unused margin as an American girl – closely indeed as in English air the text might appear to cover the page’.⁹⁸

The English air is, for a tantalising bulk of the novel, in fact of great imaginative value to Milly. Short, in his study, suggests that the opening section of the novel reads more like the James of *The Europeans* than the author of the late fiction, and the evocation is useful in reminding us of the smothered possible texts the novel presents as alternatives to itself; particularly as regards Milly’s

⁹⁴ Ibid, p.132.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.131.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.139.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p.47.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.205.

attitude to role-play, and the contribution of sentences to such attitudes. In Richard Poirier's account of that novel, the roles assigned to characters in the traditional rendition of the International Theme are reversed: where the novel's American characters cling to the rigidities of tradition, its English ones resist type and value role-play, refusing thus to be, in his elegant phrase, 'literalists about their own motives'.⁹⁹ It is thus for their imaginative and artistic potential that Milly wonders at eccentric, even unnatural English customs: such as the fact, as she observes in Book Fourth, that Kate's sister lives in genteel poverty excluded from society when Kate herself enjoys splendour at the centre of it.¹⁰⁰ The difference, which confounds obvious taxonomies, is the occasion for an extraordinary moment of literary association that designates Milly a potential author: running through the comparisons that best meet Mrs. Condrip's situation (for which plausible forbears include Carlyle, Trollope, and Thackeray),¹⁰¹ Milly rests finally on the example of Dickens. Or rather, she refuses to rest on him, the exemplary model he provides hovering indeterminately about the scene it is tasked with representing: 'the picture lacking thus more than she had hoped, or rather perhaps showing less than she had feared, a certain possibility of Pickwickian outline'¹⁰². If Milly is unclear as much about her own hopes as about the possibility of her analogues matching up to the life unfolding before her (the sentence hedgingly allows itself, before dismissing it, the hope that Mrs. Condrip, in the interests of satisfying the designs of the rubric, might prove poorer than she really is) then Samuel Pickwick has been an appropriate choice, the sheer numerousness of his exaggerated study cases providing a fitting model for the optative, radically undecidable tremors which 'certain possibilities' suggest an answer for.

Indeed, if Pickwick instigates Milly's desire to interpret her experiences textually, the word 'outline' folds these questions back into what it means to compose such texts in a Jamesian manner. For if 'pure in outline' had been Besant's term for how the novel ought to shape itself, it seems, by his abiding fascination with the word, that it is really the prescriptive *use* of outlines at which James blanches, rather than the word itself.¹⁰³ In 1875 (and in an appreciation of Balzac) James had written of how 'Dickens sets a figure before us with extraordinary vividness; but the outline is fantastic and

⁹⁹ Richard Poirier, *The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), p.125.

¹⁰⁰ WoD, p.134.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.134.

¹⁰² Ibid, p.135.

¹⁰³ The ironies of 'The Art of Fiction' see James dispute a term by which he had long been captivated, and wedded ever subsequently to an expression, in its title, whose premise that essay undermines: for being, appropriately, 'comprehensive', HJLC1, p.44.

arbitrary’;¹⁰⁴ in the same year, he writes, of a study of Hippolyte Taine, that ‘[o]n Thackeray and Dickens he has two chapters of great suggestiveness to those who know the authors, but on the whole of excessively contracted outline’.¹⁰⁵ If both examples demonstrate a horror at begging the question (while associating such ‘outlines’ with the same cluster of authors who excite Milly), an example from the later fiction ascribes a moral valency to such closures: the eyes of Mrs. Gereth in *The Spoils of Poynton* ‘grew wan as she discerned in the impenetrable air that Mona’s thick outline never wavered an inch’.¹⁰⁶ In 1902, the year of *The Wings of the Dove*’s publication, James revisits the term to discuss Flaubert, whose ‘excited and baffled passion gives the key of his life and determines its outline’.¹⁰⁷ That essay is, in fact, remarkable for its rearticulations of the terms of ‘The Art of Fiction’ more broadly, for James commends Flaubert precisely for his avoidance of keys and outlines: particularly the ensnaring outlines of the standalone phrase. ‘It was truly a wonderful success to be so the devotee of the phrase and yet never its victim’, writes James, since ‘[i]t is always so related and associated, so properly part of something else that is in turn part of something other, part of a reference, a tone, a passage, a page, that the simple may enjoy it for its least bearing and the initiated for its greatest’.¹⁰⁸ The restatement of the particles of the novel’s being ‘all one and continuous’ is remarkable enough; that Milly thinks in these terms testifies to her embodiment of James’s aesthetic sympathies.

‘Narrowing circumvallations’: aphorism and the encroachment of representation

It takes death, in a critically revealing moment in her study, for Teahan’s assumptions and equivalences properly to manifest themselves; when Kate’s ‘jerk’ of Milly’s personal letter to Densher in Book Tenth ‘figures’, by her analysis, ‘a fall or slip from a foothold into an abyss, like the fall of the picture precariously hung, a loss of basis so radical as to imply not just the fall into the abyss, but death itself’.¹⁰⁹ The positive associations that we have seen Milly make of such tottering go some way to undermining Teahan’s implied negativity: other examples go further; so far, that is, as to point up the impossibility, at least in that middle section of the novel in which Milly’s

¹⁰⁴ HJLC2, pp.52-3.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.847.

¹⁰⁶ Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, ed. David Lodge (London: Penguin, 1987), p.169.

¹⁰⁷ HJLC2, p. 316.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.335.

¹⁰⁹ Teahan, ‘Abyss of Language’, p.211.

consciousness is housed, of formulas like ‘death itself’. Death, for Milly, is simply not wholly itself: it goes many ways, by her analysis, being only one of many options that her doctor, Sir Luke Strett, suggests are available to her. Sir Luke, ‘interested on her behalf in other questions beside the question of what was the matter with her’,¹¹⁰ thereby places her condition on an intellectual plane; not into a pressing or unanswerable matter that would ground it in the finite and linear but instead into a ‘question’ to be approached philosophically. Ian Watt talks of Strether’s opening ‘question’, in *The Ambassadors*, in just these terms, finding in the device an unwillingness ‘to merge Strether’s consciousness into the narrative’.¹¹¹ Death, by Sir Luke’s reading, emerges similarly as subordinate to its conception in positive thinking: ‘My dear young lady’, as he puts it, as if the matter were an obvious question of choice, ‘isn’t to “live” exactly what I’m trying to persuade you to take the trouble to do?’¹¹²

Seymour Chatman, in his study of James’s later style, posits that James situates commonplace words in inverted commas to suggest the ‘struggle to *name* them’ [*italics his*].¹¹³ That to ‘live’ comes under such treatment at Sir Luke’s hands suggests, in the fact of this struggle, a deferral of the word’s full significance; a deferral, even, of the possibility of the word’s laying claim on Milly; and thus a deferral of death. Yet if abstracting ‘to live’ constitutes a perverse intellectualisation of unanswerable processes, Milly’s subsequent gander about London with the words ‘so in her ears’ confirms her as sharing in the perversion.¹¹⁴ It is not just living but living as a character – or as several characters – that powers the extraordinary reverie which unfolds thus at the novel’s centre; or else as an author of one, in whom prompts prove proliferative: with imaginative flights producible upon the merest gazes of smarting onlookers (‘she might, from the curiosity she clearly excited in byways [...] literally have had her musket on her shoulder’).¹¹⁵ That same Pickwickian callousness returns as instigator of these effects (she sees ‘side-streets peopled with grimy children and costermongers’ carts, which she hoped were slums’)¹¹⁶, and so does its sense of oscillation. Seeing ‘in people’s eyes the reflection of her appearance and pace’,¹¹⁷ the ceding of

¹¹⁰ WoD p.166.

¹¹¹ Ian Watt, ‘The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication’, *Essays in Criticism* 10.3 (July 1960), p.257.

¹¹² WoD, p.171.

¹¹³ Seymour Chatman, *The Later Style of Henry James* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), pp.78-79.

¹¹⁴ WoD, p.171.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.173.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.173.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.173.

perspectival ground confirms a wish for this gaze not to settle on sitter or portraitist. By people's eyes proceeding as if in a refracting mirror ('She found herself moving at times'),¹¹⁸ and by this mirror, allowing a negative instigator to position Milly as, prismatically, at once at centre and margin of the scene described – 'She found herself moving at times in regions visibly not haunted by odd-looking girls from New York, duskily draped, sable-plumed, all but incongruously shod and gazing about them with extravagance' –¹¹⁹ the effect has been so to pluralise Milly into these wider vistas – a pluralism which attaches her, with a paratactic equivalence, to a range of improbable (and improbably shifting) characteristics – as to lose the sense of what is 'not' from what is; to make, that is, of the notionally confining instead the possible beginning of something imaginatively new.

This pluralising of subjectivity reflects a pluralising of Milly's options, and James's brother seems to be called upon to provide an explanation of Sir Luke's eccentric practice. Before pragmatism was the name he gave to it (and before, appropriately, it had needed such a name: the subtitle, of course, running 'A new name for some old ways of thinking'), William James had proposed his thesis of the 'will to believe'; a doctrine which locates the 'believing tendency' wherever there is what James labelled a 'willingness to act at all'.¹²⁰ Such an undergirding makes sense of the sheer refusal in Milly to have an experience resembling that of doctor to patient: to get, instead of a prognosis, 'above all an impression', and to have 'established', in what the narrative voice wittily describes as a 'time-saving way' (Stringham has already told us of her transitional leaps) 'a relation with it'.¹²¹ Milly's portrayal – which Teahan aptly describes as 'ambiguously double' –¹²² wrests from the perhaps propositional nature of the occasion a valency that refuses to settle the data into a commanding or constricting declaration as to her state: '[C]onfronted with [...] the consciousness that he had not, after all, pronounced her anything', Milly instead defers to style to formalise the polyvalence of her own deferral, and turns style's ambiguities into fertile ground for recuperation: 'she nursed herself into the sense that he had beautifully got out of it'.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p.173.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.173.

¹²⁰ William James, *Writings: 1878-1899*, ed. Gerald Myers (New York, NY: Library of America, 1992), p.458.

¹²¹ WoD, p.159.

¹²² Teahan, 'The Abyss of Language', p.206.

¹²³ WoD, p.171.

Short says of Milly's disavowal of experiences previous to the doctor's non-pronouncing – her now 'suddenly [being] able to put it to herself that that hadn't been a life' – that the 'awkward, groping sentence reflects the cogitations of Milly Theale and suggests the groping out of which her revelation "suddenly comes".¹²⁴ But the revelation itself actualises doubt, for where 'that hadn't been a life' leaves Milly's will on a note of mere refusal, the subsequent assertion – '[t]his present kind of thing therefore might be' –¹²⁵ keeps to the promise of being ambiguous about its doubleness. Like the many-refracting passers-by who could be at once many and one, seen and not seen, so this striking rhythmic assertion pretends to an order (it organises into a pentameter, though one in which the stresses are tellingly scrambled) hedged by its own taxonomies (is this description of a 'kind of thing' an attempt at naming or a refusal to name?; does the introduction of a colloquialism mimic a feeling that Milly's thought has stumbled even as it expresses a wish away from the pattern of thinking that had done the stumbling?) which finalises in the optative's refusal to finalise, and the feminine ending through which 'might be' gets articulated. The metre, in fact, maintains a conviction about such doubtfulness, as if hearing the other valency of 'might' (as in strength) in the primary hedge this version of 'might' encourages. Responding to Kate's 'frank, "Well, what?"', Milly invokes 'the famous will-power she had heard about, read about, and which was what her medical adviser had mainly thrown her back on' – only to articulate, in not obviously hardy terms, the epithet: "'Oh, it's all right. He's lovely'".¹²⁶ Milly may have 'heard about' and 'read about' the idea of willpower from her author's brother, who had talked of the 'genuine option' his notion of 'will' represented as that constituting 'the decision between two hypotheses'.¹²⁷ Yet in choosing so to believe, Milly is in fact siding with a radical undecidability that, in not taking sides, coheres with the deferral of commitment Emerson describes; she refuses to see even death sentences as final ones.

If I cannot accept Teahan's suggestion that a failure fully to represent Milly really *is* a problem as far as the novel's ethics are concerned, it is because I have wanted to say that it is in her being fully represented that such ethics are destroyed. Milly, in Book Fourth, and trying to ascertain Kate's motives, stumbles in looking for a word to replace the contested 'volage' – a pause, marked by an em-dash, which occasions Susan Stringham's 'Well?'. Susan, the narrator proceeds to tell us,

¹²⁴ Short, 'The Sentence Structure of Henry James', pp.74-5.

¹²⁵ WoD, p.174.

¹²⁶ WoD, p.179.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p.458.

‘hadn’t filled out her idea, but neither, it seemed, could Milly’.¹²⁸ Kate, by contrast, as Milly and Susie subsequently agree, ‘looks far ahead’.¹²⁹ It is a grim moment of foreshadowing that speaks of the mistake of genre Susan and Milly are making, for the progress of the novel makes it clear that they do not have time or space for such parenthetical searching. Part of the effect of Kate’s increasing control of the narrative, indeed, is to make Milly cohere to her own literalism, a change registered by Milly’s coming to occupy chambers very similar to Kate’s earlier lookout. In Venice, and so cocooned in her palazzo’s eyrie, Milly, we are told, ‘saw that neither Lancaster Gate was what New York took it for, nor New York what Lancaster Gate fondly fancied it in coquetting with the plan of a series of American visits’.¹³⁰ The revelation should come as a surprise to readers who have witnessed the full awareness, in Milly, that this was ever so, and that its contrary was worth the learning. That this, indeed, is the same Milly who, by profiting in like manner from her ‘unused margin’, has proved herself able to exploit that inch’s deviation which has saved her as a textual entity from ever being set by the constricting likeness of the character that has been planned for her, and who has gained much – developmentally, and by simple pleasure – from the promise of these now altogether depredated ‘fond fancies’, necessitates an adjustment commensurate with her own increasing retreat into the palazzo, and the limited frequency of her appearances in the novel’s remainder.

Yet if the change has been foregrounded by her corresponding change of scene, it has been sponsored also by an increasing commingling of her metaphorical reserves with Kate’s aphoristic ones. It is not sociability but, by Book Seventh, and up in her Venetian palazzo, the ‘sweet taste of solitude’ that has enabled Milly’s dubiously altered perception of *The International Theme*:¹³¹ a finding against wasted meaning that sees her shun company (those ‘[v]oices’ which had ‘surrounded her for weeks’)¹³² and value instead a ‘stillness’ by which ‘things spoke to her in penetration’.¹³³ The echo of that editorialising solitude that had seen Kate discredit ‘irrelevant sounds’ is clear: that Milly comes by this anti-Jamesian lesson gradually, and with the unfolding of the plot, gives a supplementary significance to Philip Horne’s claim that both she and Isabel Archer issued from the

¹²⁸ Wod, p.141

¹²⁹ Ibid, p.142.

¹³⁰ Wod, p.304.

¹³¹ Ibid, p.303.

¹³² Ibid, p.303.

¹³³ Ibid, p.303.

same real-life prompt (in the person of Minny Temple).¹³⁴ For if *The Portrait of a Lady's* preface states the aim of placing 'the centre of the subject in the young woman's [Isabel's] own consciousness' and thence, centrifugally, of piling 'brick upon brick',¹³⁵ *The Wings of the Dove's* states that, as we have seen, of doing just the reverse: of coming at her by 'narrowing circumvallations', a compositional process whose inward march and representational mastery are enough to see to her crushing. James's words cast Isabel in the role of master-builder in the metaphor for which her novel's preface is most famous: that of the 'house of fiction',¹³⁶ which invokes a stable structure only to dissolve that structure's boundaries: the house, on peering closely, has not 'one window, but a million',¹³⁷ its structures not fixed but boundless. *The Wings of the Dove's* preface, conversely, casts Milly as powerless to stop a metaphor whose boundaries are literal and encroaching.

Kate's narrativizing model registers this inward march by the increasing lack of freshness her use of language yields; as if James's novel were emphasising how little language can be made to do within the limits Kate has set. For in relating to Densher in the private manner of a 'small floating island', Kate extracts herself and Densher from the more general drama of 'relations'; a term which Sharon Cameron correctly suggests James uses 'abstractly',¹³⁸ if only because such a system of not naming does justice to the taxonomic *mélange* social relations surely involve. Categorical discreteness losing out when the social world is in full swing – in Book Fifth's great social gathering in Matcham, described twice as a 'parenthesis',¹³⁹ the novel offers a now familiar picture in which '[t]he elements melted together' –¹⁴⁰ Densher's commitment to Kate's linguistic resources demonstrates the diminishing returns that are that limit's corollary. At Matcham, Milly had noticed Kate's ability 'to show as a beautiful stranger, to cut her connexions and lose her identity' –¹⁴¹ another hark-back to the preface to *The American*, which had warned against the temptation 'insidiously to cut the cable' relating experience to its literary representation.¹⁴² The novel relates the loss of this social connection to an increasingly unyielding language-use by allowing us to trace the passage of a word with beginnings in Kate and Densher's private context and then restated in a more general one: that is, in

¹³⁴ Philip Horne, *Henry James and Revision: The New York Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.198.

¹³⁵ HJLC2, p.1083.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.1075.

¹³⁷ Ibid, p.1075.

¹³⁸ Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1991), p.36.

¹³⁹ WoD, p.145.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.144.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.146.

¹⁴² HJLC2, p.1064.

Kate's response, in Book Second (the section which gives fullest exposition to their furtive courtship), to Densher's wish that she should have 'personal happiness':¹⁴³ in the exclamation (though uttered 'simply and quietly'), "'Darling!'"¹⁴⁴ By Book Fifth, Kate's repeated use of the word has come to speak of her impatience with the suggestive and figurative plane at which Milly would have left Sir Luke's judgement of her condition: "But don't you ask a good deal, darling, in proportion to what you give?"¹⁴⁵ Milly, of course, has not 'asked' for anything except 'discretion' (she has only asked, that is, that she might not be asked);¹⁴⁶ a context significant in that it presages the narrative intrusiveness Kate's later rebuff to Milly's suggestion that one gets to London by induction ironically actualises and disproves. The repetition of 'darling' – a word starting life as a validation of noble intentions against accepting society's terms – becoming in this way so much meretricious verbal currency, enforces the model Kate proposes instead for the way in which society really *is* arrived at conceptually: like, that is, a 'monster' one appreciates only once one is 'enabled to walk all round it'.¹⁴⁷

Since Aunt Maud had herself been described in Book Second as driving 'round [the] prospect' of Densher and Kate just as 'the principal lady at the circus drives round the ring',¹⁴⁸ Kate's conceptual model confirms an acceptance of society's 'smothered irony' as her own. Yet if her diminished resourcefulness stages the movement from a freshness of style to what Densher detects in the last book as that quality that had meant their 'tone – he scarcely knew what to call it – had never been so bland',¹⁴⁹ Densher's is a style wherein such developments provide a grimmer case to monitor: it has never actualised in the first place. On the one hand, he is assuredly the stimulus for Milly's playful self-fashioning, powered by the parenthetical metaphor we have already seen, in which 'her unused margin as an American girl' bespeaks an ironic access to 'reserves of spontaneity [...] so that all this cash in hand could now seek employment'.¹⁵⁰ These words, in turn, anticipate William James's injunction to his readers to 'bring out of each word its practical cash-value', which, in its accompanying enjoinder to set those words 'within the stream of your experience',¹⁵¹ tell of a

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.52.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.52.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.162.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p.161.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.192.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p.45.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.478.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p.205.

¹⁵¹ William James, *Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York, NY: Library of America, 1987), p.509.

social function to this exchange, intimately related to these words' function within the world. Yet on the other, Milly's experiments happen *despite* their prompt: for it is just this 'cash in hand' that Densher lacks. Described, when we first meet him in Book Second, as having a 'want of means – of means sufficient for any one but himself',¹⁵² the novel progressively associates such material questions of economy with questions of style: appropriately, since Densher's want of means results from employment in a kind of writing the narrative voice is at rare pains to prove as lesser than its own.

Indeed, despite the novel's usually contained and detached narratological procedures, and despite the accretion and accumulation of data and event which the novel's structure registers, Densher's style (or lack of one) provides a consistent spine of mediocrity to our apprehension of him; a mediocrity properly serving as the 'block' Leca reserves for Kate's lapidary narrative techniques. Capturing Densher's nervous self-affirmations about his own 'cleverness' in anticipation of his conference with Aunt Maud in Book Second,¹⁵³ the narrative voice takes a bracketed pause to express some distance from the reassurance even in pretending to bolster it: in describing that cleverness, the narrator notes, '[i]t wasn't, thank goodness, as if there weren't plenty of that "factor" (to use one of his great newspaper-words)'.¹⁵⁴ The brackets, of course, place all Densher's assurances in hazard, applying to the modifier 'great' contained within them as to the exclamatory 'thank goodness', tensely conditioned within a clause not allowing it typographic finality, without. Refusing to integrate the word within the text's main body becomes a way for the narrative voice to express distaste at the style that could produce it; a style that thus becomes an index of Densher's 'want of means', of his lacking 'cash-in-hand'. For that conference comes to make obvious that as far as Densher's means go (and they do not go far), they are not 'sufficient' even for himself: they bespeak, instead, a lack of those very 'reserves' that Milly has in textual abundance. Waiting in Aunt Maud's entertaining-rooms, and sensing in them a level of meaning akin to a grammar or to a syntax – her furniture is 'florid', the accumulated 'expression' of 'signs and symbols', while the 'huge heavy objects' ranged about Densher 'syllabled his hostess's story' –¹⁵⁵ Densher's own limited and circular movements ('he walked to and fro')¹⁵⁶ come to assume their own counterpart in his limited style.

¹⁵² WoD, p.45.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p.54.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.54.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.55.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.55.

That style is summarised by a feeling of entrapment caused by the immensity of his surroundings, an immensity placing his own paucity in stark contrast. ‘He found himself’, recounts the narrator, ‘even facing the thought that he had nothing to fall back on’;¹⁵⁷ a moment of afflatus (‘facing the thought’) describing its own limit, surprising Densher externally like the discovery of a wall. And if the reflexive disembodiment which the verb signals (‘[h]e found himself’) instigates a sense in which Densher’s use of language takes place at someone else’s behest, then the particularly entrapping function of this language has been to imagine no alternative lexical fund that might be drawn upon to move him in the opposite direction. ‘[H]e was in the cage of the lioness without his whip – the whip, in a word, of a supply of proper retorts’;¹⁵⁸ the final confirmation of Aunt Maud’s narrative achievement has been both to rob Densher of the means of besting her, and to persuade him that the only way of besting her is via a ready supply of aphorisms.

In Book Ninth, and towards the novel’s end, as Milly, having heard about Kate and Densher’s plot, descends into grief and illness, her condition is described by Susan Stringham in spatially figurative terms: Milly has, as Stringham puts it, ‘turned her face to the wall’.¹⁵⁹ This descent is an echo of Hermann Melville’s ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’, whose titular character actualises his famous refusal, ‘I would prefer not to’, in the prison-yard where the narrator finally encounters him, ‘his face towards a high wall’.¹⁶⁰ Milly’s death, then, coming at the expense of Emerson’s metaphors, entails her no longer seeing walls as a superable challenge: she has become a literalist about the kinds of enclosure Kate, and Maud before her, have determined. The boundaries set by Densher’s language function similarly as a perceptive wall, a block to the development of his style: a fact the more remarkable as the novel progresses, and so ostensibly affords Densher numerous chances to register in prose its tumultuous shifts. Yet his style resists such shifts, failing to meet the moment of them; as in Book Sixth, in which the potential for change which his competing affections for Milly might register are quickly organised back into a journalistic diction, again with a thematic detour steered by the narrator. Milly’s arrival in London proving ‘grist to his scribbling mill, matter for his journalising hand’;¹⁶¹ Densher works her up into a series of clichés about America (she is someone ‘to whom spangles or spots of any sufficiently marked sort could be loudly enough predicated’)

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p.55.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p.55.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p.394.

¹⁶⁰ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998), p.32.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p.238.

which are swiftly undermined by the narrative voice: ‘So he judged at least, within his limits’.¹⁶² It is the limits, again, of his pen (‘Oh his pen!’, as the narrator simply exclaims in Book Sixth)¹⁶³ that cause the narrator to intervene most outrageously in Book Tenth, when Densher is denied his chance to register the complicated grief he feels at Milly’s death. For in recalling the moment of having received news of Milly’s death from Susan Stringham, the narrative voice interrupts once more to stress Densher’s preference for journalese: his communication with Stringham ‘already presenting itself to him as a feature – as a factor, he would have said in his newspaper’,¹⁶⁴ as if how Densher registers the moment in writing might have a critically negative bearing on his character to undo the feeling of sympathy the texture of the novel might otherwise be inclined to lend the moment.

But then style, as I have been trying to say, *is* an index of the morality of the characters in this novel, and if these moments of distance between narrative voice and fictional subject refuse validity in Leo Bersani’s extraordinary claim that the novel presents Densher and James as ‘fused into a single awareness’,¹⁶⁵ the comparison is at least useful in suggesting Densher to incarnate a kind of parable about bad writing, a Jamesian authorial avatar whose procedures develop in exact reverse to the expansiveness on which James, in his critical persona, insists. The childhood of Densher being so similar, in its peripatetic ecumenism, to that directed for the infant and adolescent James by Henry James, Sr. (‘his early years abroad, his Swiss schools, his German university’ being more or less a ‘catalogue’ of ‘foreign things’ to rival James’s own)¹⁶⁶ some parity of comparison is at least being suggested by the novel’s unusual investment in Densher’s stylistic development. Bersani’s claim, that it is via Densher’s consciousness that the narrative can ‘create the necessary dramatic material for further impressions’,¹⁶⁷ in investing Densher’s style with a narrative agency that is not its own, allows us to trace the novel’s means of showing that this is not so. The ascription of agency to Densher’s consciousness is rearticulated in Teahan’s much later study, which reads the ‘jerk’ of Milly’s letter into the fire at the novel’s close as equivalent to ‘a fall or slip from a foothold into an

¹⁶² Ibid, p.239.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p.234.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p.476.

¹⁶⁵ Leo Bersani, ‘The Narrator as Center in “The Wings of the Dove”’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 6.2 (Summer 1960), pp.131-144, p.132.

¹⁶⁶ WoD, p.66. This education, including enrolments in Swiss and German institutions, is detailed in Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), pp.92-95.

¹⁶⁷ Bersani, ‘The Narrator as Center’, p.133.

abyss', and reads in Densher's stylistic turns the motivating conditions for such a fall: 'Densher', she writes, 'finds himself on a "false footing" that threatens him with a fall into the abyss'.¹⁶⁸ Yet since there is in fact no act *less* consequential than this jerk – the letter gets burnt and still Densher stands to receive Milly's money, a reversal of the finale of that other Venice-text, *The Aspern Papers* (1888), where burning Jeffrey Aspern's letters is a critical act in every sense – Densher's style is appropriate to this inconsequentiality. Densher, in fact, stands at either end of James's metaphor of oscillation for which the parenthesis was supposed to compensate: too at large in London – where, 'his full parenthesis' being closed, he becomes 'once more but a sentence, of a sort, in the general text' –¹⁶⁹ he is too cramped in Venice, his diminishing resources resolving him in turns inward that mimic the repetitious commitments of Emerson's 'Compensation'. In Book Eighth:

It prompted in him certainly no quarrel with these things, but it made them as vivid as if they already flushed with success. It was before the flush of success that his heart beat almost to dread. The dread was but the dread of the happiness to be compassed; only that was in itself a symptom.¹⁷⁰

Densher's worry is pressured by a dominant overtone of dramatic irony: that the novel's real drama is to be found not in his having too much control, but in having none of it. As he turns about the diminished materials the lapidary closure of Leca's reifications leaves to him – as descriptions of these revolutions, that is, proliferate in his 'ma[king] the whole circuit thrice' or of his 'waiting on it, turning round and round it and making sure of it again from this side and that' –¹⁷¹ Densher bears out the disastrous effects of Kate's aphoristic predominance: 'always ready, as we say, with the last word'.¹⁷²

Responding to William James's criticism of the narratological structure of *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James chided his brother for the wrongheadedness of this distaste. 'Your reflections on the *W. of the D.*, e.g. greatly interest me, yet, after all, I don't know that I can very explicitly *meet* them', wrote Henry [with italics his]; before adding, as if meeting after all were possible, 'I should think you

¹⁶⁸ Teahan, 'The Abyss of Language', p.211.

¹⁶⁹ WoD, p.223.

¹⁷⁰ WoD, pp.333-334.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p.389; p.371.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.344.

might well fail of joy in it – for I certainly feel that it is, in its way, more & more, positive'.¹⁷³ One meets things, as one meets people, in James's novels, in those 'unused margins' which describe a space between two states, a form of sociability which *The Wings of the Dove*, in particular, makes harder to actualise as a certain non-Jamesian form of narrative wins out: one I have wanted to associate with the aphoristic. If James felt that his brother should reconsider his initial judgement, it is as much as to say that his novel's thematized and not reified lapidary model of narrative suppresses a pragmatist, parenthetical one: the very suppression of which becomes an argument for the philosophy it will not allow. The next chapter, in its analysis of the aphoristic practice of Wallace Stevens, will claim in that poet a writer of similar imaginative sympathies; yet who – in being able to find in that form a positive vehicle for the articulation of his pragmatist beliefs – managed instead to square the Emersonian circle.

¹⁷³ Henry James, *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 3: William and Henry: 1897-1910*, eds. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkely, ass. Bernice Grohskopf and Wilma Bradbeer (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1994), p.222.

Chapter Three

Pragmatist Aphorism: The Case of Wallace Stevens

There are some commentators who have found in Wallace Stevens's use of aphorism a vehicle presenting momentary clarity only nullified – be it in the progress of a poem or by the more obviously linear development of his collections of aphorisms – by subsequent and equivalent moments;¹ others, who have found in this pluralism the dramatization of the act of thinking which goes against the ready extractability of 'thought' the aphorism seems more traditionally to offer.² There are some who find in the aphorism a breakdown of will – some loss of nerve, that is, in the poetry's creative powers – which Stevens's poetic voice either feels or stages;³ others (establishing an uneasy synthesis of both positions) who have claimed to detect in the aphorism an indexical outlet for this breakdown for which biography alone can offer clues; as if only a sudden lapse in confidence on the part of poet and not just speaker could explain the baffling expense of energies the choice of aphorism instantiates.⁴ As supplement to all these scholarly positions – and in its own way faithful to the spirit of them – there are those who find in Stevens's most significant uses of the form no kind of aphorism at all;⁵ who, pretending to unravel its real workings in his use of it, would annex it to some other taxonomic category altogether.⁶

This last, which implies the possibility of ascribing to Stevens's use of aphorism no taxonomy at all, is faithful to a more general inclination to associate with Stevens tendencies from which this chapter does not depart. Instead, in line with Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff, it detects in Stevens's poetry just those 'provisionalising gestures' which in Robin Schulze's apt phrase constitute its

¹ Hannah Brooks-Motl, 'The Smallest Space: Lyric Aphorism in Contemporary Poetry', *Kenyon Review Online*, Spring 2013 < <https://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2013-spring/selections/hannah-brooks-motl-656342/> >.

² Beverly Coyle, 'An Anchorage of Thought: Defining the Role of Aphorism in Wallace Stevens' Poetry' *PMLA*, 91:2 (Mar., 1976), pp. 206-222, p.207.

³ See for former Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens's Longer Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp.17-18; for latter, Marjorie Perloff, 'Beyond "Adagia": Eccentric Design in Stevens' Poetry', *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 35.1 (Spring 2011), pp. 16-32, p.22.

⁴ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.158.

⁵ See B.J. Leggett, who considers 'the aphoristic and generalizing style' to have no place in Stevens's principal aesthetic preoccupation, that of abstraction, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p.18.

⁶ See Edward Ragg, whose analysis of Stevens's compositorial processes leads him to present certain of Stevens's aphorisms as if, their being the fruit of more provisional early entries, they had achieved only an accidental lapidarity. *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.23.

hallmarks: with its frequent hedges, temporizations, and contingent moods;⁷ moods which it will agree with Richard Poirier, Joan Richardson, Frank Lentricchia, Milton J. Bates and Jonathan Levin in associating with American pragmatism.⁸ It will depart from these readings in finding the aphorism in Stevens's handling not a vehicle of knowledge, but of creative possibility whose playful effects are set at work in the poems themselves; in finding the aphorism to set the drama of its effects within the line, and not by the subsequent transcendence of an obviously unpropitious form; and in finding, by the exertion of pressure Stevens's poetic voice always puts on the aphorism as he receives it, a central instrument in Stevens's practice of a pragmatist poetics. That the aphorism gets 'troped', in Richard Poirier's term for what he perceives Stevens only to be doing elsewhere – that is, by the practice of 'turning or changing the apparently given' –⁹ will be this chapter's insistent contention. The chapter will subsequently advance the case for an aphoristic residue in Stevens's practice residing in the substantive term whose primacy it asserts. Forcing us back to a reexamination of the validity of some of pragmatism's central claims – those arguing against, in William James's writing, a close attention to the substantive particle – the chapter will conclude by noticing in Stevens's use of aphorism, just as in his repetitive deployment of a series of keywords, 'programs for more work' that evince a pragmatism the more fertile for its growing out of barren soil.

'The spirit's own seduction': The aphoristic performing self.

Since I want to claim that Stevens's use of aphorism is a central strategy in his 'provisionalising gestures', I want to establish what those gestures are and why Stevens used them. Commentary on Stevens often detects a writing occupied, in Edward Allen's elegant summation, 'not by a thought, but by the *texture* of a thought' [*italics Allen's*];¹⁰ by musical moments which, in emphasizing sonic

⁷ Robin G. Schulze, *The Web of Friendship: Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p.105.

⁸ Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* and *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York, NY: Random House, 1987); Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); Jonathan Levin, 'Life in the Transitions: Emerson, William James, Wallace Stevens', *Arizona Quarterly*, 48.4 (Winter 1992), pp. 75-97; Joan Richardson, 'Learning Stevens's Language: The Will and the Weather', in John N. Serio and B.J. Leggett eds. *Teaching Wallace Stevens: Practical Essays* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

⁹ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.39.

¹⁰ Edward Allen, "'One Long, Unbroken, Constant Sound": Wireless Thinking and Lyric Tinkering in Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*', *Modernism/Modernity* 21.4 (November 2014), pp.919-936, p.930.

over propositional meaning, represent what James Guetti calls ‘noncognitive energies’.¹¹ And since these energies baffled or infuriated his critical contemporaries,¹² it is worth asking where the appeal for this supposed senselessness lay. An answer more instructive than his much-quoted thesis on the sonic element – that ‘above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds’ –¹³ is found in a letter Stevens wrote to Hi Simons in 1943 about hearing birdsong in his Connecticut garden:

There is a repetition of a sound, ké-ké, all over the place. Its monotony unites the separate sounds into one, as a number of faces become one, as all fates become a common fate, as all the bottles blown by a glass blower become one, and as all bishops grow to look alike, etc. In its monotony the sound ceased to be minstrelsy, as all the leaves are alike, all the birds in the leaves are alike; there is just one bird, a stone bird. In this monotony the desire for change creates change.[...] The change is an ingratiating one and intended to be so. When the sparrow begins calling be-thou: Bethou me [...] he expresses one’s own liking for the change; he invites attention from the summer grass; he mocks the wren, the jay, the robin. [...] In the face of death life asserts itself. Perhaps it makes an image out of the force with which it struggles to survive. Bethou is intended to be heard; it and ké-ké, which is inimical, are opposing sounds. Bethou is the spirit’s own seduction.¹⁴

The letter is, at the least, a riposte to those commentators, contemporary and subsequent, who have criticized the Stevensian poetic landscape as barren and depopulated, and thus as cosmetically engineering shortcuts to profundity.¹⁵ Instead, by this letter’s terms, the humdrum is a necessary precondition for assertions against itself, and the unpeopled landscape an obvious staging post for vividly reactive position-making. More significant is what this vividness is being enlisted for: and that is the individual’s assertion against the mass. It is the fear of being ‘just one bird’ that motivates the

¹¹ James Guetti, *Word-Music: The Aesthetic Aspect of Narrative Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1980), p.35.

¹² See Edmund Wilson, ‘Wallace Stevens and E.E. Cummings’, in Charles Doyle ed. *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1985), p.62, for the former, and William Empson, ‘Review’ in *ibid*, p.372, for the latter.

¹³ *CPP*, p.663.

¹⁴ *LWS*, pp.437-438.

¹⁵ See the positions of Bernard Bergonzi, Edmund Wilson and Mark Halliday as quoted in Lee Margaret Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2000), p.4.

sparrow in self-naming and in naming others, who are transformed from the petrification of a faceless whole to the varieties of wren, jay, and robin. The differentiation the letter dramatizes, from stonehood to selfhood, figures a coming-into-being articulated in aural terms. Not ‘mundanity’ but ‘monotony’ motors uniformity, artisanal as well as sacerdotal, and it is when the sparrow learns to sing a different song that it can make the distinction. This new song, indeed, sounds exactly like the informal second person of Shakespearean theatre, and is itself glossed by Stevens in the letter’s margin as ‘tutoyez-moi’:¹⁶ when the sparrow asks to be ‘bethoud’, he is asking for the distinctiveness of character from chorus.

‘Intended to be heard’, ‘ingratiating [...] and intended to be so’: Stevens’s designation conveys an almost ascetic disregard for whatever beauty an earlier dispensation has been inclined to see in music. Vendler, seeming to take note of Stevens’s bloodless opportunism, his obvious interest in a sonic sense for the possibilities it makes contingently available (and not for the sounds in themselves), figures this interest pessimistically. Though she lends the letter an elegant summa – at issue is ‘the improvisation of newness in decline’ –¹⁷ her reading of this letter in conjunction with one, of two weeks previously, which had proved more pessimistic about the possibilities of distinguishing from the described monotony, argues implicitly against her effects. For that ‘this new sound he [the sparrow] makes has in it the potential for monotony just as surely as did the previous sounds’¹⁸ is just what is most enlivening about the dynamic Stevens details; and what most singularly guarantees its chances for renewal.

In valuing the sparrow’s realization of its own personhood, Stevens’s letter also inflects his ‘Mozart, 1935’ (1936)¹⁹. That poem features a speaker instructing a pianist to play the piano despite the fraught and turbulent upheavals occurring just outside: an enjoinder rightly called ‘outrageous’ by Angela Leighton.²⁰ Part of this outrageousness consists in its refusal to particularise the world it refuses, neglecting to name this world except by a pluralizing and indefinite vagueness. ‘If they throw stones upon the roof / While you practice arpeggios’, runs the poem’s second stanza:

¹⁶ LWS, p.438.

¹⁷ Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’s Longer Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.176.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise stated, all dates refer to date of publication.

²⁰ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.175.

It is because they carry down the stairs
A body in rags.
Be seated at the piano.²¹

The mere difference of specificity (*they* throw'; *they* carry'; *a* body' versus the addressee's 'the piano') names a difference of actualization that connects to the difference between exterior and unfolding action – closer to a commotion than to a traceable event – and promised performance. This the poem attempts both to keep vivid by its notable imitations (the contrast, again, between the outside 'cries' and the piano's elaborated sounds, 'its hoo-hoo-hoo, / Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic', is stark),²² and to postpone by the series of descriptors (the music, from consisting of 'practiced' exercises, moves a degree further from accomplishment by the poem's suggestion that the pianist has not even sat down) which embed the piano-playing within an atmosphere of prolepsis. A misleading allusion to Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' sponsors Alan Filreis in finding in the poem's 'be thou' a representative function ("“be thou / *The voice*” of the people', he extraordinarily ventriloquises (with italics his))²³; and Leighton a tendency to modernist impersonality against contemporary politics.²⁴ Yet Shelley's poem, whose 'thou' yokes personhood to the 'tumult' of its 'mighty harmonies', fits poorly with Stevens's, which clearly wants to contrast the temporally cyclical – 'The snow is falling' – with the individual assertiveness that would have the pianist 'Strike the piercing chord'.²⁵ That 'thou' is finally used to insist on a performance the poem defers ('Be seated, thou')²⁶ looks forward to Stevens's letter in answer to the pessimism Vendler detects there: as if this process were not evidence of declining powers but a necessary precondition for asserting them.

William Empson found that Stevens, 'growing up in the hey-day of Oscar Wilde, was perhaps more influenced by him than by Whitman',²⁷ yet what I have claimed as the rationale for Stevens's musicality sheds aestheticist resonances only to accumulate American, even especially

²¹ CPP, p.107.

²² Ibid, p.107.

²³ Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.214.

²⁴ Leighton, *On Form*, p.175.

²⁵ CPP, p.107.

²⁶ Ibid, p.108.

²⁷ Empson, 'Review', pp.371-372.

Whitmanian ones. For Richard Poirier, Stevens's self-reflexive artistry takes in 'pacing, economies, juxtapositions, aggregations of tone, the whole conduct of the shaping presence'; and is the organizing principle behind what he calls the 'performing self'.²⁸ This self is essential to what Poirier says about the Emersonian use of voice, which exists, not in 'a consistently structured moral or psychological self', but 'on the periphery of such a self, wondering what it might be like, playing with its possibilities, joking with and about it [...] or, as Walt Whitman phrases it, "both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it"'.²⁹ 'It's performance that matters', argues Poirier, and since the measure of performance is how it shapes what materials it has – the least obviously propitious the better – such performance will often involve 'know[ing] how to make the most out of a diminished thing'.³⁰ If Stevens's approach to aurality has been pragmatic in the colloquial sense – it is an effect of whatever materials have proved available – it has been pragmatist also in the philosophical one. The 'ké-ké' letter, with its dynamic of resourcefulness in adversity, and its figuration of a voice at once inhabited and disembodied, offers the chance to see how a pragmatist poetics sponsors even those moments in Stevens which seem to want to abandon propositional import altogether.

The aphorism, a form whose historical practice leaves a trail of pride in its own diminishment,³¹ offers another, though this is not how it has generally been read. Beverly Coyle, who contributed the first sustained studies of aphorism in Stevens's poetry, reads Stevens as an aphoristic writer who came to the form by traditional means: a heritage of 'dictionaries and literary handbooks' stretching back to Bacon, to which Stevens's commonplace books and aphoristic note-keeping pay testament, and to which heritage his main innovation was not 'an emphasis upon content' but 'an emphasis on the formulation' of this content.³² These formulaic innovations, however, are a means not of making the aphorisms more literary but of making them more convincing vehicles of truth. '[W]ord choice' and 'tone', for Coyle, contribute to a 'sense that what has been said is all that need or can be said', for which judgement Coyle recruits Auden: 'The

²⁸ Poirier, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Everyday Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), pp.86-87.

²⁹ Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature*, p.75.

³⁰ Poirier, *Performing Self*, p.97.

³¹ See Masud's amusing treatment of Karl Kraus in 'Aphorism Exploded', p.387.

³² Beverly Coyle, *A Thought to be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry* (Epping: Bowker Publishing Company, 1983), pp.2-3.

aphorist does not argue or explain, he asserts; and implicit in his assertion is a conviction that he is wiser or more intelligent than his readers'.³³

In this vein, Coyle holds a journal entry of Stevens's in 1906 to demonstrate his reception of the aphorism as purveyor of truth. Stevens notes that 'there are no end of gnomes that might influence people – but do not':

When you first feel the truth of, say, an epigram, you feel like making it a rule of conduct. But this one is displaced by that, and things go on in their accustomed way. There is one pleasure in this volatile morality: the day you believe in chastity, poverty and obedience, you are charmed to discover what a monk you have always been – the monk is suddenly revealed like a spirit in a wood; the day you turn Ibsenist, you confess that, after all, you always were an Ibsenist, without knowing it. So you come to believe in yourself, and in your creed.³⁴

For Coyle, the entry 'clarifies Stevens's love for the "feel of truth" in aphorism', despite 'his belief that such truth is tentative'.³⁵ The dynamic at work, for Coyle, is that of 'a momentary hold on an aspect of experience through the power of his own expression',³⁶ a dynamic in which a truth once arrived at will give way to another: when this carries over into his poems, Coyle argues, the aphorism's 'closural techniques' are 'not enough to secure full closure',³⁷ and this early entry, for Coyle, reveals why they never could. Aphorism, according to this interpretation, is a temporary truth-vehicle, and amidst the initial despondency of Stevens's entry is the consolation in this 'volatile morality': that the aphorism-reader may believe in what the aphorism is setting down, if only for a little time.

But Stevens's despondency reveals another dynamic at work here – one at odds with the aphorism as tool of instruction. For what he is in fact discovering is not that aphorisms can be turned into temporary 'rules of conduct', but that they cannot. When he does read in this way, he is

³³ Ibid, p.10.

³⁴ *LWS*, p.91.

³⁵ Beverly Coyle, 'An Anchorage of Thought', p.207.

³⁶ Ibid, p.207.

³⁷ Coyle, *A Thought to be Rehearsed*, p.48.

let down by the sameness of events – a sameness strikingly similar to the monotony from which the sparrow was later to draw inspiration. ‘Things go on in their accustomed way’, writes Stevens: aphorisms, read as truth, have not proved a counter to reality, but have contributed to it, and Stevens’s error was the false seduction of thinking they could serve any other function. The sameness Stevens presents can be pierced only when morality is given a proper ‘volatility’: when it is considered, that is, as something not true, but interesting. Instead of any renewed seriousness of purpose that might accompany religious revelation, Stevens is ‘charmed’ by the idea of religious revelation; instead of seeing God, he sees himself outside himself, in the habit of a monk. If this seems like a reading that draws on the language of performance, it is because that is the full nature of the revelation Coyle truncates: for the sentences following collaborate in the impression of a change in perception happening entirely at the level of artifice: ‘There is a perfect rout of characters in every man – and every man is like an actor’s trunk, full of strange creatures, new + old. But an actor and his trunk are two different things’.³⁸ The several selves revealed at the end of the letter, then – the several ‘characters’ who make up the performance of life – are the opposite of the several moral truths that are so forgettable as neither to pierce the sameness of reality nor to merit any elaboration in this passage. Coyle’s mistake is to suppose that the monk and the Ibsenist are what Stevens means by ‘rules of conduct’, when in fact they represent two examples of what, alternatively, can be interesting performative possibilities. And if the closing line brings a new note of pessimism, it is only to posit the difference between the act of performance and the tools the actor has used to get there: Stevens knows, with the sparrow, that every performance dries up in the end if it lingers too long over the same material.

Part of the appeal of the aphoristic performance, for Stevens, is a corralling of perception around a single compelling idea. Entertaining the possibility of monkhood, ‘you are charmed to discover what a monk you have always been’; ‘turn[ing] Ibsenist, you confess that, after all, you always were an Ibsenist’. The reduced perceptive lens aphorism affords also affords the playing out of reality according to one exaggerated stylistic quirk; to see yourself in an altered costume and be in it and charmed by it as if a spectator at the same time. Three years later, this quirk would take the shape of performance itself. In a letter to Elsie Moll, Stevens describes going through his notebook, and finding Hamlet’s ‘what a piece of work is a man!’ ‘particularly serviceable to me now’. It is

³⁸ LWS, p.91.

a discovery [...] that greatly increases my interest in men and women. One might say that their appearances are like curtains, fair and unfair; the stage is behind – the comedy, and tragedy. The curtain had never before been so vividly lifted, at least for me; and my rambles through the streets have been excursions full of amateur yet thrilling penetration.³⁹

Wilde's Vivian, as we have seen, expressed his author's nervousness about removing aphorisms from their proper context (a practice Wilde ensured could not be done to him). Whatever the bad faith of his caution, Vivian's words throw into relief Stevens's willfully instrumental reading: the selection of an aphorism out of a scene in which Hamlet has admitted himself to be 'mad north-north-west'.⁴⁰ Stevens would seem from this comparison to be a perversely naïve reader, irresponsibly culling phrases out of a context which should prevent such 'serviceability'.

Yet such instrumental usefulness as that word implies happens entirely at the level of artifice. The aphorism, far from making reality any truer, has served the function instead of making it more theatrical. Discovering that man is 'a piece of work' allows Stevens to see people and creatures in theatrical terms – for their 'comedy, and tragedy'. If people do not immediately give up their secrets, it is because, in an inversion of the proverbial truth that performance masks real depth, they spend their lives themselves as 'curtains' with the stage behind – the knowledge that behind this concealment is a performance allows for a 'penetration' that is in inverse proportion again to received wisdom: the deeper he goes, the more theatrical people reveal themselves to be. And this discovery, far from depressing him, instead 'greatly increases [his] interest in men and women': it enables aesthetic categorization of 'fair and unfair', enables the attendant dramatic distinctions of 'comedy, and tragedy', and ushers in a 'thrilling[ness]' and 'vivid[ness]' that suggest these hitherto familiar creatures have been brought to life for the first time. Vividness springs from interest: elsewhere in the same letter, Stevens had asked of the epigram 'The greatest pleasure is to do a good action by stealth, and have it found out by accident', 'could any true thing be more amusing?'.⁴¹ Between truth and amusement it is clear which criterion Stevens holds most salient.

³⁹ Ibid, pp.143-144.

⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2007), p.261.

⁴¹ LWS, p.143.

But this is a self-knowing and self-delighting performance too, a fact to which the interlarded expository descriptive writing attests: the sense of the discovery the aphorism affords as being ‘serviceable’, the registering of his increased interest, and the self-reflexivity which comes of consciously reading people through his ‘excursions’ with this one frame of perception in mind, suggest a performance both inhabited and artificially worn: as if Stevens can see himself seeing and still profit from the performance in the first degree.⁴² His ‘On the Road Home’ (1942) reveals this dynamic thirty-three years later. That poem is a cause-and-effect demonstration of the generative implications aphorism can have for this kind of performance. The four aphorisms the poem sets apart, typographically, in quoted speech, serve as motors for the perceptive possibilities Stevens’s speaker and his addressee live out:

It was when I said,
 “There is no such thing as the truth”,
 That the grapes seemed fatter.
 The fox ran out of his hole.⁴³

Stevens’s speaker recalls dismissing truth by way of a form whose history had involved its functioning as a shepherding device precisely for truth’s ends – the antiphrastic function, of content seeming to rebel against form, means, suddenly, that the world is animated and brought into focus: ordinary foodstuffs seem more appealing; the natural world runs havoc. The speaker knows that the cause of this commotion has been his words, to which he draws a deictic – and definitive – attention, enhanced by the apposition rendered in the expletive beginning: ‘It was when I said’. The freedom that comes from dismissing truth carries an Adamic sense of discovery; of creativity instigated as soon as knowledge ends. If the words claimed by speaker and addressee have altered reality, their performance involves seeing this alteration happening and being in it at the same time.

The subsequent proliferation of aphorisms only reinforces the transforming power of the characters’ words. When the speaker’s addressee provides their own variation on his aphorism –

⁴² See, for her discussion relating this theatrical conception of character to aurality, Fiona Green, ‘Form in Modernist Poetry’, in Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins eds. *A History of Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.33-4.

⁴³ CPP, p.186.

“‘There are many truths, / But they are not parts of a truth’” – Stevens represents an equivalent causal definitiveness of phrase and event:

Then the tree, at night, began to change,

Smoking through green and smoking blue.

We were two figures in a wood.

We said we stood alone.⁴⁴

It has taken the phrase to be uttered for a fuller descriptive context to be realized: for the first time we are told that the scene takes place at night. Yet it becomes stranger exactly as it shifts into focus: even, that is, as it allows itself to become a ‘scene’ (or perhaps a picture) at all. The aphorism has allowed self-perception of a distancing sort, as the speaker’s moment of clarity involves his being able to see the two of them radially, as representational beings. ‘We were two figures in a wood’, the speaker understands, and this realization provides a further understanding – the ability to name and to have that naming stand for a renewed reality: ‘We said we stood alone’. This phrasal coming-into-being involves at first a reduction of the tree to the first principles of its colour-element (its representation as green) into a representationally impossible blue. It is in fact as if he sees the scene of which he is a part as an abstract painting, disclosing strangely mediated colours; and the non-discrete appearance these colours have as they range about the colour-scale – ‘smoking through green’ – suggest a smudging effect, as if the speaker has brought the landscape right into the process of creation, looking from one side of a palette to another.⁴⁵

Despite this distancing, the scene only becomes more animated: as the speaker and addressee continue to exchange aphorisms on truth – aphorisms in favour of sense over truth-seeking (“‘The world must be measured by eye’”) or against the claims of truth-finding even as given by esteemed philosophical forbears (“‘The idols have seen lots of poverty, / Snakes and gold and lice, / But not the truth’”) –⁴⁶ reality continues to become the superlative version of itself that the ‘fatter’ grapes had promised:

⁴⁴ CPP, p.186.

⁴⁵ See, for Stevens’s relationship to painting, Glen MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁴⁶ CPP, p.186.

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
And longest, the night was roundest,
The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
Closest and strongest.⁴⁷

Pictorial distance ('the night was roundest') and sensory feeling ('the fragrance of the autumn warmest') as well as proximity to the events described ('Closest and strongest') commingle in this picture of proximal and distal twinning, where what is artificial has given the greatest sense possible of what it feels like to be alive at the present time. This is aphorism as phenomenological instigator: a vehicle not for truth, but for interesting perceptual possibilities.

Aphorism becomes a means, then, not only of affirming performance, but of enabling surprises of its own. All four aphorisms in the poem work explicitly against received wisdom – but this is not, in the traditional way of aphorism, with a view to overturning such wisdom in order to arrive at a new philosophical precept. Instead, the aphorisms Stevens uses are a means of enlivening reality through the entertainment of a fiction – of enlivening reality, that is, against what is settled, true, and thus mundane. In this, they carry out Stevens's own interpretation of James's 'will to believe': the thesis that held it permissible to believe in a proposition if it had not been logically discounted. Stevens's reading, as he explained in *Adagia*, went one step further still; to encompass, that is, the full effects of a proposition the actor knows to be false.⁴⁸ 'The final belief', argued Stevens, 'is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly'.⁴⁹ A truth enjoyed rather than valued philosophically; a knowledge that something is a fiction that one nonetheless believes in willingly: this is exactly what Stevens's performance of aphorism – with its emphasis of being in the performance and delighting in it as if from outside – has been always doing.

In 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' (1923), Stevens's speaker had admitted God as only one of these (ultimately unpersuasive) potential fictions – as had Stevens when speaking in his

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.186.

⁴⁸ Milton J. Bates makes the connection between this aphorism and James's text in *Wallace Stevens*, pp.205-206.

⁴⁹ CPP, p.903.

own voice in *Adagia* (1956), with the not necessarily atheist assertion that ‘God is a postulate of the ego’.⁵⁰ ‘On the Road Home’ makes a nod in its third stanza to a previous poem, the God-postulating sixth section of ‘The Man with a Blue Guitar’ (1937), in which God and artifice are again compared: the tune the guitarist plays is

Perceived in a final atmosphere;

For a moment final, in the way

The thinking of art seems final when

The thinking of god is smoky dew.⁵¹

Such finality as is achieved is only possible as a persuasive fiction – when the idea has not fixed itself, when it continues to be ‘smoky’, hazy and unclear: when it is not final at all. Notwithstanding the minor lexical variation that has taken place from ‘Man With the Blue Guitar’ to ‘On the Road Home’ – from the adjectival ‘smoky’ to the verbal ‘smoking’ – the collocational assonance (‘smoky dew’ to ‘smoking blue’) reiterates the persuasive power of fictions that have not settled; ones providing the greatest potential for the artist to perform their own ‘shaping presence’ on them.

How to keep things smoky – how, paradoxically, to have clarity of perception enhanced by necessarily unsettled materials, and thus leave room enough for the poet to perform this shaping work – is central to Stevens’s epistolary persona. A letter to Elsie Moll in April 1907, in which he goes through the *bric-à-bric* assemblage of his literary acquisitions once again, shows him delighted by Matthew Arnold’s *Notebooks* – a volume ‘made up of quotations jotted down by him from day to day, and of lists of books to be read at various times’, and also a ‘volume of lectures on Greek subjects’,⁵² which leads him to expound on the importance of the merely partial knowledge these jottings provide:

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.910.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.137.

⁵² LWS, p.101.

The impression of Greece is one of the purest things in the world. It is not a thing, however, that you get from any one book, but from fragments of poetry that have been preserved, and from statues and ruins, and a thousand things, all building up in the mind a noble conception of a pagan world under a blue sky, still standing erect in remote sunshine.⁵³

The elision of subjects the letter makes – from Arnold’s ‘quotations jotted down’ to ‘the fragments of poetry’ left by the Greeks – establishes a connection between aphoristic form and a necessary saving vagueness. Not Greece, but the ‘impression of Greece’ has a purity in this depiction, a purity dependent on its not being sullied by more comprehensive contexts. ‘One book’ would establish an endpoint – many fragments leave ‘the mind’ to set at work on its own extrapolation, to stop this ‘impression’ from being hampered by the real and the historical; to keep it, not explained and brought closer to modern lived experience, but existing rather in a world that is ‘remote’: a world that, sublimated into a ‘conception’ of the human mind, and thus rendered pictorial in the manner of ‘On the Road Home’ (‘under a blue sky’), is safe for literary artifice, an effect the use of the word ‘purity’, for Stevens often associated with the expressly aestheticist collocation ‘pure poetry’, only focuses.

Stevens’s letter recalls William James’s argument, in *Pragmatism*, against ‘solving names’: words, James elaborates, which ensure ‘[y]ou can rest when you have them’.⁵⁴ The implied adherence is reissued in a letter Stevens wrote at the end of his career, in which he recalls having previously enjoyed Arnold’s ‘collection of aphorisms’, yet finds himself disappointed by a recently-published, more comprehensive edition of the *Notebooks*. ‘One good saying’, he complains of the book, ‘is a great deal; but ten good sayings are not worth anything at all’.⁵⁵ Though, as he notes in this letter, his tastes have changed (‘I don’t belong to that church anymore’, he writes of Arnold),⁵⁶ this second letter represents a remarkable continuity of attitude. The dynamic at work – both in his taste for Arnold and in his ultimate dissatisfaction with him – attests to a preference for a vagueness and an

⁵³ Ibid, p.101.

⁵⁴ William James, *Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York, NY: Library of America, 1987). p.509.

⁵⁵ LWS, p.780.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.780.

incompleteness of available materials that, paradoxically, enhances clarity; a vagueness that ensures the poet can put the greatest pressure on his materials, and get to work.

James is not the only pragmatist presence hovering about Stevens's letters. Indeed, if an aesthetics of vagueness is as important to Henry David Thoreau as it is to James,⁵⁷ then Emerson, too, had argued for the necessity of the individual's putting his own stamp on history by productively ignoring it. 'Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself, – must go over the whole ground', argued Emerson in 'History' (1841): 'Ferguson discovered many things in astronomy which had long been known. The better for him'.⁵⁸ Not the least debt, in fact, is in the Emersonian legacy of troping: what Poirier calls 'turning or changing the apparently given',⁵⁹ nudging or shuffling words out of their found meanings and contexts into surprising new usages, setting them at work, as James put it, 'within the stream of your experience'.⁶⁰ And just as the troping of Greece has been made possible by a studied lack of interest in Greek culture as it really existed, so has the troping of Hamlet's words been made possible by history itself; the idea of man as a piece of work – the work of a creator – gaining rather than shedding its capacity to shock by the advance of secularism. That Stevens has been able to invest Hamlet's nostrum with a genuinely new revelatory import – and be delighted at the notion that people might be more artificial than at first appearance – suggests how much he was willing to accommodate aphorism within that aesthetics of troping that Poirier correctly identifies for his poetry's watchword. Yet, as I will now show, the chief exponents of Stevens's poetry as incarnating pragmatism, just as those who, with less partisanship, characterize it by its temporizing dodges and playful hedges, have wanted to treat the aphorism as the exception to these procedures rather than their rule. I will show in the following section that the aphorism as practiced (just as the aphorism here theorized) participates in that provisionality found elsewhere in Stevens's poetry: and that the claims made for aphorism as a form betokening fixity rely on scholarly assumptions inappropriate to Stevens's effects.

The aphoristic hedge: about 'about'.

⁵⁷ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.85.

⁵⁸ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.240.

⁵⁹ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.39.

⁶⁰ James, *Writings, 1902-1910*, p.509.

If aphorism claims its history in the instruction manuals Coyle foregrounds, it is largely owing to its having started life as what Frank Doggett calls, in a study of Stevens's poems, a 'sentence of definition'.⁶¹ Incunabula and early-modern instruction manuals contain pithy phrases which function as definitions of their substantive headings, and the aphorism as it was later used in nineteenth-century philosophy, and later, as it was exploited by Wilde, draws on this heritage of the form as pedagogic tool. Such a tool would seem out of place when applied to pragmatism, a tradition 'dedicated to disrupting the compulsion to fix identity', as Ross Posnock contends, in a summation supplied to register his embarrassment at fixing the pragmatist school with a definition of his own, even if it be the paradoxically non-fixed claim that pragmatism constituted 'a politics of nonidentity'.⁶² 'Any definition is identification', argues Posnock, 'and identity logic is our normal mode of thought'.⁶³ The connection between lexical definition and the definition of the self in pragmatism is an established one: just as James had argued against lexical 'resting places',⁶⁴ and in favour of such stabilizing terms being set 'within the stream of your experience', considered not as 'closing your quest' but as 'a program for more work',⁶⁵ so Emerson, as we have seen, had warned that the individual reliant on a settled sense of self will be rendered impotent: 'power ceases in the instant of repose', writes Emerson; 'it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim'.⁶⁶ By contrast, the non-pragmatist reader, as Louis Menand notes, 'will mistake as final and determinate what can only be indeterminate and forever vulnerable to future hitchings and unhitchings. And as with words, so with selves'.⁶⁷ If selfhood is in the transitions, as pragmatism informs us, then the fixity definition offers involves selfhood's abnegation, a place where it goes to stagnate and not to thrive.

Stevens, who in 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' (1941), had said of nobility, 'To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me show it to you unfixed',⁶⁸ would seem an unnatural sponsor for the aphoristic. He appears at first to be speaking in a different voice when he claims, in *Adagia*, that

⁶¹ Frank Doggett, 'Stevens's Later Poetry', in Peter L. Macnamara ed. *Critics on Wallace Stevens* (Miami, FL: University of Miami Press, 1972), p.119.

⁶² Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.16.

⁶³ Ibid, p.16.

⁶⁴ William James, *The Writings of William James* (London: Random House, 1967), p.36.

⁶⁵ William James, *Writings 1902-1910*, p.509.

⁶⁶ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.271.

⁶⁷ Louis Menand, 'Pragmatists and Poets: A Response to Richard Poirier', in Morris Dickstein ed. *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p.363.

⁶⁸ CPP, p.664.

‘Life is a composite of the propositions about it’,⁶⁹ or when his speaker, in ‘Men Made Out of Words’, claims with slight modification that ‘Life consists / Of propositions about life’.⁷⁰ Both aphorisms make plain what pragmatism had argued other aphorisms do covertly: they tether fixed definition to the self. ‘As soon as he has once spoken or acted with *éclat*’, wrote Emerson, as we saw in the first chapter, ‘he is a committed person’.⁷¹ Stevens’s aphorism appears to enter into a double provocation of pragmatist thinking, since not only does he speak with *éclat*, committing himself to a proposition – one, further, in favour of the making of propositions – but he does so with recourse to the word James had most sought to inhibit, the word which does most to shepherd sentences away from transitional thinking (and transitive words specifically) in favour of the substantive: the word ‘about’. In *Principles of Psychology* (1890), James had bemoaned the prevalent hunger for the substantive in language, attacking the idea that ‘where there is *no* name [...] no entity can exist’:

All *dumb* or anonymous psychic states have, owing to this error, been coolly suppressed; or, if recognized at all, have been named after the substantive perception they led to, as thoughts “about” this object or “about” that, the stolid word *about* engulfing all their delicate idiosyncrasies in its monotonous sound.⁷²

‘We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*’, writes James. To the ‘inveterate [...] habit’ of ‘recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone’ which James argues against,⁷³ then, Stevens seems here to have subscribed as a willing party.

Stevens, who in his non-aphoristic mode is paradoxically most excerpted for his evasiveness about subject – for his ‘Nothing that is there and the nothing that is’ of ‘The Snow Man’ (1923),⁷⁴ or his ‘Someone Puts a Pineapple Together’ (1951), which by its proliferative use of metaphor effects a stepwise shift of the focus of the poem an inch along from the thing invoked⁷⁵ – would seem then by such affinities to preclude the declarative aphoristic style from any place within his poetry. These twin characteristics (of hardness on the form’s side and provisionality on the poet’s) being assumed,

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.910.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.310.

⁷¹ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.261.

⁷² James, *The Writings of William James*, p.38.

⁷³ Ibid, p.38.

⁷⁴ CPP, p.8.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.694.

it is not surprising that so much of Stevens commentary has sought to account for the notional incongruity of aphorism in his work, awkwardly ubiquitous as that form proves to be from poem to poem. For Coyle, as we have seen, the aphorism provides ‘the feel of truth’, a certainty made safe for Stevens’s provisionalising aesthetic by the fact of this truth’s being only momentary and immediately replaceable. Hannah Brooks-Motl, for whom Stevens is the exemplar for what she terms ‘lyric aphorism’, shares with Coyle the opinion that aphorism’s importance resides in its appearing in series: for her, aphorism ‘sounds convincingly final’ until subsequent aphorisms undermine this pretension. Though ‘we feel stabilized by the grammar’ of an aphorism such as Stevens’s in ‘Man Carrying Thing’ – ‘The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully’, ‘a formulation’, according to Brooks-Motl, ‘that is notable for its clarity, its immediate comprehensibility, even its ease’ –⁷⁶⁷⁷ such knowledge as the aphorism shepherds is undermined by the proliferation of further, sometimes contradictory pieces of wisdom. This ultimately gives the impression in Stevens’s poetry that aphorism has more to do with process than with the kind of predetermined, closed knowledge and ‘sense of rightness’ with which the form has traditionally been associated. No longer an easily extractable form, but instead one to be taken in the context of its companion pronouncements, the aphorism, for Brooks-Motl, represents ‘not thought but thinking’, a form in which one seemingly stable knowledge-vehicle is a mere generative precondition for subsequent others.⁷⁸ The very fixity of the propositions Stevens gives, then, when taken alongside others which often state opinions to the contrary, shows how much is being provisionally ventured by him even as his statements seem final: the fixity of each individual aphorism, according to this reading, paradoxically guaranteeing fixity’s lack.

For Marjorie Perloff, who has less patience for such stabilizing gestures in the first place, the fixity of aphorism in Stevens’s poetry is part of a dynamic of transcendence of the aphorism itself: such rigidity as the aphorism introduces is shown subsequently to be replaced by the nuancing gestures more familiar to the rest of Stevens’s work. This rejection of the aphorism and of aphoristic thinking, according to Perloff’s reading, becomes, in fact, the very thing that is being dramatized.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.306.

⁷⁷ Brooks-Motl, ‘The Smallest Space’.

⁷⁸ Ibid. See also Frank Kermode, of Stevens’s prose more generally, that ‘[o]ne is left [...] with the sense that one has assisted at the process of thinking rather than that one has heard doctrine preached’, *Wallace Stevens* (New York, NY: Chip’s Bookshop, 1979), p.92.

‘Aphorisms from “Adagia” and in related poems often play a more rhetorical than integral role’,⁷⁹ argues Perloff, and she takes as example the closing section to ‘Esthétique du Mal’ (1945), which begins with the aphorism ‘The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world’.⁸⁰ ‘Fortunately’, argues Perloff, ‘the poem does not conclude here’, instead ‘turn[ing] from aphorism to the movement of consciousness itself’ with its ‘tentative *might’s* and *could’s*’ and ‘[n]o parables or maxims – only the recognition that “Merely in living” one can feel most alive, most various, most capable of “metaphysical changes”’.⁸¹ Perloff’s reading pits the modality of ‘could’s’ and ‘would’s’ against the sureness of the declarative sentence, reads into the aphorism a natural opposition to ‘the movement of consciousness itself’, and, most dramatically, contrasts the form with the actual process of living, all, seemingly, as a means of getting Stevens ‘beyond adagia’, as the title of her study claims: of rescuing his poetry, in other words, from the declarative phrase of which it is frequently constituted.

For B.J. Leggett and Edward Ragg, by contrast, no rescuing is necessary. In their studies, ‘the aphoristic and generalizing style’ is only marginally detectable in Stevens’s poetics, and is excluded from his principal aesthetic preoccupation: that of abstraction.⁸² Leggett accounts for the assured predominance of aphorisms in Stevens’s thinking about abstraction by foregrounding complicating composition-histories which undermine an ostensible assertiveness. So, ‘It must be abstract’, the rubric-header which conditions a prescribed poetics in ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ (1942), resonates with an imbued contingency in Leggett’s handling: one issuing from this injunction’s earlier iteration as ‘REFACIMENTO’, whose palimpsest-like implications speak to the non-arrival of the poem’s title. In Ragg’s study, attending to the aphorism in Stevens’s poetry – as, he claims, many commentators have been apt to do – encourages bad critical habits, and suggests a failure to untangle what is most supple and changing about Stevens’s critical vocabulary.⁸³ The complicated poetics which both commentators seek to emphasise in Stevens’s poetry is made visible only by an attempt to undermine and exclude a form associated with complication’s opposite.

⁷⁹ Perloff, ‘Beyond “Adagia”’, p.21.

⁸⁰ CPP, p.287.

⁸¹ Perloff, ‘Beyond “Adagia”’, p.22.

⁸² B.J. Leggett, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p.18.

⁸³ Edward Ragg, *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.23.

For Poirier, for whom the Stevensian aphorism occurs too regularly for its role to be so dismissed (or else thematized as staged breakdown; a posture itself its own kind of dismissal), such declarative moments register lapses in self-belief about what language can and should do that merit his momentary exclusion from the pragmatist school – an exclusion to be reckoned exactly coterminous, that is, with the duration of the aphorism. Stevens’s language hardens, in Poirier’s reading – becomes more declarative, more strenuously self-assertive – precisely where he seems most doctrinally to be agreeing with Emerson in principle, if not in style: on the matter of the death of God. He ‘protests too much’ when he makes the ‘declaration that “the solar chariot is junk”’ or when he writes that ‘the death of one God is the death of all’,⁸⁴ and Poirier seizes on speculation about Stevens’s later-life conversion to Roman Catholicism as proof that this over-emphasising style, hollow because demanding a truth it cannot properly earn, predestines these words to being unconvincing, even to their author.⁸⁵ A declarativeness not confined to God – a subject, to be sure, by whose measure Stevens’s ‘tone’ is ‘rather blustering, more defensively assertive than it is in Frost or James or even Emerson’ –⁸⁶ the lapidary instead reflects in Stevens a wider loss of nerve about his creative potency. ‘Of all of them [Frost, James, and Emerson] he is the one most given to the extremes of oscillation between deprivation and creative ebullience’,⁸⁷ writes Poirier, and his aphorizing can thus be understood as part of a rhetoric ‘that is far more ambitious for poetry than is Frost’ –⁸⁸ and far more prone, by implication, to be let down by it. A repository for creative breakdown – a breakdown which bears descriptive resemblance to the ‘resting places’ James decried – aphorism becomes in Stevens a form where a contingent poetic voice forgets itself.

And yet this loss of personal integrity occurs, paradoxically, at exactly those moments where a concrete notion of self is most strenuously being argued for. Keeping in play the pragmatist association of definition with self-definition, Poirier regrets those admittedly ‘dazzling’ moments where Stevens comes across as ‘altogether more self-assertive’.⁸⁹ These are, in fact, ‘moments of extreme self-doubt’ where Stevens ‘will announce his presence with a stoic doggedness’,⁹⁰ and Poirier quotes as exemplar Stevens’s double-aphorism in ‘Notes’: ‘There is a month, a year, there is a

⁸⁴ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.158.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.159.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.158.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.158.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.161.

⁸⁹ Poirier, *Renewal of Literature*, p.211

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.211.

time / In which majesty is a mirror of the self: / I have not but I am and as I am, I am'.⁹¹

Commentators make much of these moments, Poirier argues, because they seem so neatly to contain the self, and thus are serviceable to their critical-biographical purposes; they are seized on, in short, because '[p]ersons are meant to find themselves'.⁹² Yet for Poirier, such ready extractability belies the much more representative contingency and non-assertiveness to be found in Stevens's chief poetic contributions – poems which 'ask us instead to be content with a calm, contemplative receptivity to prospects of human dispersal'.⁹³ Such dispersal, opposed in intention and temperament to the doggedness of the declarative phrase, is a procedure in which a form as associated with fixity and assertion as is the aphorism will have no place.

Yet what should be immediately obvious about Stevens's aphorisms is how much they represent not straightforward assertions but hedged ones: assertions qualified,⁹⁴ interrupted, or else accompanied by a complicating syntactical or contextual arrangement that renders them ultimately so ambiguous as to be difficult to extract as free-floating entities from any text in which they originally feature. The modality that Perloff argues is arrived at in Stevens's poetry once the fixed aphorism has been transcended – a modality represented in the accreted optative build-up of 'could's' and 'would's' –⁹⁵ is so much a signature of Stevens's aphoristic aesthetic as to deny the possibility of the kind of dynamic Perloff sketches: there simply is no movement from fixity to flux, as she would have it, because there has been no established fixity in the first place.

To understand this, it is first important to recognise what Stevens was doing to the formal materials he received. The aphorism as it had been handed down to him – of the literary or of the philosophical type – had indeed traded in generalities which gave the impression of truth or rightness precisely because of their explicit exclusion of alternatives. By means of the definite article, and of excluding terms such as 'the last', 'the only', 'the one', 'the most', 'the perfect', 'the supreme', etc., the late nineteenth-century aphorism marketed itself as the only viable prescription for the situation it was describing: it was a definition that was also definitive. This is as true for Nietzsche's

⁹¹ Ibid, p.211.

⁹² Ibid, p.211.

⁹³ Ibid, p.211.

⁹⁴ The term is from Helen Vendler, 'The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens', in Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller eds. *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins Press, 1965).

⁹⁵ Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, p.14.

philosophy – ‘Art is the highest task and the real metaphysical activity in this life’,⁹⁶ ‘Cynicism is the only form in which base souls touch upon that thing which is genuine honesty’ –⁹⁷ as it is for Shaw’s Nietzsche-inflected playwriting – ‘Marriage is the most licentious of human institutions’; ‘Activity is the only road to knowledge’;⁹⁸ ‘Silence is the perfect expression of scorn’ –⁹⁹ and as it is in Wilde’s aesthetic and political pronouncements: ‘Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative’,¹⁰⁰ ‘The only portraits in which one believes are portraits where there is very little of the sitter and a very great deal of the artist’,¹⁰¹ ‘Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known’.¹⁰² These are aphorisms which qualify for the ‘generalising style’ Leggett claims for Stevens, since to generalize is exactly their purpose.

Compare these, then, to the way the aphorism is actually represented in Stevens’s work – particularly in *Adagia*, the collection most often culled for quotation by commentators as textual proof of direct authorial pronouncement in the way Poirier describes. Perloff claims that in that collection the aphorisms are ‘broad – and often contradictory’ and that she finds ‘more interesting’ Stevens’s ‘aphoristic remarks about his own poetry and fellow poets, for example: “Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognise this”’.¹⁰³ Leaving aside for a moment the matter of this opening negation, hinting as it does at a key part of that doubtfulness this chapter will later elucidate, the example qualifies as one of Stevens’s least representative aphorisms, a rare instance of his rummaging in the storeroom of aestheticist vocabulary and finding its jocosely faux-moral substantive discriminators among the treasures (‘We are dominated by the fanatic, whose worst vice is his sincerity’, ‘The Critic as Artist’),¹⁰⁴; ‘The supreme vice is shallowness’, *De Profundis*)¹⁰⁵. Neither is it special to Stevens that his aphorisms should contradict one another – for this is what the Wildean aphorism had been doing too, either within a single collection (‘Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious’, ‘A Few

⁹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. and trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.17-18.

⁹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman, eds. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.28.

⁹⁸ George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1946), p.156; p.253.

⁹⁹ George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah* in *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw, Vol.5* (London: Bodley Head, 1971), p.467.

¹⁰⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Random House, 1969), p.18.

¹⁰¹ CWOW4, p.99.

¹⁰² Ibid, p.248.

¹⁰³ Perloff, ‘Beyond Adagia’, p.18.

¹⁰⁴ CWOW4, p.204.

¹⁰⁵ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (London: Random House, 2010), p.4.

Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated') or across several ('Education is an admirable thing. But it is well to remember from time to time that nothing is worth knowing that can be taught', 'Maxims'; 'The only way to atone for being a little over-dressed is by being always absolutely over-educated', 'Phrases').

That Perloff gives prominence to this aphorism suggests a reading at home with the form as conceived according to the Wildean model; one out of place for a collection like *Adagia*, where statements, far from serving as extractable and definitive discrete entities, are usually made only for the surrounding syntactical arrangements to qualify and correct them for potential overreach. The aphorisms in that collection are for the most part shorn of the definite article: aphorisms like 'Poetry is a health', 'Poetry is a cure of the mind',¹⁰⁶ and 'Ignorance is one of the sources of poetry',¹⁰⁷ attest to the tentative limits of Stevens's prescription-making, allowing as they do the possibility of other healths, cures and sources, and echoing Stevens's aphorism from 'On the Road Home': 'There are many truths'. Others stress their multiplicity less quietly, as in 'The great poem is the disengaging of (a) reality',¹⁰⁸ where the typographically assertive parenthesis catches the line from swelling to an assertiveness of its own; and in '*Esthétique* is the measure of a civilization: not the sole measure, but a measure',¹⁰⁹ where the non-applicability the subsequent qualification stresses becomes the theme, rather than does the rule itself.

Stevens's dramatisation of heritage-refusal, where a generalizing aphoristic tendency is seen being smothered in its infancy and a definitive prescription is met with a hedge certain only about its own uncertainty, is a note commonly struck in this collection. Sometimes, the aphorism can be made vague upon the inclusion of a de-intensifying modifier or series of modifiers ('A poet looks at the world *somewhat* as a man looks at a woman',¹¹⁰ 'The ideal is the actual become anaemic. The romantic is *often pretty much* the same thing',¹¹¹ 'Money is *a kind of* poetry' [italics mine])¹¹². At others, it is open to persuasion about such limited truth-making as it argues for, with parentheses laying out two alternatives without any interventionist indication as to which is preferable: 'Unless life is interesting,

¹⁰⁶ CPP, p.913.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p.911.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.908.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.910.

¹¹⁰ CPP, p.905.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.904.

¹¹² Ibid, p.905.

there is nothing left (or, unless life is made interesting)'.¹¹³ And at others, Stevens can be more extreme still in his aphorisms' resistance to extractable definitiveness, not least when he touches on the 'broadness' that Perloff claims for Stevens as aphorist, as in 'Art, broadly, is the form of life or the sound or color of life',¹¹⁴ a sentence of definition steadfastly unclear about what, whether form, sound, or colour, it is seeking to define. Indeed, the qualifying 'broadly', rather than make claims for the aphorism's range and scope, emphasizes instead the parameters of such a range, as if even when the Stevensian aphoristic voice is as equivocal as it proves to be here about the nature of its subject, it is apt to go too far in fixing it. Even Brooks-Motl's example, taken from 'Man Carrying Thing' and reissued in *Adagia* – ¹¹⁵ 'The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully' – which she claims is 'notable for its clarity, its immediate comprehensibility, even its ease' – is notable for nothing of the kind. The aphorism contains at its heart a hedging descriptive accompaniment to its adverb, complicating the bold claims made by the other components of the clause, and thus performing a clarifying resistance of its own: the difference of 'almost' has made almost all the difference.

These examples suggest that the fixity with which Perloff associates the aphorism is markedly absent from the aphorism as Stevens employed it. Indeed, any study which treats the aphorism as a separate, even opposed vehicle within Stevens's poetic practice will have to contend with Stevens's aphorism about its centrality to his corpus: 'Poetry and *materia poetica* are interchangeable terms',¹¹⁶ he wrote in *Adagia*, in allusion to another collection of aphorisms, published in his lifetime, with *Materia Poetica* (1942) as its title. More substantially, the tendency for the aphorisms in this collection to behave in ways similar to those elsewhere in his work, either by qualifiers attesting to the limits of their scope ('To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is *one of the great human experiences*' ('Two or Three Ideas' (1951));¹¹⁷ 'All poets are, *to some extent*, romantic poets', ('Williams') [*italics mine*]),¹¹⁸ or by an interruptive tendency which corrects bold claims as soon as they are made ('There's no such thing as life; *or if there is*' ('Parochial Theme'));¹¹⁹ 'The school of poetry that believes in sticking to the facts would be stoned if it was not

¹¹³ Ibid, p.912.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.901.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.910.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.901.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.842.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p.770.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.177.

sticking to the facts in a world in which there are no facts: *or some such thing*, ‘A Poet that Matters’ (1935) [italics mine])¹²⁰ or before they even can be made (‘It is possible that to seem – it is to be’, ‘Description Without Place’ (1947))¹²¹ and the sheer frequency with which the aphorisms from *Adagia* reappear in his poetry, prove the form’s importance within Stevens’s aesthetic project – not as a blunt repository of hardness and breakdown to be transcended by a poetics of contingency, but as an important part of the contingency itself.

Of all his commentators, only Vendler, in much earlier studies than those mentioned, has argued for the aphorism as engaged in the nuancing gestures which are a Stevens hallmark. Where his ‘Romantic predecessors might have made a straightforward assertion’, notes Vendler, ‘Stevens temporizes, either by “might” or by “may”, and these forms compose some of his most characteristic aphorisms’.¹²² But in Vendler’s study, ‘might’ and ‘may’ share in the problem posed by what she holds to be Stevens’s more assertive aphorisms: that both the qualified and straightforward assertions betray a lack of faith in the materials available to the pessimistic, ‘wintry’ poet she holds Stevens to be:¹²³ ‘The mood of uncertainty in Stevens, whether marked by direct questions or by implicit qualification, sometimes yields to a mood of desperate assertion, where a passionate insistence is based on fear, a fear of a dreadful disintegration if the assertions prove false’.¹²⁴ Qualified aphorism, according to this argument, is of a piece with its unqualified opposite: both are forms of uncertainty in a different mood, the latter emerging in frustration only when the material driving the former has been essayed and found wanting. Like Perloff, Vendler holds the aphorism to reflect a doubt all the more obvious the more strident the tone and the more unmediated the assertion-making. Unlike her, she does not hold such procedures to be unrepresentative of Stevens’s poetics, but sees in them one of many rhetorical tools to register the fluctuations that generate Stevens’s pessimistic dynamic of wintriness. For Poirier – who does not find Stevens wintry – the aphorism represents not a performance of mood but a momentary halt to this performance, a spoke in the wheel where the real author’s voice emerges. When it does emerge, moreover, it is at precisely

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.780.

¹²¹ Ibid, p.296.

¹²² Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, p.18.

¹²³ Vendler, ‘The Qualified Assertions’, p.178, and *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p.37.

¹²⁴ Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, pp.20-21.

the instance of its poet's losing faith in those materials he ostensibly is seen most stridently to argue for.

Yet to arrive at such biographical elision, Poirier has had to remove the mediating contexts in which the aphorisms he quotes actually appear: contexts which, when reapplied, reveal a less assertive poet; one more given, in fact, to the 'dispersal of self' Poirier reserves only for Stevens's non-aphorising moods. No speaker in Stevens's poetry pronounced 'the solar chariot is junk' without also supplying the muted and dispassionate 'To say the solar chariot is junk/ Is not a variation but an end' as a corrective measure:¹²⁵ the result is an aphorism more concerned with the business of fiction-making now that God is dead than with any settled satisfaction that He is. Include 'To say' and the newly-speculative aphorism represents the exploration of the interesting possibilities that such fiction-making would entail. No speaker opined, 'Speech is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier', an aphorism Poirier quotes to elucidate the wrestle with language he makes a central feature for his pragmatist poetic canon,¹²⁶ but instead 'Tell X that speech is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier'.¹²⁷ Replace the mediation and both aphorisms appear as second-degree pronouncements: Stevens will not even be clear about not being clear. Yet the removal of mediating speech-context is a critical procedure not unique to Poirier: Coyle, in her extended study, takes 'Poetry is the supreme fiction' to be 'an aphorism' that is 'something of a rubric to [Stevens's] ideas', and a 'famous paradoxical statement which for him expressed the essence of our attempts to grasp reality'.¹²⁸ Except it is not: at least not his rubric, but his speaker's, for the original opening line to 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' had run 'Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame',¹²⁹ the camp iambic close pressing the case with an assertiveness simultaneously undermined by the mediation this close represents. Not representing Stevens's ethos but instead an assuredness to which it is everywhere opposed, the speaker's aphorism dramatizes the possibilities that would issue from a like sense of commitment.

Such instances of speech mediation are many in the Stevens aphorism. In a way similar to the straightforward hedge of qualifying words, and in a way, too, that often collaborates with this

¹²⁵ CPP, p.291.

¹²⁶ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.133.

¹²⁷ CPP, p.275.

¹²⁸ Coyle, *An Anchorage of Thought*, p.40.

¹²⁹ CPP, p.47.

hedging, the inclusion of narrative speech-markers within Stevens's aphorisms impedes both their extractability and their salience as direct authorial pronouncements. Aphorisms like 'The soul, he said, is composed / Of the external world' and 'There are men of the East, he said, / Who are the East', both from 'Anecdote of Men by the Thousand' (1923),¹³⁰ place an obstructive narrative voice at the deictic middle of an otherwise assertive pronouncement, resisting the connection between the words as they appear and a locatable authorial self. The same distancing of author-function from words uttered holds in 'Adagio', a title flirting with the extractability associated with that word (as the singular to *adagio*: that it can be this and also the slowing tempo of a musical movement foregrounds the undecidability of the form in Stevens's use of it), an extractability undermined by the presence of the speaker's second-degree mediation, which this time interests itself not only in the words but also, comically, in their delivery, as if the aphorism in question wishes to function as both text and commentary of its own performance: 'Tell her in undertones that Youth / With other times must reckon'.¹³¹ And it holds, too, in 'St. John and the Back-Ache' (1950), where the mediation already instigated by dramatic character prefixes is strengthened both by its fumbling qualifications and by the embedded address at the aphorism's centre: 'The mind is the terriblest force in the world, father, / Because, in chief, it, only, can defend / Against itself'.¹³²

This latter collaboration of distancing effects, where indirect speech and fumbling qualification both contribute to a wider strategy of aphoristic obliqueness, is notable, too, for touching on another aphoristic mainstay in Stevens's poetry: allusion to the self. For it is in fact at those times where Stevens seems most obviously to be speaking self-reflexively – times where minds circle back on themselves, where selves seem to short-circuit defensively in refusing descriptive expansion on what this self entails: times, in short, where Poirier detects Stevens emerging with 'a stoic doggedness' – that Stevens is revealed to be at his least defensive, least sure about what the definition of his self might be, still less where to locate it. The aphorism that Poirier quotes as exemplar for this assertive – and desperate – authorial manoeuvring is, as we have seen, the double aphorism from 'Notes': 'There is a month, a year, there is a time / In which majesty is a mirror of the self: / I have not but I am and as I am, I am'. Yet an inspection of the lines' textual context reveals this, too, to be an aphorism functioning only as the final development of a much longer

¹³⁰ Ibid, p.41.

¹³¹ Ibid, p.505.

¹³² Ibid, p.375.

posited thought, an elaboration of a reflection again embedded within a mediating context. The part of the poem in which the aphorism appears, which is the eighth canto of the third section ('It Must Give Pleasure'), begins, not with an assertiveness of any kind, but with doubt: specifically, doubt as to who, whether his true self or some spirited imagining which in turn might or might not be a function of his mind, is experiencing what the speaker's self thinks he is experiencing at any given time. 'What am I to believe?' the speaker begins the section asking, and then, two stanzas later, of an angel that he imagines 'in his cloud':

Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or I that experience this?¹³³

The anaphora, of rhetorical disposition if not of exact lexical item, continues in the mood of questioning that characterizes the section, even to the extent of offering the possibility of his thesis's counterargument – that the world he depicts, and the sky covering it, are 'haunted' with the flecks of white calcite which go into lapis's formation as residue from the angel's wings, even while these flecks might be the haunting of nothing more than his own perspective, his own imaginative optical spots.

The phenomenological wrestle gives way to anaphora proper in the next line, which begins the extended formulation the aphorism Poirier quotes will end:

Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
And if there is an hour there is a day,

¹³³ Ibid, p.349.

There is a month a year, there is a time,
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
I have not but I am and as I am, I am.¹³⁴

Not only is 'Stevens' as authorial self not declaring 'as I am, I am' – not only, that is, is the aphorism in fact being presented in the second degree, something that the speaker 'keeps saying' rather than directly saying now – but the speaker cannot even decide whether this repeated mantra is said by him or is the result of forces greater than he can comprehend. The lines represent not just loss of agency against the background of an internal debate about how much debate can really be called internal but the dramatisation of this loss.

Given that the section has still another stanza left, and given that this stanza conjures up another fable-like proposition to rival that of the angels (in this case, the story of 'Cinderella', one synonymous with transformation) the case could be made for a reading along the lines of Perloff's – that aphorism represents a breakdown to be transcended by the imagination – or one taking in mind Jonathan Levin's pragmatist understanding of metaphor in Stevens as a saving flight from the breakdown to which Stevens often leads the reader.¹³⁵ Or one could make the case, according to Vendler's reading elsewhere, that the section ends with the despairing wintriness that has always been its governing mood, where even the allusion to Cinderella reflects despair at the triviality of the speaker's tendency to make imaginative leaps out of humdrum materials, the perhaps sinister image of 'Cinderella fulfilling herself' presenting Cinderella's story as an imaginative and weakly onanistic self-satisfying story of its own. The description of these 'reflections' as 'escapades of death' would seem only to strengthen Vendler's reading of 'Notes' as 'the improvisation of newness in decline'.¹³⁶ Yet all such readings would be wrong, as wrong as Poirier's is, because none of them would take account of the strangeness that occurs at the level of the sentence itself. For there is no way, straightforwardly, to discuss how 'majesty' might be 'a mirror of the self' when the self as presented has been left so poorly defined, and when the actual aphorism, despite – and because of – its status as a sentence of definition, does its best to leave it so. What do the three 'I am's do, for instance, except lend to the aphorism a chant-like incantatory function, a release of these signifying words

¹³⁴ Ibid, pp.349-350.

¹³⁵ Jonathan Levin, 'Life in the Transitions', p.80.

¹³⁶ CPP, p.350.

into sounds – sounds consonant only ultimately with the metric ‘iambs’ they represent? The ‘as’ here – which is to say, the comparative function from which the seeming proposition-making leads – is being made to perform work it cannot support, for it is never clear what would constitute the proper subject of comparison. The speaker is, simply, ‘as he is’.

And yet, of course, this is not simple at all, for the adverbially-inviting ‘as’ invites in fact only a comparative short-circuit, a particularly unenlightening procedure considering that this ‘as’ has been exactly the section’s question all along. The ‘hour / Filled with expressible bliss’ is revealed, ultimately, to express nothing outside the materials provided by the repetition of the point of comparison – a comparison so strange that repetition, far from focusing the resultant image, leaves it the more assuredly unrealized. The aphorism, in fact, works at one degree of self-reflexivity further still, since it itself remains only something posited: it lengthens into less precise and longer units of time (from hours to days, months to years) before folding into the abstract envelope of the concept of ‘time’ itself, the deferred hypothetical ensuring only that once we arrive at the ‘assertiveness’ of the self – ‘as I am, I am’ – it is *non*-arrival that is being dramatized. The pleonasm, far from offering selfhood up readily to the extractive reader, disperses instead its energies elsewhere.

This heralded non-arrival, far from signalling a wintriness in the speaking voice that might attest to despair at an inability to self-actualise, collaborates with that of the poem’s prepositional indicator (“Toward”) – as with the ‘ké-ké’ letter which Stevens wrote soon after the poem’s composition, where individual self-assertion is only made possible through constant flux. The section not only suggests that the self cannot be arrived at straightforwardly, or that to arrive will only instigate the beginning of a new quest, but that there may be some profitability to be had in its not being arrived at; in its being troped, and shuffled along just where it seems most declaratively fixed. This is precisely because of the following – and last – stanza, which ends with the image of Cinderella. For that stanza offers a continued commentary on the business of selfhood and agency which the rest of the section has been treating:

These external regions, what do we fill them with
Except reflections, the escapades of death,

The assertion of 'I am' makes way for the casual resolution of these phenomenological questions: that this selfhood is an outside occurrence, an 'external region' filled with 'reflections'. Yet at either suggestive end of this punning's instantiation – at the question of whether the 'reflection' refers to the speaker's theorising or to his seeing his own self played back to him – is to be found a selfhood only further complicated. If 'as I am, I am' had been a theoretical reflection, the extended elaboration of an interesting possibility, it is only one amongst many possibilities for constituting this self; and if this is so, it is difficult to determine what the speaker can be seeing when he sees his 'self' looking back at him: in place of clues the aphorism has generated further questions. If this is so, then the 'escapades of death' represent as much the troping power of the imagination in the face of death as they do death's recognition: an escape from it, in short, even at those least propitious moments that make such troping possible. 'In the face of death life asserts itself', Stevens had written admiringly of the sparrow – so it is that the real assertion of the self that takes place here lies not in such supposed straightforwardness as a declaration of the self's presence, but in a tethering of selfhood to a process which makes such assertions newly strange. Such selfhood as is found here is not dogged, hollow, or despairing but shuffling, slippery, and uncontained, at one remove from its site of expected retrieval, hinting at its location only to be glimpsed obscurely somewhere down the line. Like the selfhood thinly-perceived in 'Someone Puts a Pineapple Together' – diffused, not clarified, by attempts to fix a name to it – it is at a 'tangent'.¹³⁸

If Stevens has invoked the language of fulfilment only to offset it with the transforming power of the Cinderella story, cutting the thread of one narrative only to bequeath the promissory tangled bundle of many others, it is to suggest, with Emerson in 'Circles', that there is no circumference to us, and that it is just in those moments of seeming completion that work must be done to push the contours of ourselves into new and imaginative frontiers: even roofs do not prevent Cinderella from making it to the ball. Stevens's poetic voice could be quite elaborate on how slippery assertions of the self can be, how shifting and unpredictable any attempts to set a boundary. When the speaker of 'The Creations of Sound' concludes with the tercet 'We do not say ourselves

¹³⁷ Ibid, p.350.

¹³⁸ See the useful discussion of the word 'tangent' in Stevens's poetry in Leighton, *On Form*, pp.179-180; and particularly, 'The object of the poem [...] goes between. It is a "tangent"', p.179.

like that in poems. / We say ourselves in syllables that rise / From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak',¹³⁹ he could be offering a cautionary commentary, were its conclusions not already evident, of how 'as I am, I am' is the last place to look for the self as concrete entity, especially considering the way X does 'say himself' is as 'a man / Too exactly himself'.¹⁴⁰ Stevens as we have seen does not favour this kind of procedure, even – and especially – when seeming to show himself most exactly as he is; and if I have sought to prove 'as I am, I am' as the un-assertive self as expressed in aphorism, it is to show how much aphorism is consonant with and not distinct from Stevens's provisionalising effects.

Sometimes, when not being overtly aphoristic, Stevens can assert the self only to show the strangeness of the assertion, as in 'The Man With The Blue Guitar', where 'You are yourself', appearing in the final stanza of the penultimate canto, gives a laconically false satisfaction to the very question the poem has been trying to determine, and follows immediately on from the speaker's troping of 'To thine own self be true' – 'Nothing must stand / Between you and the shapes you take':¹⁴¹ nothing must stop the performance of selfhood; nothing stop the addressee, in other words, from not being him. Or he can approach this metaphysics in a quieter way, as when, in 'The Motive for Metaphor', his speaker relates 'an obscure world / Of things that would never be quite expressed, / Where you yourself were never quite yourself',¹⁴² the homey demotic importing the same phenomenological coupling of questions – of agency and selfhood – that would be treated more directly in 'Notes', the shifting modal obliqueness of targets almost hit ('never be quite'; 'never quite') offering a self-consciously fumbling vision of perspective at a tangent.

Indeed, if the aphorism treats the question of selfhood in a way indistinguishable from that of Stevens's wider poetic project, the same can be said for the general habit of vagueness – Schulze's 'provisionalising gestures' – which Perloff holds to be impossible in the aphoristic form. In 'Anecdote of the Jar', Stevens achieves a referential vagueness by figuring description negatively: withholding what things are and clarifying only what they are not ('It did not give of bird or bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee'). So, in 'The Creations of Sound', which establishes its priors in the logical language of analytic philosophy ('If the poetry of X was music'), the speaking voice is vague

¹³⁹ CPP, p.275.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.274.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.150.

¹⁴² Ibid, p.257.

about the exact aesthetic crimes the figure of 'X', the notional object of the poem's criticism, seems to have committed. X, it turns out, is defined only by a lack, and from the sixth stanza onwards the poem resolves itself into a tangle of nots.

He lacks this venerable complication.
His poems are not of the second part of life.
They do not make the visible a little hard

To see, nor, reverberating, eke out the mind

[...]

We do not say ourselves like that in poems.¹⁴³

Stevens's poem, like satire too polite to name names, in fact makes the object, the X whose definition and character it is the philosopher's task to define, less precise with each negative and each shifting turn in comparison. Thus he achieves what X is incapable of doing: he makes the visible hard to see, and in so doing 'detaches' from the subject he has as soon invoked.

The term comes from Stevens's appreciation of Marianne Moore in *The Necessary Angel* (1951), where Stevens lauds Moore's ability in establishing subjects before she 'irrevocably detaches' from them.¹⁴⁴ The dual bind, of invoked subject and elusiveness about keeping to this subject's terms, constitutes what, in his earlier review of her *Selected Poems*, Stevens had defined as 'hybridisation': the combination of unlikely elements ('Hamlet in modern dress'; '[a]ny playing of a well-known concerto by an unknown artist')¹⁴⁵ that satisfied Stevens's rubric for poetry; that it 'must always be living'.¹⁴⁶ The same essay argues for negation's shared role in this detaching imperative, as when Stevens picks out a moment in 'The Steeple-Jack' (1935) – 'There are no banyans, frangipani nor / jack-fruit trees; nor an exotic serpent / life' –¹⁴⁷ for an instance showing that Moore 'hybridises

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.275.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.702.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.779.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p.778.

¹⁴⁷ Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p.6.

the thing by a negative'.¹⁴⁸ This form of hybridization again puts a personal stamp on the artist's materials by constituting 'the vital element in poetry': 'That, of course, does not mean banyans and frangipani; and it cannot for long mean no banyans and no frangipani. Just what it means, Miss Moore's book discloses'.¹⁴⁹ The echo of troping in straightforward hybridization already established, Stevens makes negativity in Moore's work an important instrument in an aesthetics of uncertain placement, where the descriptive materials offered are neither affirmed nor denied but appear at a tangent from the image invoked.

Indeed, once we are aware of this troping valency to Stevens's negative propositions, it becomes difficult to sustain, as Perloff does, that 'The greatest poverty is not to live in a physical world' constitutes stasis of even a momentary kind. Examples of this kind of aphorism, ostensibly declarative and yet in fact at work only at deferring comparison by the immediate denial of the thing invoked, abound in Stevens's work: in *Adagia* ('Poetry is not a personal matter');¹⁵⁰ in 'Saint John and the Back-Ache' ('The world is presence and not force. / Presence is not mind');¹⁵¹ in 'Poetry is a Destructive Force' ('That's what misery is, / Nothing to have at heart')¹⁵² as well as in longer samples, such as 'Adult Epigram', which seems to provide a positive counterpoint in an exegetic gloss on the negative proposition only for this second, seemingly affirmative proposition to prove equally as slippery as to the subject at hand:

The romance of the precise is not the elision
Of the tired romance of imprecision.
It is the ever-never-changing same,
An appearance of Again, the diva-dame.¹⁵³

Stevens had written that in Moore's poems she 'instinctively relates sounds' – as in 'The Fish', where '[t]here is a relation between the groups of letters *ext, ks, phys*', and where 'the *i's* [*sic*] in *defiant artifice* are related'.¹⁵⁴ What this relating does in Stevens's poem, where 'precise', 'imprecision' and 'elision'

¹⁴⁸ CPP, p.777.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.778.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p.903.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p.375.

¹⁵² Ibid, p.178.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p.308.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.775.

all assonate, is establish a sonic consonance between lexical opposites; one suggesting a strange similitude which confounds the making of definitions. For if the ‘not’ looks so similar to the ‘is’, it is to argue for a strange short-circuiting in its analytical argumentation: if the ‘romance of the precise’ is not elision’s imprecision it cannot be said sonically to be its opposite either.

This opening aphorism serves as presage, indeed, for the subsequent aphoristic gloss, with its duality of the thing’s being at once ‘never changing’ and its also being ‘ever’ so, the two rhyme-words yoked here by the hyphen seeming again to have spawned one another at the aural level. But if this gloss participates in the non-explanatory function of its preceding aphorism, it is due, in reality, to the negative antecedent which had made it so: for where a clear sense even of what does *not* constitute the romance of the precise loses integrity in this negative formulation, a sense of what it is remains unclear too. Stevens, in his Moore essay, argues for Eliot’s ‘Preludes’ (1917), with ‘the smell of steaks in the Parnassian air’, as fulfilling his aesthetics of hybridisation.¹⁵⁵ The more apposite comparison would be to ‘The Fire Sermon’s’ opening verse-paragraph, where the Thames is described as bearing ‘no empty bottles, sandwich papers / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights’ –¹⁵⁶ and where, as David Trotter notes, ‘the complaint is that the Thames in autumn does *not* contain [them]’ rather than that it does.¹⁵⁷ The implications, when the negative is taken into account, reveal not the mock heroic mood often attributed to it, but an effect rather of hybridization by the negative: neither frangipani nor banyan, nor exactly an absence of them either.

What then to do about an aphorism like ‘Life consists / Of propositions about life’, which does ostensibly seem straightforward, which does not hedge by qualifying adverbs, which does not mediate or cast in the negative, nor resolve itself into hyper-literary short circuiting repetitions that only foreground the strangeness of the thing asserted; which resorts, finally, to that signally un-pragmatist word ‘about’? The answer lies in looking at pragmatism as theorized, and in seeing whether James was right to argue that ‘the stolid word about’ really can be said to ‘engulf’ all objects’ ‘delicate idiosyncracies in its monotonous sound’. Poirier calls this ‘a passage that is apt to make any

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.779.

¹⁵⁶ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Poems of T.S. Eliot Vol. 1*, eds. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), p.62.

¹⁵⁷ David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.2.

of us feel guilty about the way we use language day by day',¹⁵⁸ but it need not be so, for of all deictic prepositional markers – and James could have chosen 'of', or 'on' – 'about', and its cognates 'around', 'round' and 'roundabout', is the least prescriptive about placement, the most apt, in fact, to encourage a response of circumlocutionary vagueness, gesturing towards an area rather than settling on it.

These, indeed, are the associations found in Stevens's poetic voice: there, 'about' can be synonymous with wandering, as in 'Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb', which supports the speaker of 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' in treating Christianity as a false end. Heaven's occupants – 'freemen of death' as this speaker calls them – are there imagined to be still in search, to 'range the gusty cold, / [...] about and still about / To find whatever it is they seek'.¹⁵⁹ In 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas' (1942), this wandering is more explicitly yoked to mental wonder, where a man 'felt curious about the winter hills / And wondered about the water in the lake' the ghostly echo of 'wandering about' in this 'wondering about' playing on the perspectival ambiguity achieved by the later failure to distinguish feeling from observation; or, as the speaker puts it, 'Being, becoming seeing and feeling self, / Black water breaking into reality'.¹⁶⁰ Or Stevens can be explicit about the opaque distance 'about' puts between the substantive and the person observing it, as in the title, 'Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself',¹⁶¹ where 'about' interferes with the *ding an sich*, or where, as in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', the speaker calls the poem 'the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it'.¹⁶²

In 'As You Leave the Room' (1957), aboutness activates the negative hybridization Stevens had outlined in his Moore essay. This late poem (published posthumously), which styles itself a *summa* of Stevens's corpus, provokes Vendler to consider Stevens to be speaking in his own person in it. It is a 'final and testamentary view of desire and its aftermath', as she puts it, before conjecturing that its composition is a response to Stevens's completing his manuscript of the *Collected Poems* for Knopf:

¹⁵⁸ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, pp.151-152.

¹⁵⁹ CPP, p.45.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p.230.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p.451.

¹⁶² Ibid, p.404.

Stevens sees his life's work contained in a single object, the potential book lying before him on a table: each page reminds him of a moment of intense feeling, something in the past, something he has loved [...] Stevens wonders whether, as a person who has lived for art, he is a skeleton, all geometrical armature and no flesh. But he reassures himself by paging through his printed works.¹⁶³

In fact, however, the poem's first words cast the identity of the speaking voice in doubt, the italicized character prefix, '*You speak. You say:*' (which Vendler's extract obscures) mediating the voice that follows behind the reported speech of an unnamed speaker and an unspecified addressee.¹⁶⁴ The degree of mediation is supplemented by the subsequent speaking voice's words, 'Today's character is not / A skeleton out of its cabinet. And nor am I',¹⁶⁵ which instantly deny, in the first clause, the imagery they have just invoked, and, in the second, the implications of that previous clause: today's character is not a skeleton, we learn, and neither is the speaking voice.

The poem is, indeed, hazier on the details of Stevens's poetic subjects than Vendler's argument suggests:

That poem about the pineapple, the one
About the mind as never satisfied,

The one about the credible hero, the one
About summer, are not what skeletons think about.¹⁶⁶

There is nothing here to suggest that the speaker, let alone Stevens, is 'paging through his printed works': instead, as the character prefix had signaled ('You say') the poem treats this summary as more or less an oral endeavor – one that, through its distal deixis ('That poem') and its most indefinite collocation of definite article to unspecified object ('the one / About'; 'the one about') suggests some imprecision in accessing this knowledge. Harold Bloom argues of this poem that Stevens 'remembered' 'The Well Dressed Man with a Beard' (1942) 'as though the poem's true

¹⁶³ Helen Vendler, *Words Chosen*, p.34.

¹⁶⁴ CPP, p.597.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p.597.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, pp.597-598.

subject inhered in its final line: “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never”.¹⁶⁷ But this remembering is vague and listless; appropriately so, for the aphorism Stevens remembers was so strongly ‘about’ the subject that it had taken eight syllables – and a parenthetical interruption – even to establish it. Such, in fact, is the pattern of all the poems the speaker alludes to, from the ‘credible hero’, a stock incarnation, in ‘The Examination of the Hero in Time of War’ (1942), whom Stevens tropes by melding his military drills and artillery fire into arpeggio practice and dandyish nighttime reading,¹⁶⁸ to ‘The Credences of Summer’ (1947), with its distinctly unseasonal dead cats, absent gardeners and ‘decay’,¹⁶⁹ and, as we have seen, to ‘Someone Puts a Pineapple Together’, with its constant transmogrification of the thing observed. These are, properly, ‘about’ the subject, and rely on its invocation even as they undermine it – just as these two stanzas, having seemed in substance to have divorced themselves from the image of the ‘skeleton’, return to its image, as if this vague accounting has really been ‘about’ how a skeleton thinks all along. How it does think, indeed, is not ‘geometric’ but loose and meandering, an effect the anaphoric repetition of ‘about’, ultimately deflating to the puttering closing dactylic of an exhausted thought (‘think about’), has done nothing to counteract.

The speaker, bracketed within an extended thought with only ‘about’ as lexically structuring hinge, is neither Stevens nor exactly not him either. If the recurring theme of these uses of ‘about’ suggest that this prepositional marker in his poems is synonymous with non-arrival, then a proposition like ‘Life consists / Of propositions about life’ displaces rather than emphasizes where life is to be found, the pluralized promise of more propositions to come only strengthening the sense that the claim, for all its seeming definitiveness, is distinctly hazy about its contours. The pragmatist poet, argues Poirier, ‘remains free floating of any fixed point’,¹⁷⁰ and I have so far argued that an awareness of Stevens’s hybridization allows us to get a sense of how aphorism – with its recourse to fixed points – bears out Poirier’s designation by honouring a paradoxical commitment to breaking it. It will be in the spirit of showing how a flouting of pragmatism’s terms enables a greater fidelity to pragmatism that the following section will proceed.

Words as walls: two types of transition

¹⁶⁷ Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), p.166.

¹⁶⁸ CPP, p.245.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p.326.

¹⁷⁰ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p.154.

If I have contended that ‘about’ performs, rather than undoes, the pragmatist work of troping of Poirier’s valorisations, I want also to affirm that this troping has – in all the examples so far given – been marshalled against the substantive particle: the very thing, in other words, that James held the preposition to be ‘stolidly’ shepherding. It is worth returning to James’s words in *Principles of Psychology* to see the several terms at work in his elucidation of how ‘dumb psychic states’ have been ‘suppressed’ by this ‘about’/substantive partnership, and to see what lessons Stevens might have drawn from them. There, James argues for ‘a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*’ which we should say ‘quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*’, and, in the same paragraph, ‘so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use’.¹⁷¹ Commending empiricists for dismissing the idea that where there is a name there must be a thing in reality which this name alone connotes – James calls such words ‘the mob of abstract entities’ –¹⁷² he nonetheless argues:

they have said nothing of that obverse error [...] of supposing that where there is no name no entity can exist. All dumb or anonymous psychic states have, owing to this error, been coolly suppressed; or, if recognized at all, have been named after the substantive perception they led to, as thoughts “about” this object or “about” that, the stolid word *about* engulfing all their delicate idiosyncracies in its monotonous sound. Thus the greater and greater accentuation and isolation of the substantive parts have continually gone on.¹⁷³

This is ostensibly a theory that seeks to substitute the transitive for the substantive, and thus put a stop to the ‘isolation’ of those abstract entities which obscure how perception is captured in language.

But the theory also contains a dangerous terminological slippage at its centre, one that resides in its imprecision about the exact location of its target. For if it might make sense, according to these lights, to implicate ‘about’ in the psychic suppression the substantive performs, James hints

¹⁷¹ James, *The Writings of William James*, p.38.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.38.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.38.

just previously at a discontentment with another phenomenon: that of needing to name things at all. Criticising those who suppose ‘that where there is no name no entity can exist’, James’s theory quickly moves back to the criticism of substantive words with which the paragraph had begun, thus surviving a clausal impasse which, if elaborated, might sink the theory in which it is sandwiched. For the slippage of object of attack, tossed out chiastically as if motivated by the opportunity to oppose empiricism by a formal as well as an argumentative reversal, reveals the fundamental problem with the case he makes: what James has done, in each of his examples, is to lend to the transitive a function which, if achieved, in fact affords it a status no different from that afforded the substantive. It is the structuring of the sentences themselves that provides the reason for this, for in merely replacing the substantive with the transitive, nothing has been done to disrupt the shape of the clauses themselves – nothing, in other words, to combat the grammatical and typographical pauses representing the real resting places of prose thought.

James’s words are seemingly sanguine about such possibilities, as if what is at stake were a mere power-reversal for words that have not enjoyed their due: ‘[w]e ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*’, James writes, ‘*quite as readily* [italics mine] as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*’. Emerson, as we saw in the last chapter, accompanied his propositional darting (‘[p]ower ceases in the instant of repose’) with a syntactic one, the clause after the word ‘repose’ shooting off from its previous phrasal partner as if in reaction to this threatened rest. James’s theorizing provides no such structural means of breaking up existing units of thought: in his system, the word directly preceding the comma still achieves rhythmic as well as perceptive prominence. If nothing registers at the syntactical level to dislodge sentences from their resting places, or to ensure those transitives do not assume a substantive value, then subject has even been reasserted in this account: ‘about’ – that psychic suppressor which is really the least precise of all prepositional markers – has been replaced by ‘of’; a preposition more exacting as to location and provenance. To achieve what James notionally wants – the end of ‘resting’ places – one would have to rewrite syntactical composition, and thus do away altogether with existing structures of thought as represented in language. This is what the parenthesis against naming hints at, but does not develop, and it is a much more radical proposition than James allows himself. Instead, his sentences participate in a familiar kind of naming: the implications of his theory, if actualised, resolving not in fewer substantive words, but more.

Joan Richardson argues that Stevens ‘had been sensitized’ to James’s words during his time at Harvard, and that ‘[l]ater in his career, Stevens, in a quiet rhetorical attempt at recall asked “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the”, still pondering the kinds of linguistic questions addressed by James’;¹⁷⁴ to which could be added that other similar moment of transitive-centring, in the same collection’s ‘Extracts from Addresses’: ‘There was that difference between the and an, / The difference between himself and no man’.¹⁷⁵ Far from accurately carrying out its intended premises, however, such moments only expose the contradictions in the theory Stevens is exploiting: a theory where ‘the’ is lent an equivalence to ‘truth’, where ‘the and an’ mirror in parity ‘himself and no man’: a theory which, its implications properly followed, points to another truth central to Stevens’s poetry – even ‘no man’, even ‘nothing’, even that loose and slippery ‘X’, are substantive words, mark with whatever psychic absence the naming tendency.

Stevens’s dedication to certain substantive tropes, figurations and collocations constitutes, indeed, a procedure repeated so often in his poetry as to represent, I would contend, the real reason for Poirier’s caution surrounding his aphoristic moments: for if the aphorism is a form which sets about defining the substantive, it seems that in Poirier’s criticism the two functions become synonymous; the former representing the latter, that is, in an enlarged form. It is in a treatment of Eliot that Poirier makes the elision explicitly, relating the reception of Eliot’s prose in his ‘Big Ideas or Feelings or Images’¹⁷⁶ with those repackaged assertions – ‘*Hamlet* is a failure, Milton is not a great poet’ –¹⁷⁷ that accompany them. The comparison is of importance if for no other reason than that such anchorings to the substantive predispose the reader away from the experience of reading as pragmatism advises practicing it. ‘Modernist texts make grim readers of us all’, Poirier argues elsewhere, ‘by offering so many convenient handles for analysis as constantly to remind us that we are in dire need of them’.¹⁷⁸ Since Poirier would – again elsewhere – foreground Henry James Sr.’s accusing words to Emerson (“Oh, you man without a handle!”) as accidentally essential to Emerson’s procedures,¹⁷⁹ his judgment enlists for deployment a critical vocabulary with an established tradition of its own. Despite this irony, Stevens’s poetry does – or does at first – seem to endorse the validity

¹⁷⁴ Richardson, ‘Learning Stevens’s Language’, p.144.

¹⁷⁵ CPP, p.230.

¹⁷⁶ Poirier, *Performing Self*, p.56

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p.56.

¹⁷⁸ Poirier, *Renewal*, p.102.

¹⁷⁹ Richard Poirier, *Trying It Out in America: Literary and Other Performances* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), p.xi.

of modernist handles, by means of an ideal critical vocabulary by which his texts can be received, and which themselves appear to be holophrasal shortenings of extended lapidary injunctions ('supreme fiction' from 'poetry is the supreme fiction'; 'abstraction' from 'It must be abstract'). It is a tendency that has provoked Milton J. Bates to structure most of the chapters in his book-length study according to Stevens's most notable and recurrent key words,¹⁸⁰ that has spawned entire studies on an elucidation of, variously, 'abstraction' and 'the supreme fiction', and which, rather less positively, has seen Denis Donoghue report a wish 'to give up [Stevens's] privileged terms, or to go beyond or beneath them'.¹⁸¹ Yet having established that Stevens's use of aphorism enhances rather than obviates pragmatist procedures, this chapter will finish by arguing that as much is true – and for the same set of reasons – of the particle it would prioritise.

The aphoristic residue: Stevens and the substantive

Why, if the air of Harvard had sensitized him to Jamesian thinking, would Stevens have chosen to use and reuse the substantive? Why outline and elucidate a series of favourite abstract terms and coinages if these terms represented by their nature a stop to language and to thinking? The answer is that Stevens was attracted to the substantive for this very reason – not because he wanted to show how such words stifled and contained the thought they should have been setting in motion, but to show how they could do no such thing. The aphoristic voice of *Adagia* indicates how motile substantive terms could be, as when, attempting to begin an aphorism with the excluding formulations common to such examples in Wilde and Shaw, he proves unable to locate the inherent hardness with which a word like 'beautiful' would – according to James's theory – have been associated: 'The most beautiful (the only beautiful) (beautiful is an inadequate and temporizing improvisation) thing in the world is, of course, the world itself. This is so not only logically but categorically'.¹⁸² Emerson warns against lapidary *éclat*, but where, simply, is the *éclat* here? Stevens, it is true, begins with one exclusion ('the most') only to restrict this exclusionary purpose still further ('the only') – the speaker's voice communicates the intention to provide a precise and discrete categorization of beauty's nature. Rather than achieve it, however, Stevens's aphorism dramatizes

¹⁸⁰ Of the eight chapters in Bates's study, five are titled according, respectively, to the images of 'burgher, fop, and clown', to 'pure poetry', to 'the romantic', to 'supreme fiction and Medium Man', and to 'Major Man', in Bates, *Wallace Stevens*, vii.

¹⁸¹ Denis Donoghue, 'Two Notes on Stevens', *WSJ* 4.3/4 (1980), pp.40-45, p.44.

¹⁸² CPP, p.907.

this achievement's unattainability, as even the existence of the corrective brackets show – seeking to demarcate, their effect, at least visually speaking, is to act as phrasal qualifiers, parenthetical corrections on the sentence's procession, an effect only heightened by this parenthesis's being met by a subsequent other, effectively ruling out its serviceability as extractable quotation. The words themselves are explicit about the inadequacy of this substantive material to meet the task set out: 'beautiful', far from concretising the term it seeks to define, defers such definitions; is 'a temporizing improvisation', a refusal to commit. The sentence seems to recover the poise of its opening and uninterrupted two words, but this gesture is self-mocking: an indication that nothing here is 'of course' and that everything is slightly off it.

James, whose 'pluriversal' philosophical ambitions registered a distaste for lexical constriction, extended these concerns to the domain even of orthography, a system that would encourage a correct way to spell being limiting to the spirit of them.¹⁸³ The suggestion – in the habit of a pre-Enlightenment, non-corrective system – provides the tantalizing possibility of a language in which nouns can be collocations of themselves:¹⁸⁴ not rooted, that is, in fixed names that would set their boundaries for them. Despite James's documented hostility to it, it is as one such collocation of itself that Stevens exploited the substantive particle. And just as the aphorism enjoys an enhanced pragmatism in Stevens's treatment, exactly in the possibilities for troping that fixity lends to it, so Stevens's troping project involves widening and dispersing the substantive's signification exactly where meaning has seemed most immobile. Stevens, in a letter of 1935 in defence of 'The Comedian as the Letter C' (1923), provided an indication of how such polyvalence could apply in aural terms:

When I wrote that poem, subject was not quite what it is today, and I suppose that I ought to confess that by the letter C I meant the sound of the letter C; what was in my mind was to play on that sound throughout the poem. While the sound of that letter has more or less variety, and includes, for instance, K and S, all its shades may be said to have a comic aspect. Consequently, the letter C is a comedian.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002), p.88.

¹⁸⁴ See, for their exposition of such early-modern cultures, Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, 'The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 4.3 (Autumn 1993), pp.255-283.

¹⁸⁵ LWS, p.294.

1935 was the year Stevens wrote and set ‘Mozart’, and the year of his appreciation of Moore. Where both essay and poem treat detachment from the subject – what Stevens in his essay called ‘hybridization’ – here is Stevens again lamenting the decreased dispensation afforded to poets moving beyond the bounds they have notionally set themselves. ‘Subject was not quite what it is today’, writes Stevens; neither, apparently, is the word ‘letter’, which really means ‘sound’,¹⁸⁶ nor the letter ‘C’, which means, not only ‘C’, but ‘K’ and ‘S’ too. Still less is clarified by Stevens’s syllogistic close, where the undeveloped assertion that these ‘K’ and ‘S’ sounds have ‘a comic aspect’ resolves into the outrageously unearned ‘Consequently’, as if travestying literary criticism’s unfolding attempts at explicatory exegesis. By the time Stevens has come to restate the title of the poem, albeit in reverse syntactical order, it has become obvious that the letter itself has meant to mimic the dynamic Stevens holds ‘C’ to be effecting: it reasserts subject, whilst showing ‘subject’ itself to be an evasive term: containing within it several resonances which can be exploited – and ‘played on’ – even within an apparently rigid rubric. It is not, indeed, ‘quite what it is’.

It was, indeed, for her ‘strange collocations’ that Stevens wrote admiringly of Moore’s poetry in a letter to T.C. Wilson contemporary with his published essay.¹⁸⁷ That letter, finding Moore ‘not only a complete disintegrator’ but ‘an equally complete reintegrator’,¹⁸⁸ reflects on Stevens’s own reanimation of critical terms, so minded as his process is at reintroducing the valences of the substantive particle just as soon as they have been dispatched. The key term Stevens ‘reintegrated’ most persistently throughout his career was ‘the supreme fiction’, that term first introduced by the buttonholing speaker of ‘A High-Toned Old Christian Woman’. Leighton wittily calls ‘pure poetry’ – that other favourite keyword of Stevens’s – a ‘modesty boast’,¹⁸⁹ an assertion as much of the term’s limits as of its integrity: if poetry is ‘pure’, it is both aesthetically refined and inflexibly inapplicable in contexts not sharing in this purity. ‘Supreme fiction’ was, in 1923, a coinage of Stevens’s lacking in the complex symbolist history ‘pure poetry’ had already enjoyed.¹⁹⁰ But it, too, is a modesty boast, a term which sits ambiguously between stressing the supremacy of poetry amongst all fictions on the

¹⁸⁶ See, for C’s musicality, Stevens’s 1939 commonplace entry (from Charles Gounod about Marc-Antoine Charpentier): ‘At last, a true musician! He composes in C natural and no one else but the Almighty could do that’. *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Subjects: Wallace Stevens’s Commonplace Book*, ed. Milton J. Bates (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), p.65.

¹⁸⁷ LWS, p.279

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, pp.278-9.

¹⁸⁹ Leighton, *On Form*, p.174.

¹⁹⁰ The classic treatment is D.J. Mossop, *Pure Poetry: Studies in French Poetic Theory and Practice, 1746 to 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

one hand, and of asserting, on the other, its supreme untruth, its fundamental difference from the stuff of life. It is also a 'strange collocation' – one that seems, in this context, similar to – and resultant upon – the tumbling extempore pronouncements of this highly partial speaker's specious argumentation, where an alliterative zeal ('may, merely may, madame') stands in for persuasive argument, and where made-for-the-moment propositions spring generatively and adventitiously from the chance meeting of sonic partners ('But fictive things / Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wink').¹⁹¹ The highly-mediated 'supreme fiction', set so restrictively within the speaker's speech ('Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame'), lends to the term a sense in which it is the established 'pure poetry' weakly-remembered, an invalid recuperation of its aesthetics whose travesty bespeaks the speaker's chancy assertion-making.

And yet the period between 1943 and the publication of *Transport to Summer* in 1947 sees Stevens return to the phrase, now as the title of his long poem, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'; a return belying Vendler's wish to separate *Harmonium* from Stevens's later poetic project.¹⁹² The poet's prepositional marker, 'toward', undermines the claims Stevens's speaker had made over twenty years previously: poetry, far from being the supreme fiction, is involved only in a gesture in that fiction's direction. Stevens was still 'toward' the supreme fiction in 1954, the year before his death, when, asked by a periodical to provide a biographical summary of his aesthetic preoccupations, he wrote that he had a 'central theme', which is that his work 'suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfilment. In the creation of any such fiction, poetry would have a vital significance'.¹⁹³ Lucy Beckett rightly notes that what has not changed, in the many years of transmission from *Harmonium* to his last years, is the search to find 'some kind of answer to [...] the problem of belief'.¹⁹⁴ Just as in 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', then, Stevens's note shows him preoccupied with how to replace religion with a fiction that might fulfil in the way in which religion has ceased to. And yet as Ragg notes, the supreme fiction, what Ragg emphasizes as Stevens's self-declared 'central theme', is, 'remarkably, no longer poetry itself'.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ CPP, p.47.

¹⁹² Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, p.1. Jenkins seeks to correct this view in *Rage for Order*, p.10.

¹⁹³ Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.1.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.1.

¹⁹⁵ Ragg, *Aesthetics of Abstraction*, p.169.

A return to the extra-textual materials surrounding the composition of 'Notes' gives pause to how remarkable this development really is, for Stevens's letter to Hi Simons in 1943 finds him cagily insistent on his not defining his central theme. 'I have not defined a supreme fiction', Stevens writes, in defence of his title:

I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean [...] As I see the subject, it could occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations. In trying to create something as valid as the idea of God has been, and for that matter remains, the first necessity seems to be breadth.¹⁹⁶

Stevens's exegetical prediction, that the term 'could occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations', recognizes the dynamic at work for contemporary and subsequent criticism in the dogged faithfulness of his terminologising tendencies. Yet far from employing and proliferating such coinages as sly critical ambushes, his confession that he 'does not know what he means' is of essential importance to what makes possible the implications of the last sentence: that if he is to replace current fictions, 'the first necessity seems to be breadth'. It is in the interests of breadth that his next letter to Simons undoes what little he has given away in the term's elucidation. There, instead of writing that he 'doesn't know what he means', he writes instead 'I don't know what it is going to be', condemning to futurity any resolution in the matter, and imploring Simons in the collective act to 'not say that our abstraction is this, that or the other'.¹⁹⁷ And in 1951, upon the appearance of 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', this breadth was to grow so broad as to take on a plural form which, now partnered with a proposed aesthetic somewhere in the future, meets not arriving with not defining: 'the poet', writes, Stevens, who creates a world 'indistinguishable' from 'the world in which we shall come to live [...] gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it'.¹⁹⁸ And so the term, which had begun as an asserted description of reality, becomes in its every iteration less stable and less defined: pushed, beyond the present, to an ideal of uncertain actuation; standing not for an established truth or for a critical access-point, but for an enlivening and interesting possibility. A hard substantive has been shown to us unfixed.

¹⁹⁶ LWS, p.435.

¹⁹⁷ LWS, p.438.

¹⁹⁸ CPP, p.662.

Stevens's biographical note stresses 'the possibility of a fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfilment'. In so doing, Stevens is tethering the act of proposition-making explicitly to the fictional enterprise, where to propose is not only to defer, but also only tentatively to imagine what might be possible. And if to propose is not to arrive, then a proposition such as 'It must be abstract', despite its assertiveness, does not signal arrival either, partakes just as fully in its poem's overarching aesthetic of 'toward'. Ragg's study describes abstraction as if just such an arrival were indeed possible; as if, in fact, in Stevens's work, it becomes so: 'it was not until his final decade', writes Ragg, 'that he [Stevens] fully absorbed abstraction'.¹⁹⁹ But a tracing of 'abstraction's' shifting meanings throughout Stevens's career suggests a similar series of disappointments to lie in store for Ragg's totalizing scheme as the 'supreme fiction' has already yielded by it. I agree with Ragg, for instance, that Stevens's career previous to his final ten years leaves 'abstraction' unabsorbed; that a poem like 'Contrary Theses', for instance, presents this non-absorption as the central drama of its effects (effects of which the laconic line, 'The abstract was suddenly there and gone again', solidly attests).²⁰⁰

But I do not think that a poem like 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract', written five years before Stevens's death, suggests any advance in these absorptive energies. Rather, with its 'windings round and dodges to and fro'²⁰¹ and its 'Writhings in wrong obliques and distances',²⁰² Stevens's poem makes good on the dual promise of its title, by which the achievement of abstraction signals both what is 'ultimate' in poetry in the sense of its carrying unique superiority, and also in the sense of its being final: including the possibility of the death of poetry itself. 'If the day writhes, it is not with revelations. / One goes on asking questions',²⁰³ writes the speaker, involving the logic of abstraction in the comparative business of 'rhyming' which this 'writhing with' surely muffles. And so it is that substantive descriptors – the 'blue' which James listed as an example of a lexical resting place – get caught up in this frantic wrestle of comparison and inquisition: it 'is not so blue as we

¹⁹⁹ Ragg, *Aesthetics of Abstraction*, p.11.

²⁰⁰ CPP, p.242.

²⁰¹ CPP, p.369.

²⁰² CPP, p.370.

²⁰³ Ibid, p.369.

thought. To be blue, / There must be no questions'.²⁰⁴ It is as if Stevens's keyword, rather than closing his metaphysical quest, has proved the generative prompt to many others.

The wrestle should give pause to Bates's straightforward gloss of a letter from Stevens to a Yale Student who had written a schematic exegesis of 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds' (1931) in 1941. 'Stevens', he writes, 'did not want to encourage the excessive intellectualization he thought inimical to pure poetry by going further into "theory"'.²⁰⁵ Bates does not exploit Stevens's use of the term 'detachment' ('the purity of a poem is a question not of the detachment of the poem but of the detachment that it produces in the reader') except to suggest its role as intensifier in the escapist force of the perceived opposition; yet the combination of opposites which I have wanted to contend are detachment's particular status in Stevens's practice undermines the confidence of Bates's aestheticist summary – particularly when we consider Stevens's pitched staging of the two terms as they meet in the title to a poem of six years later. 'The Pure Good of Theory' – which dramatizes, in the collocation of two opposites, a yoking which itself does violence to autarkic 'purity' – remembers, in its third canto, Adam's act of naming to be less taxonomically categorizing than the Bible had presented them. Like a poet with an imperfect command of his materials, Adam, having 'malformed the morning metaphor', sees that 'all the leaves leaked gold', in an off-centre Eden which is now only 'paradise malformed'.²⁰⁶

Words are so generative of others in this onomastic boundlessness that naming occurs even when Adam does not mean it to, as if it were definingly and unconsciously human to trope and figure: 'His mind', writes Stevens, 'made morning, / As he slept. He woke in a metaphor'.²⁰⁷ This is the context in which Stevens's speaker posits 'The solar chariot is junk' as 'not a variation but an end', and in which, reiterating his interpretation of James's 'will to believe', he professes a kinship with 'the nicer knowledge of / Belief, that what it believes in is not true'.²⁰⁸ 'Variations', just like 'windings round and dodges to and fro', are what this nicer knowledge consists of: a knowledge that equates being human with being literary, and being literary with being necessarily unstable about the words one is charged with creating. The same is true when, in 'Notes', the speaker, having

²⁰⁴ CPP, p.369.

²⁰⁵ Bates, *Wallace Stevens*, p.141.

²⁰⁶ CPP, p.291.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p.291.

²⁰⁸ CPP, p.291.

mischievously asserted that ‘The death of one god is the death of all’, is forever found in the act of restaging the creation-myth from which he is notionally keen to get away: ‘Phoebus is dead, ephebe’, the speaker asserts, ‘Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest, / Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber’.²⁰⁹ At every instance of this myth’s heralded death the sonic crossover intervenes to resurrect some life in the project of naming – ‘slumber’ resuscitates ‘umber’, and ‘ephebe’ ‘Phoebus’ – as if, in these several variations, the new word is being generated from the old word’s rib; as if the combinations of form have refused the definitive jumping-off point the speaker is at pains confidently to assert, as these substantive words refuse the rest which they, and the subject they depict, have argued for. These words have come, as his speaker set it forth in ‘The Creations of Sound’, ‘At a distance’, from a ‘secondary expositor’,²¹⁰ one who is and is not the author’s speaking voice itself, being in and outside that voice and delighting in it at the same time. The Fall, by this account, is not so much a new version of an old story but the only story it is possible to tell ourselves, told in the only way that it is possible to tell it.

Stevens was not motivated to the aphorism, then, because he saw in it a way of gaining knowledge or of clarifying truth. Nor was he motivated to it by a loss of faith, either in his materials or in faith itself; nor, indeed, by a wish to show the aphorism up in his usage as a lifeless and unmanipulable form whose dramatic possibilities might best be exploited in its transcending. No: Stevens was motivated to the aphorism for the same reason the sparrow in the ‘ké-ké’ letter is motivated to striking a different note – because it represented an opportunity to assert life by means of the most ostensibly unpropitious materials; an opportunity, indeed, to exploit the interesting possibilities that might arise out of the oblique and tangential performances of selfhood that this troping process might make available. Levin remarks that Stevens ‘unravels nightly what he weaves by day’,²¹¹ a summation that might serve for Stevens as easily as any poet inclined to pragmatism. But lost in those accounts of Stevens as pragmatist, and Stevens as practitioner of the vague more generally, has been a recognition that an important part of this unweaving requires the memory of the previous stitch, an expectation of hardness for the intended softness to assert itself. A criticism minded to Stevens’s more provisional moments must accept that hard types of forms, just as hard types of words, be taken into account for the complex malleability at work in his use of them, if Stevens’s full

²⁰⁹ CPP, p.329.

²¹⁰ CPP, p.275.

²¹¹ Jonathan Levin, ‘Life in the Transitions’, p.80.

shaping presence is to be registered. Without such a concession, an important part of the dynamic play in so much of Stevens's poetry is excused, travestied, or ignored altogether. With it, as this study has sought to show, can be revealed at work not just the troping of keywords and phrases but the fundamental troping of a form. In Stevens's hands, the aphorism itself moves at its own oblique distance from where it was when he had found it.

Chapter Four

Ronald Firbank's Aphoristic Reversals

In the first academic survey of Ronald Firbank's novels, Jocelyn Brooke claimed that 'to attempt any "serious estimate"' of Firbank or to "'assess his importance"' was 'as though one should press some rare orchis between blotting-paper. A shapeless brown blob is the result: duly classified and labelled no doubt, but, were it not for the label, entirely unrecognizable'.¹ If Brooke's judgement has constituted its own attempt to 'vary the metaphor' that E.M. Forster used (in recruiting Alexander Pope for his argument, with a further deflation about the middle clause) – that to commit Firbank's writing to exegesis was '[t]o break a butterfly, or even a beetle, upon a wheel' – then Osbert Sitwell's description of his memoir of Firbank as an 'attempt to pin down upon a sheet of paper that unrivalled butterfly' is a return to it.² It is a return also to the language of aphorism; the metaphor of the pressed orchis being an essential instigator of the idea of phrasal preservation, as witnessed in this thesis by Wilde's frequent attempts to reanimate the connection between the 'flowers' kept in a florilegium and the aphorisms that summarise, as well as enact, his art. The elision matters as much as the dynamic Brooke describes (or fails to describe): for in varying the metaphor, as both writers do, Brooke and Sitwell participate in the drama of categorisation which has occupied subsequent commentary on Firbank's work, and which it will be this chapter's intention to resolve.

Specifically revealing as to its form, Sitwell's judgement uncovers another essential feature in Firbank's sentences: not only that they are working in an aphoristic tradition, that is, but that their doing so is in a proper sense outrageous. For attempting to 'pin down' the butterfly matters as much for its shifting categorical evasiveness (it is hard to pin down) as for the ephemerality that makes it an improper subject for this kind of preserving. Inherent to Sitwell's assumptions, in other words, is an understanding of Firbank's sentences as borrowing the architecture of a privileged form to serve un-privileged ends. If one might be tempted to call this satire (perhaps taking heed of the buried presence of Pope's 'Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot'), one would do well to mind Arthur Waley's comments from 1929: that 'satire implies disapproval, and [that] there is no sign that he [Firbank]

¹ Jocelyn Brooke, *Ronald Firbank* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1951), p.9.

² Osbert Sitwell, 'Introduction', in Ronald Firbank, *Five Novels* (London: Duckworth, 1949), p.vii. For the centrality of butterflies to Firbank's work see John Anthony Kiechler, *The Butterfly's Freckled Wings: A Study of Style in the Novels of Ronald Firbank* (Bern: Francke, 1969).

disapproved of or in any way condemned the vapid society that he depicts'.³ The temporal skew to this survey of scholarly voices is not incidental to my preferences, and it will be the contention of this chapter that an earlier criticism understood Firbank's effects better than a later one, which, in attempting to rediscover and recuperate Firbank for a rote understanding of literary modernism, participates in its own unseeing; its own 'shapeless brown blob' upon the preserving page. If there is no sense that Firbank condemned his own society, there is no sense either that he idolised an earlier one or wanted to recover something from it (lacking this Augustan conviction, his work also implies none of the sense of diagnosis that unites both Wilde and Eliot, however distinct their sensibilities). His chief means of putting distance between his own work and the exalted claims for art of Wilde's aestheticism, this chapter will disclose, is by a reversal of the terms of trade upon which aphorism had relied. Instead of making the unfamiliar familiar, Firbank's sentences borrow from everyday language to make the familiar newly strange: using the blotting-paper meant for butterflies, that is, and catching beetles with it instead.

'Would it be Greek or Renaissance?': Firbank's Disruptive Categories

There is a moment, in Firbank's *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924), where the amateur lepidopterist Charlie Mouth, in carrying his specimens through customs, recalls, as Richard Canning rightly suggests, Oscar Wilde's famous aphorism on arriving in America.⁴ Instead of Wilde's polished 'I have nothing to declare but my genius' (the aphorism that commenced his American tour in 1882) Mouth's exchange with the customs officer runs thus:

"Have you nothing, young man, to declare?"

"...Butterflies!"

"Exempt of duty. Pass."⁵

If for no other reason than that something is clearly being 'done' to Wilde's aphorism to suggest this later iteration to be unlike the earlier, the moment gives pause to Don Adams's claims to an exact

³ Arthur Waley, 'Introduction to Limited Edition', in Mervyn Horder ed. *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques* (London: Duckworth, 1977), p.169.

⁴ Richard Canning, 'Introduction', Ronald Firbank, *Vainglory, with Inclinations and Caprice*, ed. Richard Canning (London: Penguin, 2012), p.xix.

⁵ Ronald Firbank, *Three Novels*, ed. Alan Hollinghurst (London: Penguin, 2000), p.147.

commonality of purpose between the aesthetics of Wilde and those of Firbank – claims by which Adams would wish to treat the entire business of criticism as a superfluous concession to values not of his subject’s own. Having claimed to detect, in the first of two studies of Firbank’s fiction, a fictional domain whose characters, ‘frustrated and abused by the world at large, have chosen to withdraw into a private world that is more amenable’⁶ – a world, moreover, ‘in which there is no distinction to be made between reality and artifice’ – Adams names, in the later study, the recognisable originator of the model that would value such retreats, and make such claims for it. Affirming Brigid Brophy’s designation of Firbank’s relation to Wilde as that of a ‘devotion’, Adams anchors this feeling in Wilde’s critical essays (‘the key to understanding Firbank’s relation to and inspiration from Wilde’) and suggests for those moments of stylisation that commentators ‘have found most offputting’ in Firbank’s work a display of ‘the very characteristics that most fully and convincingly express the subjective individualism that is the ideal of Wilde’s late Romantic aesthetics’.⁷

Enlisting, for his argument’s purposes, Cuthbert Wright’s tautology about Firbank’s being ‘superlatively himself’ where ‘no one has resembled him’,⁸ Adams’s short-circuiting procedures are faithful to the standards set by Wilde’s magisterial interrogations, which exhaust such subjects as they would pretend to investigate: the reader, like that witnessing the unfolding adjudications of Wilde’s ‘Decay of Lying’, is ‘forced to swallow Firbank’s novels whole or not at all’.⁹ And if Adams casts Firbank’s novels as the application in practice of what Wilde had advanced in theory, Brophy’s citation ends up looking far from incidental: in her study, by which Wilde ‘was cut off before he could quite fulfil the inventive part of his programme’;¹⁰ Firbank’s works have as resultant effect that of ‘taking up aesthetics from where Wilde had been cut off’.¹¹

To cast things in these aposiopetic terms is to register the final indignity in the Wilde story as that of his not having been able to perfect his aphorisms, the continuing of which – by Brophy’s

⁶ Don Adams, *Alternative Paradigms of Literary Realism* (London: Palgrave, 2009), p.86.

⁷ Don Adams, ‘Morality as a Matter of Taste: The Fiction of Ronald Firbank’, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 47.1 (March 2018), pp.17-35, p.21.

⁸ Ibid, p.17.

⁹ Adams, *Alternative Paradigms*, p.75.

¹⁰ Brigid Brophy, *Prancing Novelist: A Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography in Praise of Ronald Firbank* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p.249.

¹¹ Ibid, p.250.

estimate – is Firbank’s task. This is not only the case, in her study, by the lights of the receptive atmospherics Adams delineates, whereby a model ineffability is again the critical watchword (‘Firbank made the aesthetics part of the books. He sealed the climate necessary to appreciating the book into the book’s atmosphere’)¹²; it is so also by the literal way she detects Wilde’s aphorisms within Firbank’s phrasing, and the implicit sense that mining Firbank’s works for evidences of Wilde’s buried aphorisms is an appropriate use of critical energies. If Firbank’s is a corpus in which ‘strand after strand [...] led back to Wilde’,¹³ the site of this narrative/textual metaphor – with its (fairly conventional) paronomasia on spinning yarns and weaving tales – is the sentence: appropriately, since it is Brophy’s view that personal contingency has seen to Wilde’s being interrupted. ‘[Y]ou can sometimes pick out the substance of a Wildean aphorism and, by straightening it out, re-erect it in its original upright stance of assertion’¹⁴, writes Brophy at one moment in her study; at another, following on from ascribing to Wilde the bestowing gift of a sense of ‘theatre, rather than narrative’,¹⁵ that Firbank’s writing ‘rings with curtain lines, ambivalent and open-ended or on the minor-key final note of an epigram whose stresses have been redistributed’.¹⁶

Appearing in the same decade as Brophy’s study, Leo Bersani’s *Future for Astyanax* was able to designate the manner in which all texts must be considered fragmentary by the lights of psychoanalytic criticism, even if it masquerades under the assumed guise of traditional source-hunting. With its ‘tracing of all desires back to familial patterns of desire’ and its ‘insistence on a certain pattern of normal psychic growth’,¹⁷ such criticism ‘helps’ texts ‘to regress to their sources’.¹⁸ Gladly participating in that tendency – and thus making those otherwise implicit procedures of scholarship more visible – Brophy’s study illuminates the way in which an understanding of Firbank’s sentences as ‘fragments’ of Wilde’s aphorisms works towards a similar regression; in this case, to an established model of sexuality which Wilde’s example had gone to determining. Alighting upon a potentially useful piece of terminology to describe Firbank’s innovations – what she calls his ‘overhear method’ –¹⁹ Brophy is at pains only to fold these genuine discoveries behind *du-jour*

¹² Ibid, p.250.

¹³ Ibid, p.250

¹⁴ Ibid, p.430.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.487.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.488.

¹⁷ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (London: Marion Boyers, 1978), pp.8-9.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.18.

¹⁹ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p.532.

orthodoxies about psychic repression, whose ‘fragmentary’ results gesture to a sexuality only in the gift of past examples to measure and determine. That these fragments are again instigated by the metaphor of the woven text – the overhear method is the fruit of Firbank’s ‘habit’ (the implied appetitive pathology is itself instructive) ‘of ambiguously half-bodying forth images by means of deliberate gaps in his fabric’²⁰ dissipates the force of those innovations she would otherwise stress, since it suggests a need for them to be helped back to the text from which they had mistakenly deviated. Even Wilde’s notionally marginal sexuality is recuperated further into a framework that would understand it by the patrilineal model of literary influence: one wherein he is Firbank’s ‘literary stepfather’,²¹ and his fragmentary *askesis* a form of ‘creative parricide’.²² An ‘intellectual puzzle’ to Firbank, Wilde is rendered soluble, in her account, only by Firbank’s sexual awakening, which happens by piecing together the scraps left by the earlier writer,²³ recuperating him into a textual whole and using this antecedent text as the model for a sexuality of his own: ‘Wilde’, she writes, ‘ceased to be an intellectual mystery as soon as Firbank became tolerably acquainted with his own temperament’.²⁴

If I have gone into some depth about a commentary whose datedness might render it straightforwardly un-illuminating to exegesis, it is in part to suggest, as I have already proved, the inappropriacy of its rearticulation in its recent contexts. Yet Adams’s study, which has encouraged a way of talking about Firbank that would forbid talking altogether, exposes, in citing Brophy’s, the curious commonality between his approach and one that would have Firbank’s sentences serve as semi-available prompts for saying everything. For to suggest, as Adams and Brophy do, that Wilde and Firbank are set at achieving the same ends, with Firbank as the completing hand to Wilde’s earlier scriptive instigations, is to set as standard a model of fragmentation undeterred by the extreme sexual valences of Brophy’s handling. Embodying Glen W. Most’s much later designation of the literary fragment as an ‘incomplete textual citation’,²⁵ Shaun McCarthy’s treatment of Firbank’s effects – published five years after Brophy’s study – keeps to the implicit Freudian

²⁰ Ibid, p.532.

²¹ Ibid, p.425.

²² Ibid, p.293.

²³ Brophy takes the protagonist of *Odetta d’Antrevernes* (1905) to be Firbank’s avatar, ‘eavesdrop[ping] adult conversation (about the Wilde scandal) and doesn’t understand’, *Prancing Novelist*, p.426.

²⁴ Ibid, p.244.

²⁵ Glen W. Most, ‘On Fragments’, quoted in Rebecca Varley Winter, *Reading Fragments and Fragmentation in Modernist Literature* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2018), pp.1-2.

language which in her usage had proved central, and locates it within a schema of canonical literary modernism. With Firbank, writes McCarthy, ‘as also with Eliot, the suppressed or exhausted element of the equation is notable by virtue of its absence’;²⁶ further, ‘as Joyce dislocates syntax and Eliot imagery, so does Firbank seek to dislocate conversation to a similar purpose – that of persuading the reader to re-create that nine-tenths of the iceberg of social custom and behaviour that lies beneath the surface of the spoken language’.²⁷

The idea, then, of ‘re-creation’ as being something it is the commentator’s business to set about doing – doing, that is, because Firbank’s ‘fragmentary’ writing has gestured to those larger texts that would complete or correct them into normative wholes – runs as implicit throughline to the mainstream of Firbank scholarship; at once keen to save its subject from the margins by situating him within the modernist canon, and taking a suppressed sexual or citational source as a confirming measure of that canon’s principal effects. For Alan Hollinghurst, for whom ‘a genuine modernist sensibility’ suffuses Firbank’s work, ‘the main features of Firbank’s stylistic revolution were the suppression, or at least concealment, of plot; a texture made up of elliptical-seeming fragments; and an extraordinary brevity’.²⁸ This being so, it makes sense that scholarship would wish to make the small leap Jed Mayer seeks to in suggesting, of a section of Firbank’s *Vainglory*, that ‘its deletions are largely recoverable by the careful reader with enough time for such puzzles’;²⁹ in other words, that recovering deletions is the challenge Firbank’s use of fragmentation sets. That the scholarship on Firbank is not always clear about the nature of the deletion – whether it is that of a larger textual whole, as I have so far exposed; or of such building-blocks of narrative as would impede the reader’s ability to generate their own impression of it, as Susan Harrington argues –³⁰ bespeaks a general awkwardness inherent to this model’s critical application, itself evidence of a wider generic mis-seeing. The mismatch of prompt to effect that comes of Mayer’s claiming to detect ‘bitterness and urbane [sic] despair’ in the designation of one of *Vainglory*’s characters by Firbank’s unassigned ‘A tiara swamps her’ (a surely humorous moment dependent upon

²⁶ Shaun McCarthy, ‘Firbank’s *Inclinations* and the Nouveau Roman’, in *Critical Quarterly* 20:2, 1978 (Summer), pp.64-77, p.67.

²⁷ Ibid, p.69.

²⁸ Alan Hollinghurst, “‘I Often Laugh When I’m Alone’: The Novels of Ronald Firbank”, *Yale Review*, 89.2 (April 2001) (pp.1-18), p.2.

²⁹ Jed Mayer, ‘The Artificial Conversation of Ronald Firbank; or, Dialogue for Weary People’, in Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simons eds. *Critical Essays on Ronald Firbank, English Novelist 1886-1926* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p.104.

³⁰ Susan Harrington, ‘Ronald Firbank’s *Flower Beneath the Foot* as a Dialogue Novel’, *ibid*, p.167.

straightforward catachresis for its effects) is instructive of the bad critical instincts that are encouraged by an understanding of modernism as dealing principally in paginated voids and chasms, and of this modernism as having anything to do with Ronald Firbank.³¹ Pilar Sanchez Calle's claim that 'under the surface of witty exchanges, laughter and frivolity lies a subtext of darkness, emptiness, frustration and extreme discomfort' becomes, then, only the most outrageous rendition of a tendency to locate in Firbank's texts effects exactly to the contrary of those the data has supplied.³²

The increasing tendency to align Firbank with a certain idea of canonical modernism necessitates a refusal of the aesthetics Adams outlines that is strangely like it as to its essential principles. There is not only the fact that the sense of rupture with what Hollinghurst calls 'the murky legacy of the 1890s' – a caesural break consisting of 'his cutting-out of superfluities' and 'his amassing of fragments' –³³ establishes that legacy as the model from which to deviate; but also that, in describing Firbank's proper place as being within modernism and not within aestheticism, Canning's similarly-persuaded study invites back that standard of ineffability which Wilde had associated with the latter. Still smarting in 2012 at Forster's 'condescending' survey of Firbank's work, and claiming that Forster 'failed to appreciate [...] the radical modernism in Firbank's capacity for compressing narrative and condensing storylines' (again, the question becomes that of which narratives have been compressed, which storylines condensed),³⁴ Canning relates what he takes to be an understandable exegetical failure in the 'typical paradox which can make "explaining" Firbank so hazardous', since 'what he is celebrated for lies not in what he wrote, but in what he did not write, what he skipped over, assiduously excised or truncated'.³⁵ The exact terms that had, in Adams's study, marked out Firbank as successor to Wilde (an important part in continuing where Wilde was cut off being, we might remember, that of the ineffability of commentary surrounding him; of 'swallow[ing] Firbank's novels whole') reappear, in Hollinghurst's and Canning's, as means of asserting his departure from him.

³¹ Mayer talks of 'the void surrounding the conversations of Firbank's characters', Ibid, p.104.

³² Pilar Sanchez Calle, 'Private Dreams, Public Realities: An Analysis of Female Characters in Ronald Firbank's *The Flower Beneath the Foot*' in Davies, *Critical Essays*, pp.177-8.

³³ Hollinghurst, "I Often Laugh", p.3.

³⁴ Richard Canning, 'Introduction', p.xviii.

³⁵ Ibid, p.xxi.

If the effect, then, of these notionally modernist-inclined studies has been to anchor an appreciation of Firbank's effects back to within a Wildean mooring, the comparison is instructive exactly in its being misplaced; or rather, in how it alerts us to the question of what Firbank is really doing with the example Wilde has set. For the 'parricide' of Brophy's study, just as the 'rupture' of Hollinghurst's – alike in making an argument for agonistic breakage – exactly misunderstand the temperament of Firbank's works, and the atmosphere of belatedness they access and impart. In a parsing of those words we have seen Vivian, of 'The Decay of Lying', use to exalt the isolated cultures of his preferred artistic conditions – that Hegelian world of 'true culture', with its promissory undergirding by a Darwinism that will 'make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety, and change' – Adams claims for Firbank a shared concern; Firbank's fiction being, in his understanding, 'devoted to imaginative expression of this world of "true culture" in which "sin is impossible"', a world 'envisioned in and through the pastoral, which is the genre and realm that all of Firbank's mature fiction entertainingly inhabits'.³⁶ Since Adams, like Brophy, claims Firbank's fiction to have been an embodiment of Wilde's *Intentions*, it does nothing to hurt his case that Firbank left little in the way of direct critical pronouncement. Yet one rare intervention – Firbank's designation of his work as 'thistledown' –³⁷ does much to concretise the nature of this silence, as well as the salience of Adams's deterministic teleology; pointing as it does to an understanding of Firbank's sense of development as exactly the reverse of that envisioned by Wilde: instead of an efflorescent variety about his literary forms, Firbank's are a retreat to the downy margins.

If 'thistledown' suggests an understanding of Firbank's literary effects as debased from the horticultural metaphor that Wilde had used as shepherd to his own, then this is the force of that earlier criticism which, not seeking to rehabilitate Firbank for the accepted canon, remembered Wilde's example only to characterise Firbank's fiction as a reduced version of it: one not minded towards creating or attaining any culture that was new. Such is the effect of the words of Ifan Kyrle Fletcher in the *Memoir* of Firbank's contemporaries – published, in 1930, four years after his death – when he talks of the conditions Firbank required for his fiction as ones implicitly reduced from the Meredithian security of Wilde's depiction. Instead, that is, of those thorny roses, representative of his style, by which, by Wilde's congratulation, Meredith had managed to keep the world at bay (and

³⁶Adams, 'Morality as a Matter of Taste', p.25.

³⁷ Quoted in Brophy, p.254.

to guarantee linguistic independence in so doing)³⁸, Firbank was ‘like the Sleeping Beauty’ in having ‘lived in a shadowy haven of retreat, secure from the world behind impenetrable briars’.³⁹ At issue is a reduced, slumberous, and less visible world than that of Wilde’s depictions: worlds away, in other words, from the fluent perfectibility of that ‘true culture’ which was meant to produce an art more vivid and more expressive than life was capable of offering; that Firbank’s world enlists for protection not the beautiful rose but only the synecdochally diminished ‘briars’ suggests a domain that would dispense with the beautiful side of Wilde’s compact altogether. If Wilde had lamented James as ‘impenetrable’ – an effect Stevens would come to valorise as that of making ‘the visible a little hard | To see’ – then Kyrle Fletcher’s memorialisations, as Firbank’s own encouragements, suggest for Firbank’s fiction an ethos decidedly alien to Wilde’s lucid effects.

This may be because the better comparison, for Firbank’s purposes, is to the aesthetics I have argued consistently as opposed to Wilde’s: those of Pater, whose writing is properly decadent in the sense of arguing for an ethics of impermanence, of atrophy, and of decay, and for whom stable and rigid categories are liable to dissolve at the merest exertion of outward environmental pressure. In Pater’s review of William Morris’s poetry – an essay that would later comprise the bulk of his conclusion to *The Renaissance* – a ‘strange complex of conditions’ shows ‘flowers of sentiment expand, among people of a remote and unaccustomed beauty, somnambulistic, frail, androgynous, the light almost shining through them’.⁴⁰ Leighton has called this ‘a “beauty” so diaphanous that it can diffuse and invite penetration at the same time’,⁴¹ and it may be that no small part of these effects is to withhold on clarity as to subject (is it the flowers which are ‘somnambulistic’ and ‘frail’ or the androgynous figures they share undetermined space with?) which Leighton elsewhere detects as one way Pater has of putting his practically-felt doctrine of atrophy into practice;⁴² or as to the perspective that might be resultant upon it (is it in the reader’s gift or that of the *androgènes* to notice their own beauty as ‘unaccustomed?’). The fraught stability and imminently permeable translucence of these figures is rearticulated by Sitwell as a useful entry for Firbank’s creations, whose embodied

³⁸ ‘[H]is style would be quite sufficient of itself to keep life at a respectful distance. By its means he has planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with wonderful roses’, CWOW4, p.81.

³⁹ Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, ‘Ronald Firbank’, in Ifan Kyrle Fletcher ed. *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (London: Duckworth, 1930), p.27.

⁴⁰ Walter Pater, ‘Poems by William Morris’, *Westminster Review*, 34 (1868), pp.300-12, p.302.

⁴¹ Leighton, *On Form*, p.85.

⁴² Leighton writes of Pater’s subjects as susceptible ‘to a grammatical erosion, even a vanishing, as he explores its all too permeable borders’, *ibid*, p.89.

gestures towards innovation are fringed with all the logical caveats that are missing in Wilde's imagination of a world made paradoxically fuller and stronger by refusing community. Firbank's fictions, creating a 'new if minute world, which existed in its own pulse of time', borrow from Pater, in Sitwell's depiction, not just in the reduced circumstances that would see them 'etiolate', good only to be let 'loose in the realm of a harmless reality',⁴³ but also in the measurement that had confirmed the only momentary durability of that atrophying matter.⁴⁴

Yet it may also be that such comparisons themselves are overdignified, too monumentalised in the expected scope of their prescriptions. For Sitwell's description, heavy in decadent-aestheticist allusion, works itself to drive a distance between Firbank's effects and those of the model it invokes. Where Pater's figures, that is, are made to underscore an apocalyptic message about the imminent disintegration of matter, one wherein even the idea of progress is undermined (Pater's 'expand' instigates the impression of a development swollen rather than grown; that these figures do not survive the transition from review to book enacts in miniature Pater's exultant refusal of overarching *telos*, his gladness at caducous shedding) Firbank's, by Sitwell's reckoning, are beauties whose attractions inhere not in their (non-existent) prescriptive valences, but in their ability to confirm the talent of their creator. These creatures, no longer the half-figured things that level the distinctions of all material forms in Pater's stewardship, are – for so their capturing metaphor implies – now simply butterflies: '[t]he virtuosity of the author', Sitwell writes, 'was able to net any situation [...] and let it loose in the realm of a harmless reality'. Eking out their half-lives in Firbank's netting, his fiction's characters have their translucence explained (these are appropriate descriptive modifiers for the interaction of butterfly-wings to sunlight) and the authority that had sanctioned their allusiveness deflated, reduced as these have been to the curatorial enjoyment of beautiful ephemera. That this netting occurs 'against the mauve and lime-green horizon' of Firbank's fictions enforces the sense that decadent literature is being accessed only to register time's transit from its earlier effects. Itself a collected feature accessed for its conferring atmospheric essence, the decadent 'mauve' is recruited to give the impression of an eternal twilight to Firbank's imaginings: robbed of the potency of their originals and left to record the sun's afterglow only in the memory of some phosphorescent rays, the

⁴³ Words that travesty Wilde's ethics Adams quotes as also Firbank's: that those who will people his utopias 'can do everything they wish without hurt to the soul [...] the soul being an entity so divine that it is able to transform into elements of a richer experience, or a finer susceptibility, or a newer mode of thought', 'Morality as a Matter of Taste', p.25.

⁴⁴ A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life', WPR, p.152.

invoked colour has registered an allegiance which is also a confirmation of that source's diminishment.

These dubious indicators of affiliation should give pause to Brophy's confident assertion that 'Firbank's aestheticism', although 'warned off non-fiction polemic' by the Wilde trial, was a conviction Firbank 'lived – through his habit of collection and cult, including his collection and cult of Wilde'.⁴⁵ For if Adams, in describing Wilde's pastoral as 'the genre and realm that all of Firbank's mature fiction entertainingly inhabits', marshals the hedging adverb to perform an awkward soldering of Wilde's aesthetics to those of Firbank (and in so doing, only undoes its force by values not obvious in the former), it is a ripple of disruption oddly faithful to Firbank's procedures, and to the nature of the distance registered between his writing and literary aestheticism. 'Entertainingly', however slight the disobedient tremor it notes, refuses to acknowledge an aesthetics that is truly 'lived'. Something different to straightforward endorsement, similarly, is at work in Firbank's 'collecting', as Sitwell's description of Firbank's rooms attests. Wilde, with a nod to the similar interior reckonings of Des Esseintes in *A Rebours* (1884), provided the standard of aestheticist domestic control in Lord Henry's living room in *Dorian Gray*. With its 'Persian rugs' and 'china jars' enacting a straightforward orientalism, its artfully-arranged reading-matter there to strike a note of extracted essences harmonic with the 'gilt daisies' that have 'powdered' them, and the raw-and-cooked 'apricot-coloured light' that reduces the natural world to such comestible values as can be extracted from it, Lord Henry's room practices an updated form of blazon: this is a collecting which, managing the world by its constitutive metonyms, bears out the force of Vivian's 'prefer[ring] houses to the open air', because '[i]n a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure'.⁴⁶

To compare this, then, to Firbank's rooms is to be granted a picture of order disrupted: one in which high-cultural touchstones like the drawings of Felicien Rops and bronze carvings from classical antiquity, seemingly participative in the formulae of Wilde's extractive effects (the elision of 'elaborate inkpots, coloured quill-pens' and 'a vast tortoiseshell crucifix' seeming to continue the note of domination-by-essence that is characteristic of Wilde's descriptive accounting), jostle with the disruptively particular and personal – 'a photograph of his [Firbank's] mother in court dress';

⁴⁵ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p.250.

⁴⁶ CWOW4, p.74.

some of Firbank's 'own published books and manuscripts' – and with the flagrantly deflating ('a number of the silliest illustrated weekly papers (which provided him with a constant source of amusement))'.⁴⁷ Underscoring the scene's dissolving of the subordination which has been central to Wilde's effects is the sense in which the inscription of his authorial personality in amongst this assemblage registers his own art as somehow mimicking its implicit argument: the sensibility that would delight in the illustrated weeklies inhabiting this high-cultural carapace registers thus as a kind of joke at the monumentality of these proportions. The effect of the photograph of his mother being 'mounted in a large silver frame',⁴⁸ for instance, strikes, however mildly, at the sense of overborrowing that is the scene's dominant note, and which enforces a similar valence in the exterior qualities of his own published and unpublished works – indifferent, that is, as to the interior's proper polish – 'bound' in the harmonising and prettified blur of 'white vellum'.⁴⁹ If the volume as art-object proves insensible of the text it houses, that is, it may be that this is a function of the mismatch that Firbank's texts themselves declare an interest in; a mismatch which constitutes the real dynamic, I will contend, of his isolated sentences.

For that the beauty of its binding makes no distinction between the published and unpublished text stresses at a deeper equivalence between the two: a retained sense of roughness even to the finished product that works instructively against the outer gloss that would seem to formalise its aestheticist affiliations. Fletcher observes that Firbank's 'love of beauty [...] was always apparent in his hatred of pretentiousness'; a conviction by which he 'suspected his own expressions of admiration', 'questioned the sincerity of all rodomontade', and 'refus[ed] to talk seriously about art and life'.⁵⁰ judgements suggesting quite a different reason for not sombrely rearticulating Wilde's aesthetic pronouncements than that he had been 'warned off' them by the events of 1895. Brophy, in her comments about Firbank's collecting practices, claims that Firbank 'extended that habit of living into his writing, which isolates and adores images as a collector does objects';⁵¹ and later, in extrapolating her designation of Firbank's 'overhear method', that 'Firbank became in real life a collector and connoisseur of overheard remarks'.⁵² Yet, knowing what we know about this

⁴⁷ Osbert Sitwell, 'Ronald Firbank', in *Ronald: Firbank: A Memoir*, pp.124-125.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.125.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.125.

⁵⁰ Fletcher, 'Ronald Firbank', p.27.

⁵¹ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p.250.

⁵² Ibid, p.426.

collecting, and the slyly anarchic strategies it enforces for the disruption of Wilde's subordinated order, we might be tempted to imagine for such procedures not the extension of sympathy and reverence for an older aesthetics but a similar disruption to it: an extension to Firbank's sentences, that is, of the strategies inherent in his collecting practices more widely.

It was indeed by 'isolation' that Wilde produced the effects of his aphorisms – even if, as I have spent much of this thesis's first chapter in proving, such isolation enlists the paradoxical requirement of some interaction with the wider world to achieve them. Wilde's encounter with the American customs officer provides no exception to this aspect of the aphorism's mechanics. In punning upon workmanlike and bureaucratic language, Wilde is able to re-literalise the everyday back into his preferred schema: a system whereby 'declaring' an item at customs becomes answerable to 'declaring' it – as a version of the Austinian performative – for the aphoristic sentence; rules by which everything, as Said has it, is made true upon someone's merely saying it is. By keeping both versions in circulation and staging the exchange as the meeting-point of two distinct registers, Wilde is also able to assert his own individual and paradoxical voice against the depersonalised one of ordinary speech, in ways that capture a related conviction about the role of the artist within (and without) society. Rendering thus the unfamiliar familiar, Wilde's declarative paradox works according to the summary Northrop Frye provided for it. The result of this disputatiousness is not absurd but a new truth, antinomically alternative to that of common understanding, yet bearing the stylish personal stamp that enacts the distinction of the author's voice, and thus makes good on its assertions of artistic autarky.

The effects are reversed when it comes to Firbank's treatment of the scene; for far from an 'incomplete textual citation', Charlie Mouth's response to the customs officer provides material whose outrageous completeness constitutes its very comedy. Typographic markers conspire to suggest a sentence fully its own even without the remembered example of Wilde's exclamatory portentousness, as the majuscule 'B' of 'Butterflies', and the mark of exclamation that caps it to finality, signal the utterance's distance from the kind of elliptical statement which Anne Toner suggests to be that of the modernist mainstream, whose registered typographic absences evince a writing 'committed philosophically and aesthetically to forms of the obscure'.⁵³ Firbank's ellipsis is

⁵³ Anne Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.151.

not either, as Toner crisply summarises its effects in Jacques Derrida's philosophy, a marker of 'the infinite deferral of meaning',⁵⁴ but an exact gesture at its instantiation: like 'diagrammatic bullet-paths of dots', as Brophy nicely has it, which Firbank's sentences 'leave behind',⁵⁵ the ellipsis only enhances another useful designation of Brophy's, hampered by her taxonomic uncertainties: that Firbank's sentences are 'aerated'.⁵⁶ Literalising this air and thus confirming – and not interrupting – the white space that serves as its metaphorical synonym, Firbank's sentence works at replicating the aphoristic culture that had achieved a separable space for its material by different means; and registers the disruptive effects of his domestic blazons in ways that scholarship of his idolatrous reception of Wilde's work has proved unfit to register.

The 'dislocation' that assuredly occurs, in this scene as often in Firbank's writing, is not one that invites the reader to supply 'nine-tenths of the iceberg of social custom', as McCarthy puts it, but instead to see how much a sense of social custom depends on statements without an obvious wider context to supply. Firbank's joke works by pointing to how such sentences that should fail on their own to satisfy instead satisfy completely in their usage by the characters who speak them. This is the note that Evelyn Waugh was able to extract in his own memory of the scene: that, that is, which in *Vile Bodies* (1930) sees Divine Discontent receive a customary dispensation of a similar kind to Charlie Mouth's.

'Have you anything to declare?'

'Wings.'

'Have you wore them?'

'Sure.'

'That's all right, then.'⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.151.

⁵⁵ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p.487.

⁵⁶ For how emblematic the term is to the uncertainties of which I speak, see her use of the word 'ventilated', which dissipates Firbank's sentences' demarcated qualities exactly where 'aerated' enforces them: the former lets the air in, the latter keeps it out. Ibid, p.427; p.397.

⁵⁷ Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (London: Penguin Books, 1955), p.21.

Waugh's novel does not just allusively remember Firbank's:⁵⁸ it picks out a synecdochic value from Firbank's earlier image so as to emphasise that original's effect. Remaining true thus to the spirit of Charlie Mouth's exchange (in that an ephemeral item has been inserted in the remembered place of a privileged form; the progressing smallness of 'butterflies' to 'wings' only confirms the disjuncture of lapidary vehicle to the lightness of the material it is seen to shepherd), *Vile Bodies* also replicates and exposes the mechanics of a model with a fundamentally opposed vision for dialogue to that advanced in Wilde's examples.

For instead of featuring brilliant speakers entrusted with a given monopoly of wit – speakers like those of Wilde's magisterial dialogues, or of Wilde speaking in his own person in 1882; speakers for whom 'the point' has been to showcase the deficiency of the common stock of language when set against the brilliant uses made of it in this superior speaker's finer handling – Firbank's and Waugh's dialogic exchanges manifest the opposite conviction: that ordinary language may be far stranger and more imaginative than the culture of the aphoristic – premised as that is on the necessary reshaping of shop-worn truisms and cumbersome everyday speech – takes for its basic assumption. If it is true to say that the Charlie Mouth exchange reorientates the focus of Firbank's sentences from the durable to the transient, it is also true that it spreads this focus out: to take in a mechanics of dialogue that would be satisfied with such clearly unsatisfactory data as the customs officer, in Firbank's novel as in Waugh's, is presented with. And if saying this is to say as much as that all language is implicated in the process, then that is the paradox Firbank's example sustains: his fiction, as Waugh noticed,⁵⁹ managing to innovate much more than those studies which would have him be another Joyce or Eliot – and understood thus by standards clearly not his own – can credit him with doing. The remainder of this chapter will build on the foregrounding of the earlier criticism that has so far been its tendency: and will suggest, by an attention to his reported method as by a focus on his most compositionally self-reflexive novel, that Firbank's isolated sentences drive a reversal of those aesthetics the aphoristic conventionally shepherds. And if it is by such reversals that his ethics of collecting are best understood, it is because Firbank's sentences commit to print the kinds of categorical disruptiveness so far witnessed in contemporary accounts of Firbank's

⁵⁸ As his 1964 preface does explicitly: 'I began under the brief influence of Ronald Firbank but struck out for myself', he writes; failing to clarify whether the novel in question represents this 'brief influence' or the tenuous beginnings of the 'striking out', 'Preface', *Vile Bodies* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.xvi.

⁵⁹ Ernest Hemingway, amongst others, 'developing the technical discoveries upon which Ronald Firbank so negligently stumbled', 'Ronald Firbank', Waugh, *Memoirs and Critiques*, p.175.

interior blazonry. Transporting the downy margins of his literary thistledown to centre stage, Firbank's sentences thus work at foregrounding, as well as delighting in, the sheer strangeness of our everyday exchanges: dislocated, that is, not because a suppressed element is missing, but because it is not.

'Little Extricable Cubes of Wit': Firbank's Aesthetics of Asides

More useful than his assertion of Firbank's being 'among the supreme prose stylists of high modernism'⁶⁰ – indeed, in all meaningful ways opposed to it – is Canning's recent comment (in a broadcast interview, and thus itself appropriately off-the-cuff), by which he argues that 'Firbankian dialogue is true dialogue'.⁶¹ The observation is enough to suggest an immediate distance between Firbank's attitude to language and that of Wilde, who had advocated a 'language different from that of actual use [...] full of resonant music and sweet rhythm, made stately by solemn cadence, or made delicate by fanciful rhyme, jewelled with wonderful words, and enriched by lofty diction'.⁶² I have wanted to suggest a distinction between Pater's aesthetics and those of Wilde, a distinction which iconographic overlap only registers. Pater, in asserting his 'hard, gem-like flame' and in noticing the serendipitous possibility for literary discovery of 'chance-tost gems [...] of expression',⁶³ imagines a writerly enterprise that would value for these jewelled moments the fleeting over the 'stately' or 'solemn': synonyms, as those are, for the hushed permanence of Wilde's lapidary systems. If the overlap – that equating value with diamonds – remains unanswerable, it is just this equation Firbank works to undo: his sentences, as disposed towards chance as Pater had advocated, prioritise instead something closer to chance-tost *non*-gems; expressions surprising not for their refinement but for their roughness; just as much as for the fact that this roughness is being captured at all.

The *Memoir* revisits these decadent-aestheticist convictions only to see Firbank undo their vaunted preciousness by deflating comparison: a fact which the mere act of comparison instantiates (Wilde's 'language different from that of actual use' and Pater's 'chance-tost gems' depending as they do upon turns of phrase that separate themselves from the linguistic common stock). Keen,

⁶⁰ Canning, 'Introduction', p.xxxix.

⁶¹ Richard Canning, 'Better Known', November the 4th 2018, [4:24 of <https://betterknown.co.uk/2018/11/04/richard-canning/>].

⁶² CWOW4, p.84.

⁶³ Quoted in Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, fn., p.169.

apparently, to permeate this inseparability by means particularly violent to its treasured imagery, Firbank, as Kyrle Fletcher describes him, was frequently to be found ‘working at a sort of mosaic, in which the pattern was picked out in pretty touches and amusing details lifted from life [...] Returning home from a trip to London, he would be as excited about a *faux-pas* he had seen at Rumpelmayer’s or an *incongruité* he had overheard in the train as if he were bearing a new book by “Max” [Beerbohm] or an Egyptian amulet of rare potency’.⁶⁴ Like Sitwell’s, Kyrle Fletcher’s account is dense in aestheticist rhetoric, some of it buried and cross-referential (when Firbank celebrated the ‘brightness of the *mot juste*’, as Kyrle Fletcher reports,⁶⁵ he retains the sense of perceived equivalence between ‘wonderful words’ and gleaming jewels); some of it more obviously a synthetic harkback to both Wilde and Pater (it is as a ‘mosaic’ that Wilde disparagingly summarised Pater’s efforts); and some of it, bespeaking its ostensible affiliations the more volubly still, making reference to a writerly practitioner of the 1890s. That a relationship between Max Beerbohm’s fiction and the language of gems should be taken as axiomatic is exactly proved in Firbank’s own levelling deflation of the equivalence’s pretensions. To establish a paratactical relationship detecting no difference between these ‘amusing details’, *faux-pas* and *incongruités* on the one hand and those monumentalised literary efforts on the other, then, is to make a larger point about these collected phrases as incongruities in themselves; about the units from which Firbank is seen to construct his fictions, that is, as effecting a note of discordance that retains, rather than renders gemlike, the disruptive senselessness of its original context.

For that this *is* how Firbank constructed his fictions is attested in Sir Coleridge Kennard’s memory of Firbank’s ‘writing down on long strips of paper any phrase that particularly struck him and hoarding these strips in his desk’.⁶⁶ By Kennard’s account, with its striking recourse to the same decadent-aestheticist imagery as Kyrle Fletcher’s, these phrases were then ‘destined to be fitted in, mosaic-wise’ to the architecture of the text;⁶⁷ as much as to prevent that text’s *having* a proper architecture, ‘the pitfalls of construction’ being, in Kennard’s laconic summary, ‘baffling to him’.⁶⁸ And though it is tempting to see even in these compositional habits a disposition towards modernism or proto-modernism – Hollinghurst, understanding Firbank as a literary Picasso, has

⁶⁴ Kyrle Fletcher, ‘Ronald Firbank’, pp.37-38.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.43.

⁶⁶ Coleridge Kennard, ‘Introduction to *The Artificial Princess*’, *Memoirs and Critiques*, p.108.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.108.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.108.

Firbank employ a ‘verbal collage, by which he [Firbank] conveys the atmosphere of a party as if with a roving microphone, picking up and juxtaposing random snippets of talk’ –⁶⁹ Kennard’s account instead suggests for these sentences not ‘snippets’ of a wider conversation but whole phrasal entities, synecdochally representative of the conversations from which they have issued rather than fragmentarily truncative of them.

One indicator of the peculiar cross purposes to which Firbank’s compositional resources have been put by a subsequent commentary comes in some words – rare in their exposing self-reflexivity – which see Firbank boasting of his liberating compressive powers. ‘I think nothing,’ wrote Firbank, in 1924, ‘of filing [sic] fifty pages down to make a brief, crisp paragraph, or even a row of dots’.⁷⁰ For Hollinghurst, Firbank’s observation proclaims his modernist affinities – suggesting, indeed, some incompleteness in any survey of modernist studies that does not give him his due. By his reckoning, Proust’s achievement in ‘expand[ing] the novel to unprecedented length to do justice to the complexity of his narrator’s consciousness’ serves as close companion to Firbank’s technique of ‘requir[ing] almost everything to be left out’; Proust playing Joyce, according to the familiar formula, to Firbank’s Beckett.⁷¹ For Canning, it is Woolf who serves as creative comparison, than whom Firbank emerges the modernist superior: Firbank’s letter proving, by Canning’s lights, that he ‘endlessly sought to compress [...] time, turning this idea into narrative method more consistently and completely than Woolf herself’.⁷² If it is unclear how Canning seeks to prove or disprove this claim, it is fair to say that Woolf, in whose *Jacob’s Room* just such compressive techniques are marshalled to account for the dead soldier at the novel’s absent centre,⁷³ was at work on something different to what Firbank is describing: that the ellipses and other interruptive typographic markers that thread that novel – as well, most prominently, as the white-spacing which fringes its presentation, an innovation as well as a house style for the Hogarth press – work to suggest an absent non-recoverability not obvious in Firbank’s boastful and rather workmanlike words. Those words instead seem to point backwards, not forwards: to synthesise both Pater’s ‘labour of the file’ as compositional prerequisite,⁷⁴ as well as the close collocation (‘fine down’ for

⁶⁹ Hollinghurst, “‘I often laugh when I’m alone’, p.2.

⁷⁰ Canning, ‘Introduction’, p.xxiii.

⁷¹ Hollinghurst, “‘I often laugh when I’m alone’”, p.2.

⁷² Canning, ‘Introduction’, p.xxiii.

⁷³ See, for instance, Edward L. Bishop, ‘Mind the Gap: The Spaces in *Jacob’s Room*’, *Woolf Studies Annual*, 10 (2004), (pp.31-49).

⁷⁴ Macfarlane, *Original Copy*, p.179.

‘file down’) that occurs in the perorating moment to his ‘Conclusion’: ‘what is real in our life fines itself down’.⁷⁵

To the professional scholarship of the immediate postwar period – that coming before Firbank’s relationship to modernism had been assumed – Firbank’s compositional practices proved not that Firbank’s sentences truncated or left incomplete the source from which they had issued, but that they represented them even in the small packaging in which we find them. Something sturdier, more altogether ordinary than wanting to recast temporal bounds, for instance, is suggested by Miriam J. Benkovitz, the scholar whose archival research unearthed the ‘row-of-dots’ letter from which Canning draws his fragmentary conclusions.⁷⁶ In Benkovitz’s study, Firbank’s claim is proof that his novels involved ‘hard, concentrated work’ –⁷⁷ and this, in aid of phrasal items that would summarise, rather than truncate, the atmospheres they sought to achieve from out of this narrative method; one whose effects were ‘at once elaborate and condensed’.⁷⁸ Brooke’s study, too, finds in Firbank an expert impicator, whose compositional practices lack the force of the social commentary or radical artistic technique which a consortium of Mayer, Canning and Hollinghurst are intent on pinning to him: for Brooke, instead, Firbank’s ‘disjointed construction’ has ‘a very simple explanation: Firbank simply left out the parts which he found boring to write’.⁷⁹ What Brooke calls the ‘scaffolding’ of most novels – the ‘discursive explanations’ and ‘descriptive *longueurs*’ – are in his account ‘ruthlessly deleted’; in this way Firbank ‘skips’ such passages as ‘the alert reader’ is minded to skip anyway. ‘In consequence his stories have an economy’, writes Brooke, ‘a closeness of texture which amounts to a kind of novelistic shorthand’.⁸⁰

And for Robert Murray Davis, returning to the question of Firbank’s compositional practice almost twenty years after Benkovitz’s study, modernist literature gets invoked only to endorse common-sense editorial nostrums about workmanship and craft: ‘a good deal of material in the notebooks’, he argues, ‘confirms Ernest Hemingway’s theory that if a writer knows something well

⁷⁵ WPR, p.151.

⁷⁶ Miriam J. Benkovitz, ‘Ronald Firbank in New York’, *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 63 (May 1959) pp. 247-259, p.258.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.258.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.258.

⁷⁹ Brooke, *Ronald Firbank*, p.13.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.13.

enough, he can leave it out'.⁸¹ Indeed, for Murray Davis – for whom the depth of Firbank's knowledge of and research about details only alluded to in the finished fair copies of his novels' typescripts is evident from a close acquaintanceship with the notebooks from which those novels grew – the 'row-of-dots' epithet is a 'boast' his notebooks 'confirm': 'This arduous process of composition' – a description which, like Benkovitz's 'hard, concentrated work', or even Brooke's 'ruthlessly deleted', leans heavily on the idea of Firbank's compressed suggestiveness as finely-wrought in its design and finely-won in hours given to it – 'helps to explain how, in very short novels, he [Firbank] was able to create the effect of a full and busy world';⁸² again the impression is one of containment rather than loss. 'Elaborate and condensed'; 'novelistic shorthand'; 'compressed suggestiveness': the aggregate effect of all these critical descriptors is to militate for an appreciation invested not in the idea of incompleteness brought by absence, but of a summary won, instead, by careful method.

If we have seen the mismatch of tone and instrument which Mayer's monumentalising treatment of one of Firbank's dialogic moments actualises, my purpose has been to make the case for much of the symptomatic scholarship of the present time as engaged in a curious mis-seeing of Firbank's effects. There is indeed a historically-specific point to be made that touches on the nature of the critical escape with a particular pertinence: for even a writer like the Waugh of 1929, who, three years after Firbank's death, compares, at one moment, Firbank's sentences to cinematic intertitles,⁸³ and, in another breath, and with a plausible register of developments in modern art, to 'little extricable cubes of wit',⁸⁴ is really engaged in a discourse of renovation rather than innovation; intertitles having a summary value that goes against an understanding of them as truncated 'snippets', which the claimed 'extricability' only focuses. Waugh's designation of these sentences as 'cubes' shows, in fact, a remarkable prescience about Firbank's compositional method; for Sitwell, in his description of Firbank's interior of two years later, notes those precious and non-precious objects to be jostling for adjacency with 'cubes of those large, rectangular postcards upon which it was his habit to write'.⁸⁵ Waugh's appreciation, elsewhere, demonstrates a perspicacity with some

⁸¹ Robert Murray Davis, 'Ronald Firbank's Notebooks: "...writing books was by no means easy"', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 15:2, April 1977 (pp.172-192), p.177.

⁸² Ibid, p.178.

⁸³ Waugh, 'Ronald Firbank', p.177.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.178.

⁸⁵ Sitwell, 'Ronald Firbank', p.125.

known sanction from the author, who, as Benkovitz very astutely pointed out in 1959, provides ‘his own description of the origins of his novels in mere phrases, as in his preface to the American edition of *The Flower Beneath the Foot*’.⁸⁶ By Waugh’s estimation, which may have drawn from Kennard’s notice of four years earlier, it was ‘[f]rom the fashionable chatter of his period’ that Firbank ‘plucked [...] the particles of his design’.⁸⁷ Waugh’s words contain a fascinatingly aphoristic double promise for Firbank’s sentences: one by which they serve both as summaries of the action they instantiate, and generative particles of the wider architectural structures in which they are housed.

Perhaps most significant of Waugh’s assumptions, however, is the notion of some equivalence between the littleness of these words and the wit that is resultant from them. Indeed, a survey of the popular press’s immediate reception of Firbank’s writing shows Waugh only to have been the most fluent of contemporary exegetes as to Firbank’s effects: again and again, the assumption that Firbank aims at ‘wit’, and that the short and lapidary – Waugh’s ‘cubes’ – are his intended vehicles for arriving at such wittiness, is appealed to and endorsed. Gerald Gould, untroubled by his putting to service the dubious wisdom of English literature’s most compromised aphorist after Pandarus, archly concedes, in a review of *Caprice* (1917), that ‘[i]f brevity is the soul of wit, Mr. Firbank must be a wit indeed’.⁸⁸ By his lights, it is against the yardstick of wit and its conventional aphoristic forms that Firbank’s work must be held to succeed or fail; where it fails is in its not being aphoristic enough: ‘occasionally’, writes Gould, ‘through the nonsense gleams a comprehensible epigram, or a bit of characterisation deftly phrased’.⁸⁹ That reading Firbank might lead the reader to hunt for the aphorisms his works contain – and that this hunt might be considered to work against the grain of Firbank’s flimsy structuring – is encouraged by Aldous Huxley’s enjoinder to Firbank to ‘produce a real comedy of manners’;⁹⁰ by the *New York Times* Book Review’s finding in *Vainglory* the ‘fashionable dialogue in which Mr. Firbank excels and which Oscar Wilde might well have envied’;⁹¹ and by the *Times Literary Supplement* finding Firbank ‘witty enough’ and with ‘a neat turn to his sentences’ but his designs hampered by the ‘endless flow of scintillating

⁸⁶ Miriam J. Benkovitz, ‘Ronald Firbank in New York’, p.250.

⁸⁷ Waugh, ‘Ronald Firbank’, p.178.

⁸⁸ Gerald Gould, *New Statesman* 10 (29th of December 1917), pp.310-311, in Steven Moore ed. *Ronald Firbank: A Bibliography of Secondary Materials, 1905-1995* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996), p.5.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁹⁰ Aldous Huxley [unsigned], *Athenaeum*, 19 December 1919, p.1386 in Moore, *Ronald Firbank*, p.6.

⁹¹ [Unsigned] *New York Times Book Review*, 18th of October, 1925, p.8 in Moore, *Ronald Firbank*, p.3.

nonsense'.⁹² Gould, Firbank's only contemporary repeat reviewer, had enlisted, for his review of *Inclinations* (1916), a disciplining and Augustan standard to bring this mismatch of elegant phrasing and inadequate design to an even fuller force, one in which the sometime 'gem of true wit' 'collapses', by Gould's estimation, 'into comparative coherence as seldom deviated into sense'.⁹³ Despite the tortuous syntax afforded Dryden's treatment of Shadwell in *MacFlecknoe* (1682),⁹⁴ Gould's critical designations are clear: Firbank is a self-consciously witty writer, and it is on this basis that his merits should be understood.

To read the bulk of the immediate criticism of Firbank's works, indeed, is to notice a near uniformity of judgement behind the descriptors: a sense that Firbank is best understood by his not being taken seriously or lastingly. His is 'an incessant sparkle', wrote *The Observer* of *Vainglory* (1915), in an unsigned review;⁹⁵ his work '[m]arked by a certain bizarre lightness of treatment', as *The Irish Times* claimed for *Inclinations*;⁹⁶ his novels 'really witty nonsense', as the *Daily News* wrote of *Valmouth* (1919).⁹⁷ Even Waugh's essay, with its penetrative formal observations, talks of Firbank's writing as if some sense of its lowness and ephemerality should be taken as read: Waugh finds that '[s]ome silliness, a certain ineradicable fatuity, seems to have been inherent in him';⁹⁸ that his work is 'there to be enjoyed by those who have a taste for it' but is 'too individual and intangible to become a literary influence'.⁹⁹ Yet if the *Memoir* suggests this fatuity to have been a selecting principle – Kyrle Fletcher remembers for part of his process his reading 'one book because it was the most trivial ever written on its subject' – it is important to understand this dynamic by the standard from it deviates. Kyrle Fletcher also notes, that is, that this reading formed a part of Firbank's sessions in the Reading Room of the British Museum, 'keeping up an elaborate and entirely effective *mockery* of study' [italics mine].¹⁰⁰ That the 'mockery' depends upon the 'study' to regulate its contrastive effects is as evident from this anarchic waste of time in a temple of learning, as it is from Kennard's memory of an overzealous attention paid to what Kyrle Fletcher describes as his 'hoard of *bon mots*', '*faux-pas*',

⁹² [Unsigned] *Times Literary Supplement*, 22nd of April, 1915, p.138, in Moore, *Ronald Firbank*, p.4.

⁹³ Gerald Gould, *New Statesman* 7 (22nd of July 1916), p.378, in Moore, *Ronald Firbank*, p.4.

⁹⁴ 'The rest to some faint meaning make pretence, | But Shadwell never deviates into sense', John Dryden, *The Major Works*, ed. Keith Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).p.143.

⁹⁵ [Unsigned] *Observer*, 4th of July, 1915, in Moore, *Ronald Firbank*, p.3.

⁹⁶ [Unsigned] *Irish Times*, July 1916, in Moore, *Ronald Firbank*, p.4

⁹⁷ [Unsigned] *Daily News*, 1919, in Moore, *Ronald Firbank*, p.6.

⁹⁸ Waugh, 'Ronald Firbank', p.175.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p.176.

¹⁰⁰ Kyrle Fletcher, 'Ronald Firbank', p.60.

‘*incongruités*’ and ‘non-sequiturs’,¹⁰¹ sentences which in Kennard’s account are ‘carefully chosen and jealously preserved’.¹⁰² If the selecting principle has proved a collecting one also, it is as much as to say – as with his interior blazonry – that Firbank’s practices show him remembering an earlier ethos only to deflate it by that memory’s invocation.

Yet such commentary as would see him as modernist unwittingly participates in these effects: by failing to see how much humour is connected to Firbank’s appropriations of literary forebears, it erects the standard that continues the joke. Elaborating on his claim for a modernist conviction behind the 1924 letter, for instance, Canning claims that ‘Firbank’s rows of dots might also conceal a multitude of unstated truths, invariably sexual’.¹⁰³ Yet there are volumes left unstated in Canning’s own procedures, as his swift movement from ‘might’ to ‘invariably’ suggests: the modal reflex – a cringe in grammar from uncertain ground on to the steady sureties of hard terrain – underlines the programmed manner in which optative doubt calls out of habit for a corrective sexual certitude; a posture for which Brophy had set the template. Comparison with an earlier criticism reveals the divergent sympathies between that and a subsequent orthodoxy – no less in evidence than when it is Canning himself who relies on such voices. To support his remarks, Canning recruits Brooke, who, he writes, ‘argued that one “...” connoted “the whole of Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis” in its silence’¹⁰⁴. But to read this side-by-side with the section to which Canning alludes is to see how far a departure these words have been from the import of the original. For of the character of Monsignor Parr in Firbank’s *Vainglory* (1915), Firbank’s narrator has observed him ‘Something between a butterfly and a misanthrope, he was temperamental, when not otherwise...employed’; to which Brooke has noted: ‘Firbank is a master of innuendo; those three dots imply the whole of Kraft-Ebing [sic] and Havelock Ellis – and even (as Firbank might have added) more’.¹⁰⁵

It is obvious, even at the most superficial reading, that noticing in Firbank a ‘master of innuendo’ sets him at some distance from Canning’s portentous notion of ‘unstated truths’ (there is nothing to stop ‘innuendo’, after all, from observing unstated *un*truths – in yoking the real, as often occurs in Firbank’s comparisons, with the unreal, and creating humorous turns on the present

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.60.

¹⁰² Kennard, ‘Introduction’, p.108.

¹⁰³ Canning, ‘Introduction’, p.xxiii.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.xxiii.

¹⁰⁵ Brooke, *Ronald Firbank*, p.57.

thereby: Mrs. Shamefoot's 'paus[ing] meditatively to admire a stone effigy of the first Lady Blueharnis, stretched out upon a pillow like a dead swan', is a representative example)¹⁰⁶. Brooke's commitment to Firbank is substantially a commitment to his voice; his criticism, not a programmed way of hinting at Firbank's sexual message, but a mimicry of Firbank's effects that speaks of a real commitment, so embodied as to spill over into ventriloquism. 'Claud's such an extremist, you know', observes Reggie in Firbank's *Princess Zoubaroff* (1920), Firbank's only published play. 'They say when he kissed the Pope's slipper [*a gentle cough*] he went on to do considerably *more*...' ¹⁰⁷. Missing this – and missing Brooke's attempt to embed his own appreciation within Firbank's joking – Canning makes nothing of the larger service to which Firbank's 'row of dots' is being put here: that of proving, as Brooke states explicitly, that Firbank entered his mature style – transitioning, that is, from *Odette d'Antrevernes* to *Vainglory* – paradoxically, by *immaturing*; including in his text phrases like 'calm wee door', which he 'might once (in *Odette*) have used quite seriously', yet whose 'effect' here 'is purely satirical'.¹⁰⁸ In such a spirit, also, are Krafft-Ebing and Ellis invoked; that is to say, as a joke.

Brooke here is spared Canning's judgement, if only by the accident of the latter's radical misreading. Yet, wedded as he is to a monumentalising vision for Firbank's work, Canning repeats the effect in dismissing Anthony Powell's summary: that 'it would be a mistake to claim too much' for Firbank. 'With advocates such as this one might conclude that Firbank had no need of enemies',¹⁰⁹ Canning quips, adding that by the time of these comments (1961), Powell's 'youthful enthusiasm had deserted him'.¹¹⁰ These words form part of the preface to the 1961 reissue of Firbank's collected fiction: an odd place to signal a caesural break, and so it proves in Powell's many affirming comments about Firbank's procedures. Powell talks of Firbank's 'mastery of technique',¹¹¹ of 'his onslaught on the actual technique of writing' –¹¹² whose 'effect', quite against Canning's embedded treatment of them, is 'by no means to be lightly dismissed' –¹¹³ of 'bursts of dialogue that are at once realistic, esoteric, funny, sad, a trifle cruel'.¹¹⁴ If none of this savours of renunciation, its

¹⁰⁶ Ronald Firbank, *Vainglory, with Inclinations and Caprice*, p.85.

¹⁰⁷ Ronald Firbank, *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, ed. Anthony Powell (London: Duckworth, 1961), p.718.

¹⁰⁸ Brooke, *Ronald Firbank*, p.57.

¹⁰⁹ Canning, 'Introduction', p.xvii.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.xvi.

¹¹¹ Anthony Powell, 'Preface', in *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, p.10.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p.11.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p.11.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.14.

very proliferative positivity may cause us to return to Powell's excerpted words – so much the self-evident punchline of Canning's strategies – only to see that those, too, have proved affirming ones: if it is 'a mistake to claim too much' for Firbank, this may only be because to 'claim too much' is to miss those moments in his work which by Powell's lights genuinely *are* remarkable. And it may be that in such caution Powell was being vatic as well as wise.

Indeed, seeing enemies everywhere, a commentary that wants to stress Firbank's modernism misses the often genuinely perspicacious observations offered by a previous dispensation. One such moment occurs in Brophy's dismissive rejection of Brooke's efforts, whose editorial slippages might have led us to draw instructive lessons as to his predispositions. Brooke's study has Firbank respond, appalled, to an acquaintance addressing him by his surname: "I wish", he called back, in shrill and agonised tones, "I *wish* you wouldn't call me "Firbank"; it gives me a sense of goloshes";¹¹⁵ elsewhere, when a friend seeks to introduce him to an American acquaintance, Brooke has him 'exclaiming in an all-too-audible stage-whisper: "My dear, I *couldn't* – he's *far* too ugly!"'.¹¹⁶ Brophy's distaste at the inaccuracy of both these representations – Brooke 'invent[s] the italicisation and repetition of the "I wish"' in the first example,¹¹⁷ and changes, in the second, what Kyrle Fletcher had called his 'curt treatment' of the American friend (in Kyrle Fletcher's account, Firbank 'paused in the doorway, looked once, muttered, "He is much too ugly", and walked away') into a characterisation that 'becomes the opposite of curt' –¹¹⁸ has homophobia as motivator, Firbank's words transformed, by Brooke's prejudiced handling, into a 'pansified dither' redolent of a 'screaming queer'.¹¹⁹

There are formal reasons – outside the fact, that is, that this is a curious accusation to level at Brooke; himself gay – to doubt Brophy's comments, and to find in these italicisations and repetitions an act of faithfulness to rival his ventriloquism of Firbank's tone. For in untidying what in their original instances have proved curt utterances, Brooke's editorialising has remained faithful to a standard for these sentence that the texts themselves have set; the obvious lack of polish that is their hallmark determining a correction to such sentences as do not conform within the accepted

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p.252.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p.253.

¹¹⁷ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p.252.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.253.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.253.

and appreciated shape of the author's voice.¹²⁰ Since we have seen how subsequent readers and editors have turned some of Wilde's occasionally messy and mediated phrases into complete aphorisms, self-sufficient vehicles with a symmetry corrected from the source yet according to the standards Wilde himself had set, we might say that Brooke's attempts at the contrary instance an aphoristic reading culture in exact reverse.

Such later reading cultures find their sanction once again in the near-contemporary documents describing Firbank's behaviour: this time, in Augustus John's comments about Firbank's restlessness as a sitter, by which tussle his head 'got somehow out of focus'.¹²¹ If Brooke rewrote and reworked Firbank's sentences as messier items than their proper originals, it is because Firbank's literary terrain is the 'out of focus'. Such focus speaks as much to the kind of experience being observed as the messiness of the observation: for Firbank's is a gaze which looks to the margins; at the kinds of experience consciously inessential to life's drama. 'They had been out evidently among the crowd', notes *The Flower Beneath the Foot's* (1923) narrator of the activities of Pisuerga's Prince Olaf and Mrs. Montgomery, 'and both were laughing heartily at the asides they had overheard'.¹²² We know, from Kennard, that Firbank composed his texts from out of his collected sentences because he meant to have a career as a dramatist –¹²³ we know also that composing in this way simultaneously impeded his abilities at dramatic structure, and that something like the textual unity that Wilde's aphorisms enjoyed is enjoyed similarly in Firbank's sentences in a debased form. Yet if a sense of the dramatic lingers on in Firbank's novels – as Kennard, following on from Sitwell, says it does – this is a drama that itself is out of focus; one that echoes Evan Morgan's assertion of Firbank's being 'a unique character out of cameo fantasy'.¹²⁴

In Firbank's novels, that is, the great protagonists of the Western dramatic canon become bit-parts, anxious – if at all – only of not seeming to be mistaken for more central than they really are. When, in *Inclinations*, the actress Mrs. Arne tells her interlocutor, Miss Collins, that she means to

¹²⁰ To quote, purposefully, almost at random; as to italics: 'I am sure no hours are too *long* for her'; 'No, really!...I can't think *why* she would have it' (whose opening protestation contains some dithering too); or as to repetition: "'I dare say", she said, "when he first heard of my marriage he was frightfully, frightfully upset?"; or as to both: "No, no, *please*!" Firbank, *Complete Ronald Firbank*, p.252; p.159; p.288; p.339.

¹²¹ Firbank, Letter to Tony Landsberg, quoted in Canning, 'Introduction', p.xxxii.

¹²² Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p.23.

¹²³ Kennard, 'Introduction', p.108.

¹²⁴ Benkovitz, 'Ronald Firbank in New York', p.250.

‘treat’ Lysistrata as ‘a character-part’;¹²⁵ when Sir Oliver in *Caprice* ‘well recall[s]’ the actress Mrs. Mary ‘as the “wife” in *Macbeth*’ (‘I assure you she was positively roguish’, he adds);¹²⁶ when *Vainglory*’s Mrs. Steeple is described as having ‘played *Romersholm* in Camberwell’;¹²⁷ or when the Countess, in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, says, with some of the repetitious ‘dither’ Brophy refuses, ‘How clever Shakespere! [sic] [...] How gorgeous! How glowing! I once knew a speech from “Julia Sees Her!...” perhaps his greatest *oeuvre* of all. Yes! “Julia Sees Her” is what I like best of that great, great master’;¹²⁸ we are witness to a tendency that would invoke dramatic effects only radically to undo their monumentalism.

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In drawing as heavily as I have on the personal observations of his contemporaries, I have wanted to make the case for Firbank’s working methods and attitudes as both an important reflection on Firbank’s ultimate effects in their own right, and as a function prohibitive to later claims for him as a writer more momentous than his works can or should sustain. Yet *The Flower Beneath the Foot* shows this division between method and fiction to be not so neat as this treatment has perhaps suggested; that novel being an avowed commentary on Firbank’s methods just as much as their effects. Waugh, in his appreciation, revealingly finds Firbank’s authorial self-insertions ‘intolerable *viuex jeu*’ (a throwback, that is, rather than an innovation)¹²⁹, but the regularity of these moments makes them too significant as commentary, fatuous as they are, to be dismissed as merely incidental or sportive games. The extended digression on the bibliography of the author by his own characters; the allusion to how these novels have been composed (‘I feel’, says Mrs. Barleymoon in the same scene, ‘his books are all written in hotels with the bed unmade at the back of the chair’)¹³⁰: if Firbank’s novel encourages us to appreciate his words thus in a hyper-literary way, it also encourages us to turn our attention to the basic workings of all language; for this is the frequent theme of its self-reflexivity.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.238.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p.342.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p.85.

¹²⁸ Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (London: Penguin, 1986) p.24.

¹²⁹ Waugh, ‘Ronald Firbank’, p.175.

¹³⁰ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p.55.

In Arthur Waley's view, Firbank's 'mind' seemed 'continually to hover, as it were, an inch or two above the surface of things';¹³¹ in Sitwell's, what distinguished Firbank's rooms was the unsettled and unintegrated nature of things which ought to have been settled and integrated, such as his perennial palm-tree, which 'the author's personality was able to translate [...] back into a tropical and interesting plant, so that here it lacked that withered 1880 boarding-house air which it usually assumes in England'.¹³² Finally, there is Sitwell's observation of Firbank's composing by postcards: compositional materials ensuring whatever writing they shepherd to be bearing the trace of transit. These are exactly pertinent to Firbank's purposes, even if this destabilising gaze is being turned on quite ordinary and potentially shop-worn units of speech. 'She saves us from *cliché*', says Pisuerga's prince about Laura de Nazianzi,¹³³ a safeguard proving ultimately un-lasting as the novel runs its course and Pisuerga receives a delegation of "representatives of English culture" described as 'the very apotheosis of worn-out cliché'.¹³⁴ But the novel's own way of saving itself from cliché is to stymie cliché's workings altogether: to set it within inverted commas – either literal, as here, or otherwise implied – and so to arrest all possibility of its being a vehicle for the meanings usually intended for it.

Firbank may have a character speak Italian 'with all the glibness of the Berlitz-school',¹³⁵ but it is English which starts to look like a foreign language under his too observing stewardship, and it is with the *pro forma* in his own language that he picks his fights. A description like that used on Pisuerga's Archduchess Elizabeth – 'she was looking, as the grammar-books say, "meet" to be robbed' –¹³⁶ is only the most extreme and self-declaring of examples of a tendency to underline the very strange turns of phrase which must not be lingered over if they are to work as language's basic *engrenages*. This method of calling usage so frequently into question, in fact, brings description perilously close to impossibility, as in: 'oh, how stern and "old"!';¹³⁷ 'not far along the lake was the "village"';¹³⁸ 'I had "come to him" quite suddenly out ferreting one day with the footman...';¹³⁹ 'the

¹³¹ Arthur Waley, 'Introduction to Limited Edition', in *Memoirs and Critiques*, p.169.

¹³² Ibid, 125.

¹³³ Ibid, p.20

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.127.

¹³⁵ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p.61.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.26.

¹³⁷ Ibid, p.120.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p.79.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.64.

better to “prepare” him for his forthcoming Eton exam’;¹⁴⁰ ‘he [...] only hoped the lesson would not be “lost” on Lady Something’;¹⁴¹ “I forget if you know the Tolgas”, she said. | “By ‘name!’”,¹⁴² and so on, in a kind of mania of attention where none is merited. That he should use the technique more conventionally, to distinguish the genuinely foreign (‘I’m what they call an “amoureuse”’)¹⁴³ only proves the point.

These, however, are merely bumps in the steady stream of language – catches of typography that halt, for a moment, what must pass unhindered if the basic give-and-take of conversation is to be correctly honoured. Firbank’s technique sets its sights on more; ambitions to which a moment in *The Flower* seems to tell most fully. Indeed, Laura de Nazianzi, enamoured of Pisuerge’s prince, might be seen to lend some comment – in this most self-reflexive of Firbank’s novels – to what Kennard remarks about his method when she brings the Prince’s ‘last epistles’ out of her case, and begins ‘methodically to arrange them in their proper sequence’:

- (1) “What is the matter with my Dearest Girl?”
- (2) “My own tender little Lita, I do not understand –“
- (3) “Darling, what’s this –?”
- (4) “Beloved one, I swear –“
- (5) “Your cruel silence –“¹⁴⁴

The tension latent in how this process has been presented is shadowed in the subsequent description of Laura’s ‘thrusting them back again carefully into the bag’ –¹⁴⁵ in, that is, the tussle at work between ‘carefully’ and ‘thrusting’ – for the comedy here relies on these addresses not *having* a ‘proper sequence’ to be methodical about in the first place. Like Firbank’s own units of composition, these forms of address are resistant to wider ordering; all seeming to be different versions of one premise, they each have equal – and dubious – claim to constituting a new beginning that is in fact the same. Yet just as Firbank’s own collected sentences had invoked a methodical

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.100.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.60.

¹⁴² Ibid, p.51.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.104.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.79.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.79.

system with contradiction at its centre – giving valued attention to those sentences making no claim to be other than ephemera – so here Laura suggests that these sentences of address – set apart as units of meaning in their own right – literalise silence. That the Prince, therefore, faced with a non-responsive interlocutor largely of his own imagining, must make up the difference for an absence in prose that is incapable of transcending cliché. And finally that in so relating these two ideas together, Firbank is making a connection between the words people use in his novels and the units of phatic speech.

Eric Griffiths, in seeking to define what is not quotation or repetition, claims that a reply to a letter beginning ‘Dear Sir’ that itself begins with ‘Dear Sir’ constitutes an example of neither –¹⁴⁶ ‘Dear Sir’ becomes, then, what Donald Davie labels as language’s ‘ghosts or pointers’,¹⁴⁷ an element of speech that depends on being assumed and thus ignored within the bounds of conversational formality.¹⁴⁸ Yet Firbank’s characters, refusing to take such common linguistic resources as stable givens, invest the *pro forma* utterance with a meaning it cannot support. Partly this technique asserts itself from the subtle embroidery of a stock phrase that – in the slight modification – peers at the oddness of the root suggested in the expression as it normally stands: some flowers are described thusly as ‘all the mode at present’ (for ‘all the rage’),¹⁴⁹ rivalry at court is described as ‘leaping to [the] eye’ of Father Nostradamus (instead of ‘catching’ it)¹⁵⁰ and those at court similarly seek to ‘gain [the] ear’ of Father Geordie (instead of ‘winning’ it).¹⁵¹ That ‘any girl might envy Father Geordie his ear’, as the Countess continues,¹⁵² suggests the still more expansive way in which the workings of such locutions are undermined in being animated; for the error Firbank’s characters make is to treat the simple address as if it were anything else but phatic speech; as if it were speech, that is, to be added to, developed from, and engaged with as if a proper carrier of significance.

So, in prayer, where the workings of incantation are stymied by being too generative – by housing, that is, particles of meaning which, intended to be taken *en bloc*, are engaged with as

¹⁴⁶ Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.55.

¹⁴⁷ Donald Davie *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), p.98.

¹⁴⁸ Griffiths, *The Printed Voice*, p.55.

¹⁴⁹ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p.106.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.83.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.83.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p.83.

separable units: 'For the love of God...In the Name of Pity...of Pity' ('Of Pity', echoes the Queen);¹⁵³ where to add is to deviate, and possibly also to blaspheme: 'Jesus – Mary – Joseph!';¹⁵⁴ where, similarly, what gets exclaimed reveals perhaps troubling blind-spots in theistic comprehension ('Mercy save us!')¹⁵⁵, and where to interrupt the liturgy is to appreciate by the sorts of call-and-response not sanctioned in standard vows: 'I fear this complete upset has considerably aged me.....But to Thee I cling'.¹⁵⁶ Such moments remember *Inclinations*, and the trouble had by the protagonist's lover in composing a love letter that is not thrown off course by its own 'Dear Sirs': "My dear dearly", reads Mabel, 'he always calls me *dearly*! "My own, own little wife'.¹⁵⁷ The epistolary attentiveness engaged in by Mabel and her lover, which tries to turn genteel formality into personal substance and succeeds only in achieving another form of repetitious chanting, as if sprouting vowels ('dear dearly' and 'own, own' literalise this refusal to progress; the lovers' mistake lies in thinking they can own 'own'), suggests, with *The Flower*'s errant prayers, that it is just in her failing to recognise in different modes of speech a corresponding difference in their capacity to carry meaning that she guarantees only its emptiest versions.

The studied symmetries of Wilde's aphorisms had served to suggest simple polarities of experience and vision: in 'Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it';¹⁵⁸ in 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life';¹⁵⁹ in "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means",¹⁶⁰ – as in a host of others – Wilde's aphorisms show a sturdy refusal to leave the facts of stress or emphasis to chance. If such symmetries enforce an unanswerable import or significance, Firbank's effects are the opposite; for in his writing, the frequent italicising which Brophy refuses conspires both to register how language sounds, and to suggest, in such a registering, an emphasis in ordinary speech working against the aim of an express significance. Moments such as that of Queen Thleeanouhee in *The Flower*, in her saying 'if you should *dare*, sir, to come any closer...!'¹⁶¹ might seem overt in self-advertising as an 'empty threat', but the general tendency in Firbank's work is to derailing emphases of a more listless kind, and where a mismatch of style as to

¹⁵³ Ibid, p.127.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.122.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.121.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.78.

¹⁵⁷ Firbank, *Vainglory, with Inclinations and Caprice*, p.289.

¹⁵⁸ CWOW4, p.146.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p.102.

¹⁶⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (London: Heinemann, 1967), p.34.

¹⁶¹ Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p.27.

effect is once again the watchword. Instances like ‘Being a client of the house (and with an unpaid bill) she could *dictate* to Eva’;¹⁶² like ‘never more than sixteen or seventeen – at the *very* outside’;¹⁶³ like ‘Applications, from those entitled to attend, should be made to the Lord Chamberlain as *soon* as possible’;¹⁶⁴ like ‘looking chic as she *always* does’;¹⁶⁵ like ‘the Princess impressed me as being *just* a trifle pale’;¹⁶⁶ like ‘I *thought* not’;¹⁶⁷ like ‘It seems he can’t help it, and that he simply *has* to!’;¹⁶⁸ and like ‘They tell me Don Juan was nothing *nothing* to him...’;¹⁶⁹ suggest a typographical emphasis inclined towards the positivistic capture of language as it is really spoken, and the odd results in such language as they are presented in a privileged form that cannot easily sustain their lightness, nor the undirected passage of their renegade stresses, so much at odds with their propositional value: this is the familiar made strange.

By refusing the weight and glimmer of Wilde’s jewelled and lofty diction, Firbank is able to give a listening ear to such incongruities as are there as part of the ordinary business of spoken language: in sentences that borrow the universalising tendency of aphorisms only to have the lack of appropriacy to such claims made glaringly apparent. It is by such means that Lady Something can be seen to have ‘exclaimed’, as in *The Flower*, ‘No really, my dear’,¹⁷⁰ and the phatic be seen to occupy an entire utterance; or that the single word ‘Don’t!’, as in *Vainglory*, initially expressive of shock in Miss Pontypool’s use of it, comes in time to be a catch-all, even an unthinking utterance: “But all the same, he was very brilliant.” | “Oh, don’t!” Miss Pontypool murmured’.¹⁷¹ If Firbank’s over-listening sees his sentences, in such moments, shed their meaning in being generalised, it is a habit of attention in which the characters themselves are frequently participative; being so responsive to phatic conversational utterances, that is, as to treat one another’s sentences as if more significant than they plausibly can claim to be.

¹⁶² Ibid, p.40.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p.36.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p.39.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p.39.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p.38.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p.50.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p.127.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p.127.

¹⁷⁰ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p.88.

¹⁷¹ Firbank, *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, p.168.

William Plomer remarks that Firbank ‘noticed that people don’t listen much to one another, that in conversation they pursue their own thoughts rather than other people’s’,¹⁷² but the tendency in his fiction is to the exact opposite, to an over-listening that calls the bluff of casual conversation. Such listening undoes cliché, as in *The Artificial Princess* (1925): ‘it would be ungrateful not to take advantage of the opportunity and make hay whilst...’ | “Hay!”;¹⁷³ or literalises the figurative, as in *Vainglory*, where Mrs. Guy Fox, assuring Lady Georgia that Lord Blueharnis ‘would not require much pressing’, is met with the wish that ‘he would, for his figure’s sake’;¹⁷⁴ or attaches to such detail as makes the steady passage of conversation impossible, as in *Caprice*:

“When we all go to Spain to visit Velasquez –“
“Goya –!”
“Velasquez –!”
“Goya! Goya! Goya!”¹⁷⁵

and *Inclinations*:

“She has also an apartment in Rome”.
Miss Collins was mystified.
“*Apartments?*” she asked.
An apartment, a flat, a floor – it is the first floor”.
“Oh, good gracious!”¹⁷⁶

and *Caprice* again:

“One gets to Croydon best by Underground”, the pale-looking girl remarked.
Miss Siquier winced.
“Underground!”
Her lip quivered.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² Quoted in Canning, ‘Introduction’, p.xiv.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.37.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p.158.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.335.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p.258.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p.335.

and again:

“Why do you dislike her so much?”
“Cadging creature!”
“René?”
“Limpet”.
“René?”
“Parasite”.
“René –?”
“Scavenger”. [sic]
“*Basta!*”
“I know all about her”.
“What do you know?”
“If I tell you, I’ll have to tell you in French.”
“Then tell me in French”.¹⁷⁸

Each of these exchanges, not fragments of anything larger but passages of dialogue whose self-generative and self-reliant qualities the fiction glaringly thematises, suggest for Firbank’s project not the solipsistic utterances of Plomer’s scheme but a hyper-responsive conversational model in which the word last uttered is often the word first pounced upon by successive interlocutors; with deleterious effects for those sentences’ sense-meanings and sometimes delirious ones for the connections between the words themselves.

That final excerpted exchange, which expresses most strongly the observing attention the white spacing gives to these un-lapidary, sometimes nonsensical words in the focused brevity that has made them possible, suggests, with the disputatious gallerists, the possibility of its ceasing to work as language at all – to make good, that is, on the call-and-response quality that shadows that interlarded ‘René’, or that earlier sees the repetition of ‘Goya’ and ‘Velazquez’ into a kind of phonemic satiation by chant. Count Orvieto’s defensively retreating locution in the above excerption from *Inclinations*– ‘An apartment, a flat, a floor’ – suggests, besides pointing to the absurd difficulty

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p.370.

of defining very ordinary things that is the Firbank hallmark (and very ordinary turns of phrase: from *Caprice*: “‘It’s so far off’ | “Define ‘far off’””) ¹⁷⁹ a corollary to these sentences’ self-sufficiency in their being actually centripetal; not – in the way of the fragment – gesturing towards wider texts, but instead turning inwards, as if seeking some atomic value amidst the constitutive parts of its thin resources. Stevens, baffled, as my introduction has shown, by Ronald Lane Latimer’s detecting continuities between his work and Firbank’s, found there to be ‘no relation’ between them ¹⁸⁰; yet in this respect the effects are remarkably similar to that poet who said that ‘words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds’, ¹⁸¹ and whose poetry often descends to those units which reveal themselves smaller than sense can be: in the ‘hoo-hoo-hoos’ and ‘shoo-shoo-shoos’ of ‘Mozart, 1935’ ¹⁸².

Firbank’s work, which can make a kind of equivalence between phatic phraseological filler and the refrains of popular song – “‘Anyway!’” | “Oh, for the wings of a dove.”” – ¹⁸³ comes at times to likening its own dialogic method to the sort of avian twittering a dove itself might do, as when Mrs. Montgomery, in describing her garden’s pigeons as ‘wee’, ‘twee’ and ‘ducky-wucky’, is related as having ‘inconsequently chirruped’. ¹⁸⁴ If ‘twee’ seems to grow out of ‘wee’ and seek encouragement in ‘ducky-wucky’, another moment in the same novel relates the full effects of such chirruping in terms the stronger for their actively forbidding meaning:

‘The song of the pilgrim women, how it haunts me’, one of the dowagers was holding forth: ‘I could never tire of that beautiful, beautiful music! Never tire of it. Ne-ver...’ ¹⁸⁵

Repetition and satiation are the watchwords here, in an understanding of music where melody wins out over lyricism. That last row of dots about which Firbank may have ‘thought nothing’ only participates in the accentuation of this lexical retreat inwards: in the further enforcement, that is, of this atomising process (‘Ne-ver’) that splits words into constituent parts – parts which, in seeking

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p.351.

¹⁸⁰ LWS, p.287.

¹⁸¹ CPP, p.663.

¹⁸² CPP, p.107.

¹⁸³ Firbank, *Vainglory, with Inclinations and Caprice*, p.216.

¹⁸⁴ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p.104.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p.73.

significance from stress, make the standard procedures of language distinctly strange, even foreign. Other moments – ‘S-s-s-h’;¹⁸⁶ ‘M-a-b-e-l’;¹⁸⁷ ‘Countess P-a-s-t-o-r-e-l-l-I’ –¹⁸⁸ take this retreat inwards still further, to the effect of rendering the original sound of the word actually impossible in its transformed atomic state. Yet it is finally towards music that Firbank most self-revealingly aspires; not, that is, for purposes Paterian or monumental, but simply so as to suggest that the way we really do speak, if hovered over, results in effects not dissimilar in meaning from the stuff of birdsong. ‘Ta-lirra-lirra-lo-la-la’ is what, Miss O’Brookomore assures, ‘they’re saying in the café’;¹⁸⁹ sounds which, from what we know of Firbank’s own café-going methods, we would have to name for *incongruités*.

In a recent re-appraisal of Brophy’s study, Canning claims that his ‘essay’s findings stand firmly on the shoulders of Brophy, unquestioningly an under-valued literary-critical biographical giant’.¹⁹⁰ This chapter has argued that it is just from such shoulder-standing that Canning’s (as others’) mis-readings have issued; that the tendency has been to over- and not to undervalue the significance of her findings. When Joseph Bristow, in his own study of Firbank, quotes affirmingly from Brophy’s assertion that Firbank’s career instantiates the progress from ‘mauve into fauve’,¹⁹¹ he shows the lastingness of her sense of telos (his comments come twenty-four years after hers, and are repeated in spirit if not in exactitude by Canning and Hollinghurst throughout their studies). Yet another comment of Brophy’s – that which notices, astutely, that two of Wilde’s plays ‘have importance in their titles’ –¹⁹² suggests the mistake inherent to it, for it is just this importance that Firbank’s works lack, and which what I have wanted to call Firbank’s reverse-aphorism routinely actualises. One might say, as Hollinghurst does, that the kinds of standalone sentences that do make it into Firbank’s work suggest that ‘the certainties of Wildean epigram are suggestively unpinned and unpicked’,¹⁹³ though I think this reading invokes a modernist anxiety about literary procedures that is nowhere in evidence in Firbank’s words. Instead, Firbank’s use of aphoristic reversal – the capturing

¹⁸⁶ Firbank, *Vainglory, with Inclinations and Caprice*, p.203.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, p.198.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p.214.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p.208

¹⁹⁰ Richard Canning, ‘Penetrating (the) *Prancing Novelist*’, in Richard Canning and Gerri Kimber eds. *Brigid Brophy: Avant-Garde Writer, Critic, Activist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p.50.

¹⁹¹ Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.105.

¹⁹² Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p.7.

¹⁹³ Hollinghurst, “I Often Laugh When I’m Alone”, pp.1-2.

of phrases, words and ticks out of common usage, thrust, in his stewardship, from their place on the margins to centre-stage, and glorified in white spacing their import cannot deserve – point to Wilde’s priorities in a funhouse mirror. This is not an exalted or an exemplary diction, but the language of the everyday; not the rendering familiar of the unfamiliar, but rather of the familiar made strange. *That* is his innovation, and it is an achievement more special to him than symptomatic readings – assured that a modernist programme must be good for him – will adequately allow. Favouring and giving voice to his earlier readers, this chapter has wanted to hold to their model as one by which Firbank’s effects are made more visible; its conclusive words will sustain these achievements, all the while revealing their real effects on a canonical modernism I have tried to suggest as not Firbank’s own.

Conclusion

The end of the moment

The purpose of this thesis has been that of situation: to use what I understand by the aphoristic as a means of better appreciating the range of effects of the writers I discuss; effects obscured by their misrecognition by the rubric of the fragmentary, or of the provisional, or by a definition of the aphorism that understands the form as anything other than a bolster to the authority of the author. My argument has been that Wilde turned to the aphorism as a form that might organise his response to the contemporary crisis in philology by the most conservative of means: in making his voice immediately recognisable as synonymous with this paradoxical form, he provided the strongest means possible of refuting the notion that the writer's voice might be susceptible to decay at the hands of atmospheric conditions, or dissipation by subservience to the assumed tastes of the reading public. Wilde's conception of his artistic utopias draws much of its energy from the perceived – and often invoked – distance of these utopias from the reading public's ineffectual ghostly standard, and it is the singular efficacy of the aphoristic form that has it mimicking and enacting, by formal means, the basic mechanics of this paradox in Wilde's receptive conditions. In Wilde's writing, but in his aphorisms most especially, the authorial self is bolstered by constant reminders of what it is not.

If we understand aspects of Wilde's aphorising – his reverence for orality, and his reshaping of his aphorisms throughout his career – not as a means of collectivising or otherwise undermining authorial selfhood but instead of strengthening the aphorism to a hitherto unknown fidelity to its etymological denotation in 'boundedness' – in a bolster to frontiers about the self – then we can more accurately describe the effects not just of Wilde's aphorisms but of those contributions to the discourse around the aphorism which responded to them. James's efforts, by these means, become a way of recruiting an American pragmatism – dense in his brother William's writing as in that of William's godfather, Emerson – to undermine the possibility (as well as the rightness, should such an unlikely thing be thought possible) of organising the self permanently into such monumental vehicles as aphorisms. It has been the argument of my chapter on James that he extends the disagreement with the aphoristic sequestrations argued for in his own time to the level of narratology, allowing the aphorism to accrue a startlingly negative valency as a vehicle for the forwarding of certainty: of tidy plots and begged questions, which in composition as in characterisation are thematised for their exemplary foolishness. It took Stevens, as my third chapter

has sought to prove, to propose the same pragmatist ideology about the relationship of language to selfhood, yet to see a way by which so fixed a form might prove a perfect vessel – exactly because of the fixedness of its Wildean iteration – for the transcendence of so rigid a material into those very contingent examples of felt selfhood James had supposed impossible by its stewarding.

Most significantly, as far as it shows up the relative lack of perspicacity of the available literature (and so exaggerates the mis-seeing) is the treatment of Firbank by most commentary as a fragmentary writer; a reading which my last chapter has attempted to correct. I have wanted to argue, in this thesis, that Firbank, who devoted himself to the legacy of Wilde, was also the most comprehensively anarchic steward of that legacy: and that nowhere was this anarchy more strongly effected than by his treatment of Wilde's aphorisms, whose terms of trade he exactly reversed. Instead, that is, of conforming to Northrop Frye's designation of the epigram as making unfamiliar thoughts familiar by the use of wit, Firbank's innovation is to make ordinary language – demarcated on the page as standalone utterances with all the attentive prestige of the aphoristic vehicle – newly strange. For just as Stevens's poetry ended the implications of Wilde's findings by lending a new contingency to a previously lapidary form, Firbank changed it so that it stopped being quotable altogether.

This act of homage is significant not just in that it ended the moment – though it did do that – but that, looked at from the other end of the telescope, it provides a lineage for a later practice of post-war theatre rooted, as my thesis has attempted to allow us to see, in an earlier question about language. When Michael Billington is able to see in the dialogue of T.S. Eliot's *Cocktail Party* (1951) certain premonitions of Harold Pinter's theatre-writing,¹ he does not notice how far this dialogue depends on a Firbankian hyper-attentiveness to words that comes close – as dialogue does in Firbank's play and novels – to disturbing the possibility of the forward motion of conversational dialogue altogether:

Julia: Did you say Hampstead?

Edward: No, I didn't say Hampstead.

Julia: But she must live somewhere.

¹ Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p.30.

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